

**Egypt's Celluloid Closet:  
Homosexuality in Egyptian Cinema**

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## Abstract

This thesis argues that the representation of gay men in Egyptian cinema not only has been historically problematic but rather regressed considerably over the years. While critically reflecting on twenty-three feature films as case studies, I demonstrate that depictions of gay characters in Egyptian cinema have overwhelmingly been limited to crude and cruel stereotypes. These stereotypes are often associated with mental illness, being sexually abused at a young age, being influenced heavily by 'Western decadence' or a result of lack of self-control or willpower.

Furthermore, the thesis argues that censorship plays an important but not a major part in depicting homosexual characters in a more realistic and less stereotypical manner. The filmmakers' interpretations and cinematic ploys also play a crucial part in the way these characters are portrayed. In interviewing experts, as well as filmmakers of Egyptian cinema, my work reveals how the majority of filmmakers remain complicit with the expectations of Egyptian audiences and society. In addition, in adaptations, particularly films based on novels, filmmakers sometimes intentionally transform homosexual characters by portraying them as 'deviant'.

As a creative-critical PhD, this thesis has two components. The written component of the thesis, which offers a critical reflection on the representation of gay characters in Egyptian cinema, is accompanied by a documentary I have written, directed and produced, entitled *Egypt's Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Cinema*. While the documentary traces the depiction of gay characters between 1963 and 2018, the theoretical framework I provide in the written piece reflects my own creative practice. Although there is existing academic work on the representation of sexuality in Egyptian cinema, a creative-critical approach is a new approach in the field. This is where the original contribution of my thesis from a methodological point of view lies: in making a documentary about the topic I address the research questions of the thesis in visual form. The unique insights afforded through the documentary form are complemented by my review of the trope of homosexuality in broader Arabic cultural contexts and the ethnographic value of the interviews I have conducted in the process of the film's making.

Chapter One looks at links between representations of homosexuality in Egyptian literature and cinema and the effects of Egyptian censorship structures. Chapter Two looks at

the history of the Egyptian film industry, its alignment with state ideology and its depiction of minorities. Chapter Three considers state concerns about the 'image of Egypt' and illustrates through case studies how production design (*mise-en-scène*) and authorship (*cinéma d'auteur*) have shaped depictions of gay characters on screen. Chapter Four analyses the process of making my documentary and the knowledge generated during this process. These analyses demonstrate the ways in which authorship and its relation to specific directors play a major part in showing gay characters realistically. It shows that state censorship can be seen collectively as an important element that helped shape the representation of gay characters, but there are other elements also involved in the construction of these characters.

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## Notes on transliteration

- Throughout the thesis, I use the Egyptian colloquial rather than the classical Arabic. For example, for the letter 'jim', I use 'g' instead of the classical Arabic 'j'.
- I transliterate the 'hamza' accent as an apostrophe except where it is pronounced at the beginning of a word, where I use 'a'.
- Where the letter 'qaf' begins a word, I have not transliterated it. If it appears later in the word, I use an apostrophe. When it is used twice in the same word, I use 'q', e.g. Zuqaq.
- When referring to names, titles of books or films and names of places, I transliterate the letter ' 'ayn ' as an apostrophe.
- Titles of films are transliterated from Arabic. Both English and Arabic versions of titles are given the first time they are mentioned in any given chapter, in the film list containing all films in the introduction, and in the thesis filmography. Otherwise, I only use the English translation of the film title.



## **Introduction**

In the introduction to my thesis, I describe my own experiences growing up and living as a gay man in Egypt, including how the Egyptian police regularly target LGBTQ+ people. I describe how I came to know and love cinema and filmmaking and my desire to explore the complex but overwhelmingly negative representation of homosexuality in Egyptian cinema through a documentary of my own. I describe how I selected twenty-three key feature films that include some kind of homosexual representation and why I think my documentary can make a practical contribution. I discuss the value to my project of academic work on practice-based research, documentary filmmaking, Egyptian cinema, Egyptian legal, social and political contexts, and queer theory. I also outline the chapters that follow.

### **Hope in the City of a Thousand Minarets**

As an Egyptian gay man, my experience, like many others', is associated with the hostile environment that surrounds us every day in Egypt. The consequences of perceptions around being gay have always had implications in the ways I have lived my life. The traditional expectation of families in Egypt, in line with cultural attitudes, is that a man's role is to raise a family and protect the so-called family honour. The pressure of the family dynamic makes gay men's lives complicated because we must live a "double life," where we must hide our sexuality as a result of these cultural values. Homosexuality is seen as a weakness, an illness that will pass, which does not afford us opportunities to express our needs or likings. It is for this reason that gay men, like me, are forced to hide their sexuality with a veneer of heterosexuality. I think it is important for me to identify my position in framing this PhD as the frustrations I have had in what can be referred to as a complicated life are among the reasons that inspired me to conduct academic work on the topic. With no role models, particularly as a result of the lack of positive representations of gay characters in media in general, and in films in particular, how can Egyptian gay men come to terms with their sexuality in such a hostile environment? Not only is our lifestyle curtailed but our experiences related to other characteristics, such as sex, gender, class, race, and disability, are frequently distorted. Egypt is a male-oriented society where men rule the home and dominate all aspects

of society and women are seen as less important, apart from their roles as mothers and housewives.<sup>1</sup>

In legal terms, contemporary Egyptian law does not explicitly criminalise homosexuality, but it does have several provisions that criminalise any behaviour or the expression of any idea that is regarded as immoral, scandalous or offensive to the teachings of a recognised religious leader. State officials and police regularly harass and abuse LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and other sexual and gender minority) people.<sup>2</sup> I reflect later in the thesis on incidents when police have arrested people because of their homosexuality. I have not been in a situation like that before, but some of my experiences are related. For example, early in 2022, I went back home to visit my family and to film two interviews for my PhD documentary. Before going to Cairo, I had to go through a process that is based on fear. This process included deleting certain applications and messages on my phone to make sure I am safe, which I think should not happen when one is going to his own country. There is a limited gay scene in Cairo. Before the 2011 Egyptian revolution, there was a place called The Greek Club, which was the only nightclub where gay people could meet and enjoy having conversations, and also dress the way they wanted to dress. I remember being there once and, while enjoying the friendly environment, a friend came to me and said, “we have to leave now”. I said “why” and he said “because the police are coming,” and he started to inform everyone that he was told by a source that the police were on their way to raid this place. We left the place immediately and, while getting a taxi on the other side of the street, we witnessed the police arriving. Every LGBTQ+ person in Egypt is very close to that moment of being arrested by the police and potentially going through traumatic experiences. The scary part about living in Egypt as an LGBTQ+ person is that you know as a citizen that the law is often broken by the police rather than the public. When someone is arrested there is no specific process that is being followed or rights being upheld because everything is put under the umbrella of morals, and this is a taboo topic in Egypt making accountability and progressive change highly challenging. I grew up in a society where it is forbidden to disagree with or discuss what is considered immoral.

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<sup>1</sup> Nawal El Saa’dawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Human Rights Watch*, “Egypt: Security Forces Abuse, Torture LGBT People,” October 1, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/01/egypt-security-forces-abuse-torture-lgbt-people> (accessed March 30, 2022).

The Egyptian police have a long history of arresting gay people and raiding places where gay people gather. The most famous incident is the Queen Boat case, also called The Cairo 52. In May 2001, 52 men were arrested when the police forces raided the Queen Boat, a club on the Nile. The arrests were condemned by international human rights organisations.<sup>3</sup> Fifty men were charged with “obscene behaviour,” in accordance with a law that bans prostitution, while two were charged with “contempt for religion” in addition to being the leaders of a homosexual “cult”.<sup>4</sup> The coverage of the media also framed these men as deviants. Their names and occupations were published in both official and independent newspapers; some front pages even featured their photos with their eyes covered.<sup>5</sup> The Egyptian police took further dehumanising actions against the detainees. From the start of their detainment, the men reportedly suffered physical abuse and electric shock treatment, clearly to persuade them into confessing to homosexual acts. Following their arrest, many of the men underwent, against their will, forensic examinations of their genitalia and anus, presumably done in the name of evaluating whether they had participated in penetrative sex.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar incident in 2017, the Egyptian police arrested seven people for “promoting sexual deviancy” after they were supposedly seen waving rainbow flags at a concert in Cairo by Mashrou’ Leila, a Lebanese band with an openly gay lead singer.<sup>7</sup> Sarah Hegazy, an Egyptian socialist lesbian writer and LGBTQ+ activist, was among the people arrested and tortured in custody.<sup>8</sup> After three months, Hegazy was freed on bail, but the people who

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<sup>3</sup> Khaled Dawoud, “50 Egyptian gays in court for 'fomenting strife',” *The Guardian*, July 18, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jul/18/1> (accessed June 16, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> *OutRight International*, “EGYPT: EGYPTIAN JUSTICE ON TRIAL - THE CASE OF THE CAIRO 52,” October 15, 2001, <https://outrightinternational.org/content/egypt-egyptian-justice-trial-case-cairo-52> (accessed August 30, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *BBC News*, “Seven arrested in Egypt after raising rainbow flag at concert,” September 26, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41398193> (accessed August 13, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Hegazy, “A year after the rainbow flag controversy,” *Mada Masr*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/15/opinion/u/a-year-after-the-rainbow-flag-controversy/> (accessed January 14, 2022).

tortured her were never brought to justice.<sup>9</sup> Hegazy was forced to leave the country and seek asylum in Canada. In September 2018, while in exile, she published an article in Arabic describing her traumatic experience in the Egyptian prison: “It was electricity, I was tortured with electricity. They threatened to harm my mother if I spoke about it to anyone – my mother who died later, after I left [...] Electrocuting me was not enough. The men of Sayeda Zeinab police station also incited the women being held there to sexually assault me, physically and verbally.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, she struggled with “severe depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe anxiety and panic attacks”.<sup>11</sup> Sadly, in June 2020, Hegazy took her own life. In her suicide note, Hegazy wrote: “To my siblings, I tried to survive, and I failed. Forgive me. To my friends, experiences have been cruel and I'm too weak to resist. Forgive me. To the world, you have been extremely cruel, but I forgive.”<sup>12</sup>

It is remarks like this one that really ignited my passion in undertaking research in the field. Indeed, at the heart of my PhD is the desire to explore this context of toxic heteronormativity and patriarchy through the role of a medium I love: cinema and specifically cinematographic regimes of representation. When I was growing up in Egypt, cinema offered a world that I could escape into, especially when I was feeling scared or uncertain about the future. Watching movies gave me the feeling that there was more to the world than my everyday reality. Yet as I got older and started considering my own sexuality, I began to realise that cinema was not only a space of escape or aspiration but also a space where negative stereotypes about homosexuality were reproduced and even amplified. This project, then, is an attempt to understand these differently powerful attributes of cinema by bringing together aspects of my lived experience with a critical investigation of how my country's film industry has represented homosexuality. I wish to outline the historically problematic representations of gay characters in Egyptian cinema and collect visual evidence that sheds

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<sup>9</sup> Rasha Younes, “For Sarah Hegazy: In rage, in grief, in exhaustion,” *The New Arab*, June 16, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/sarah-hegazy-rage-grief-exhaustion> (accessed January 14, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Hegazy, “A year after the rainbow flag controversy”.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Sarah El Sirgany, “How one gay Egyptian woman stood up to homophobia and paid the ultimate price,” *CNN*, June 17, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/17/middleeast/sarah-hegazy-egypt-intl/index.html> (accessed January 14, 2022).

light on a cinema history that, with few notable exceptions, has remained stereotypical and traditional in its approach to sexuality and identity.

This research, then, analyses the ways in which male homosexual characters have been represented in Egyptian cinema since 1963, the factors that have influenced these representations, and the consequences for Egyptian culture and society. Although Egyptian cinema has been the focus of a number of academic studies, a creative-critical approach is yet to be applied to the topic and critical engagement with homosexuality on screen has been limited, as I will show. My intervention in this field with my PhD project is twofold. In terms of Egyptian cinema scholarship, I am offering the first systematic survey of how homosexual characters are created and perceived across a representative range of specific films from Egyptian cinema, and investigating the significance to this of censorship and directorial tastes and priorities. In this context, I show that in most films homosexuality is depicted as the result of mental illness, being raped at a young age, being influenced by 'Western decadence' or because of a lack of self-control or willpower. Furthermore, these films often end either with so-called 'happy endings', where the characters are 'cured' of their homosexuality, or with tragedy, suicide or murder, to perpetuate particular Abrahamic religious notions that sin leads to death. It is rare indeed that homosexuality is shown as normal, acceptable or compatible with a life worth living.

At the level of practice research, I produced a film about how homosexuality is represented in Egyptian cinema: the first ever feature documentary that explores the artistic elements used to portray homosexuals and how these elements are resistant to change and continue to reproduce fundamental aspects of negative beliefs about homosexuality. The documentary involves interviews with filmmakers and film critics from inside the Egyptian film industry. At a narrative level, it argues that the representation of gay men in Egyptian cinema, which has always been problematic, has regressed over the years. I also argue that censorship plays an important part in depicting homosexual characters in a negative light. However, filmmakers' own interpretations of homosexuality also play an important and, I argue, more crucial part in the way such characters are represented.

Making my own documentary allows me to investigate whether, how and why the representation of homosexuality has regressed over the years. It allows me to voice my concerns and encourage discussions on the topic that is long overdue. Furthermore, making a documentary provides opportunities to illustrate aesthetic choices through selected clips.

This highlights the choices of production elements that are used to depict homosexual characters and shows how these production elements often do not help depict homosexuals in a positive light.

I am aware that both in academic research and many forms of LGBTQ+ cinema and art, there is a bias towards focusing on gay men over other queer identities and particularly women and transgender people. There are, of course, Egyptians who identify with all the different components of the initials 'LGBTQ+' as well as in many other iterations. My documentary focuses only on the representation of gay male characters. This was a conscious decision reached when my initial research revealed so few depictions of lesbians, bisexuals or trans people in Egyptian films that there would not be sufficient material to include in the research. Having said that, although this project concentrates on gay men, it still has relevance to other LGBTQ+ people suffering repression because it sheds a bright light on certain mechanisms of oppressive representation that to some extent affect all sexual and gender minorities. It is a subject I feel a personal affinity with.

My PhD documentary contributes to Film and Gender Studies and to the Egyptian film industry by targeting two categories: audiences and filmmakers. In order for any positive change to take place, Egyptian and international audiences must first understand the progression or evolution of these depictions in Egyptian cinema and how they underwrite the image of homosexuals in Egyptian society today. Therefore, my documentary retraces the genealogy of the representation of homosexual characters in Egyptian cinema post-independence, specifically 1963, the year in which the first explicit homosexual character appeared in an Egyptian film. This has not been attempted in a documentary before. It focuses on how artistic representations are manipulated to portray a distorted view of homosexuals in Egyptian cinema that is acceptable to the current government and dominant mainstream cultural expectations. It explores how these elements have been historically used, and how, even today, they still are resistant to any change. They all share the same fundamental attributes and misconceptions that are still acceptable and comfortable for Egyptian society. Cutting to the heart of the issue, I will show how films portray a negative image of gay people as fools, as unwell or as doomed lovers, and by that construct homosexuality as a sign of weakness, sickness, incompleteness or deviance and rejection.

My thesis focusses on the reasons behind these depictions. As an Egyptian filmmaker and an insider of the country, I assess this by examining the work and style of particular

filmmakers to help understand how each director represented homosexual characters in relation to his background or film style and how he (or, rarely, she) used homosexual 'deviancy' to highlight social or political issues. This does not reflect or serve homosexuality justly in this day and age and misleads the audience. Even with the growing interest in academic research about film and culture in Egyptian cinema, homosexuality remains a largely ignored topic.

### **Research background and questions**

My overarching research question is: how has the representation of homosexuals in Egyptian cinema evolved since 1963 to the present day? Further, what factors have influenced these representations? To answer this question, I will analyse twenty-three feature films, presenting homosexuals historically and contemporarily, exploring myriad male sexualities to investigate the changes in presenting them. This is assessed through studies focused on the last six decades, including the situation before and after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Existing research on Egyptian cinema largely falls short in regard to the analysis and historicisation of homosexuality, with key critical texts excluding reference to homosexual representation even where it would seem relevant and significant. Joel Gordon's *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* explores the major changes in the content and style of Egyptian film production during President Gamal 'Abdel Nasser's era.<sup>13</sup> Gordon analyses a number of Egyptian films, stars and studio systems. Director Hassan al-Imam is mentioned in the book and his film *Palace Walk/Bayn al-Qasrain* (1964)<sup>14</sup> is examined but his earlier film *Midaq Alley/Zuqaq al-Midaq* (1963),<sup>15</sup> an adaptation of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* (1947),<sup>16</sup> is not mentioned, despite its established high status in Egyptian culture and inclusion of homosexual representation. In his book *Men aflam al-tes'emat - Maqalat naqdiyya (Films from the 1990s - Critique Articles)*,<sup>17</sup> the renowned film critic and former head of the Egyptian censorship

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Middle East Documentation Centre, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> *Palace Walk*, directed by Hassan al-Imam (Helmy Rafla, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> *Midaq Alley*, directed by Hassan al-Imam (Ramses Naguib Films, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1947).

<sup>17</sup> 'Ali Abu Shadi, *Men aflam al-tes'emat - Maqalat naqdiyya [Films from the 1990s - Critique Articles]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'Amma li-l-kitab, 2001).

authority 'Ali Abu Shadi discusses a number of films and directors, including director Samir Seif and his film *The Belly Dancer and the Politician/al-Raqissa wa-l-siyasi* (1990). Abu Shadi praises the director and his cinematic style, which stems from the professional Hollywood style of filmmaking, and continues to discuss the main characters in the film.<sup>18</sup> However, the homosexual character Shafik Terter is mentioned only in passing even though he is one of the main characters and is seen almost in every scene with another main character. (Of the twenty-three films I am discussing in this thesis, four films are directed by Samir Seif and will be discussed in detail.)

Even critics who pay attention to unequal representation within Egyptian cinema often ignore homosexual representation. For example, Viola Shafik's 2007 study *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* focuses on female actors and directors and the representation of minorities on screen, including peasants, Jews, Copts and Nubians.<sup>19</sup> Shafik talks about Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria.. Why?/Iskindiriya lih?* (1979).<sup>20</sup> While Shafik focuses on the director's representation of a Jewish family and other ethnic minorities, the gay character is merely mentioned in passing. Chahine bravely presented a romantic love story between a patriotic Egyptian male and a male British soldier with emotional integrity and was heavily attacked because of his sympathetic representation yet even Shafik does not engage with this aspect of the film.

Homosexuality in Egyptian cinema therefore remains a largely ignored topic in a growing literature about film and culture. My research identifies for the first time twenty-three feature films made between 1963 and 2018 that represent homosexual acts and/or identities. It analyses these and identifies key aspects and patterns of such representations and explores how they have changed over time. It also examines a range of factors shaping these representations, within the film industry and Egyptian politics and society more broadly, including censorship, directors' visions and government priorities. And it considers what impact these representations have had on Egyptian culture, in terms of 'straight' and mainstream understandings of homosexuality and also homosexual Egyptians' own

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 43-50.

<sup>19</sup> Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> *Alexandria.. Why?*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and Algerian Television, 1979).



experiences and understanding of themselves.

### **Methodologies**

My research applies an interdisciplinary approach by critically looking at the representation of homosexual characters in different forms, e.g., films, literature and academic work, and considering them in their legal, social and political contexts. This is supplemented by a number of literary and academic texts about Egypt's film industry, e.g., Viola Shafik's *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*.<sup>21</sup> This comprehensive assessment will serve as a foundation to investigate and address authorship and the different types of directors and writers that regularly represented homosexual male characters. I will analyse twenty-three Egyptian films and the censorship regulations relevant to their production, taking into consideration the director's background and the political context to understand and highlight the reasons and social factors involved in the representation of homosexual characters. These films are *Midaq Alley/Zuqaq al-Midaq* (Hassan al-Imam, 1963), *The People and the Nile/al-Nass wa-l-Nil* (Youssef Chahine, 1972), *The Malatily Bathhouse/Hammam al-Malatily* (Salah Abu Seif, 1973), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof/Qeta 'ala nar* (Samer Seif, 1977), *Alexandria.. Why?/Iskindiriya lih?* (Youssef Chahine, 1979), *An Egyptian Story/Hadduta Masriyya* (Youssef Chahine, 1982), *Alley of Desire/Darb al-Hawa* (Hossam al-Din Mustafa, 1983), *Summer Thefts/Sariqat sayfiyya* (Yousry Nasrallah, 1988), *Alexandria Again and Forever/Iskindiriya kaman we kaman* (Youssef Chahine, 1989), *The Belly Dancer and the Politician/al-Raqissa wa-l-siyasi* (Samir Seif, 1990), *Highly Dangerous Man/Mosagal khatar* (Samir Seif, 1991), *Terrorism and Kebab/al-Irhab wa-l-kabab* (Sherif Arafa, 1992), *Mercedes* (Yousry Nasrallah, 1993), *Disco Disco* (Inas al-Degheidy, 1994), *The Emigrant/al-Muhager* (Youssef Chahine, 1994), *The City/al-Madina* (Yousry Nasrallah, 2000), *Dare to Give/Rasha gare'a* (Said Hamed, 2001), *Fishtail/Diel al-Samaka* (Samir Seif, 2003), *The Ya'coubian Building/'Imaret Ya'coubian* (Marwan Hamed, 2006), *Let's Dance/Mateegy nor'os* (Inas al-Degheidy, 2006), *The Right One/Wahed Saheh* (Hadi El-Bagoury, 2011), *Family Secrets/Asrar 'a'elya* (Hani Fawzi, 2014) and *Diamond Dust/Turab al-Mass* (Marwan Hamed, 2018). Focusing on these specific case

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<sup>21</sup> Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

studies will allow for a comprehensive and deep understanding of the driving force behind the portrayals of homosexuality in Egyptian cinema over time.

For the purpose of my PhD, I have chosen a practice-based research methodology because it involves a dynamic, iterative relationship between practice and research. As Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds note, the value of this approach has been recognised for decades yet “settled status in terms of its definition and discourse” is elusive.<sup>22</sup> They understand ‘practice’ as “the act of creating something novel with the necessary processes and techniques belonging to a given field,” and ‘research’ as “a systematic investigation to establish facts, test theories and reach new knowledge or new understandings”.<sup>23</sup> In the context of media and arts research, this can involve the creation of works that generate new personal understandings for the researcher and new knowledge for the field they work in. I follow Candy and Edmonds in framing this project as ‘practice-based’ because my main contribution to knowledge is a creative artifact (rather than ‘practice-led’, which suggests research leading to new understandings about practice). As Candy and Edmonds state, “the making process provides opportunities for exploration, reflection and evaluation”<sup>24</sup> in a structured way that benefits the researcher, while the accompanying thesis makes their findings available to the field.

Queer theoretical approaches to film studies can also help us understand how film texts are created, circulated and received by audiences. As I will show, overt representations of homosexuality in Egyptian cinema are almost always unsympathetic with anything else a potential source of controversy. This illustrates the point made by Ellis Hanson: “Every film with a queer theme, no matter what the sexuality of its director or the origin of its funding, is still embattled in a highly moralistic debate over the correctness of its politics, as though art were to be valued only as sexual propaganda.”<sup>25</sup> Hanson was not writing about Egyptian cinema but the point stands. It is even more relevant when the filmmaker is from a country where homosexuality is illegal or considered an ‘act of indecency.’

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<sup>22</sup> Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, “Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line,” *Leonardo Journal*, *The MIT Press* 51, no. 1 (2018): 63-69, 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis Hanson, ed., *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 11.

However, queer film studies do not only engage with overt representations of homosexuality. Richard Dyer describes how viewers can derive powerful queer meaning from films that do not explicitly refer to homosexuality but give a sense of “the way that a social-sexual identity has been understood and felt in a certain period of time”.<sup>26</sup> Again, Dyer was not writing about Egyptian cinema, but the point stands here too, and again may take on more relevance where there are limits on what can be shown on screen. I will show how this comes through in works by Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah.

It is important to recognise differences in how aspects of same-sex desire, identity and experience are understood and expressed across different regions. Western audiences and critics, especially if applying an auteurist perspective, might expect the identity and experiences of a filmmaker to be considered in connection to the films they make. However, this may not be the case in all places, particularly when engaging with controversial subjects. There are various reasons, social, cultural, political and practical, why an Egyptian filmmaker might decide not to make their sexuality public. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt pay attention to that in their study of queer cinema around the world, noting that “filmmakers outside the West may not be ‘out’ as gay and, indeed, may not find the rhetoric of visibility useful or relevant for their sense of self”.<sup>27</sup> Within the context of queer theoretical approaches to cinema, Schoonover and Galt offer insights especially relevant here, emphasising the potential for queer meaning not in the life of the filmmaker but in the film text itself and its reception by potentially queer audiences.

Schoonover and Galt argue that “another approach to queer film methodology is a textual focus that defines queer films as those that depict queer people diegetically”.<sup>28</sup> I will describe in Chapter Two the influence of such portrayals on me personally and people around me in my early life, real and powerful effects related only to representations of queerness and not the identity of any individual filmmaker. This shows the powerful queer meanings that film texts and audiences can generate even when audiences know nothing about the filmmaker’s personal life.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 191.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

At the same time, these film texts can be profoundly informed by the personal experiences of filmmakers, especially auteurist filmmakers. But this is not to say that their interest lies in their status or their simple truths about individual lives. Rather they shed light on society as a whole and even on the limitations of self-perception. Chahine's films and style are a good example. In works like *Alexandria.. Why?*,<sup>29</sup> *An Egyptian Story*,<sup>30</sup> and *Alexandria Again and Forever*,<sup>31</sup> homosexuality is represented and not associated with any negative stigma.<sup>32</sup> Chahine has talked about the autobiographical elements informing these three films. I analyse this more in Chapter Three.

### Chapter outlines

In Chapter One, 'Homosexuality and Egyptian literature, censorship and cinematic adaptation', I look at representations of homosexuality in Egyptian literature and the various responses to them, including how they relate to colonial experiences. This includes first-hand expressions of homosexual desire by, for instance, the major writer Abu Nuwas, and also attempts to portray homosexuality as something imposed from outside Egypt. I also look at how homosexual representation relates to structures of censorship and cinematic representation in Egyptian society and culture. I look at the historical development of the rules governing censorship and the restrictions they have put in place. I also look at how filmmakers have always been able to find ways around some of these restrictions, including representation of homosexuality, if they feel strongly enough about it, yet few have done so and even fewer have done so with empathy or respect. I explore how this has affected cinematic representations of homosexuality in Egypt and what we can learn by comparing novels with homosexual characters to films adapted from those novels – particularly how the films tend to be more regressive in their representation. I also look at how international coproduction has affected this situation.

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<sup>29</sup> *Alexandria.. Why?*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and Algerian Television, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> *An Egyptian Story*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> *Alexandria Again and Forever*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, Paris Classics Productions, La Sept, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication and Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Garay Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film," *Middle East Report* 206 (Spring, 1998): 32-36, 36.

In Chapter Two, 'Egyptian cinema and Egyptian identity', I describe the effect of representation of homosexual characters in Egyptian cinema on me growing up and as a young adult, my motivations for this research and how I selected the films I look at in this thesis and my documentary. I give an account of the history of the Egyptian film industry and its place as the only major national film industry in the region, discussing its origins under colonialism, its expansion, its nationalisation after the revolution and later reprivatisation, and the limited opportunities in the industry for expression outside the bounds of censorship. I show how in the years since the revolution of 2011 the industry has become more conservative and aligned with the government's desire to promote police and military figures as national heroes. This works to strengthen and promote the government's image and position domestically and, considering the position of the Egyptian cinema industry as a media powerhouse, throughout the Arab-speaking world. I also show how the Egyptian film industry has historically shown negative representations of various different minorities, religious and racial as well as sexual. But while some of these have improved in recent years, representation of homosexuality has got worse.

In Chapter Three, 'The representation of homosexual characters and experiences', I draw on Stuart Hall's ideas about representation and power to explore how negative representations of homosexuality on screen make LGBTQ+ and other disadvantaged people more vulnerable. I show how fears around "damaging the image of Egypt" can lead to some people's very citizenship being thrown into doubt, and how such fears have affected me personally. I analyse the roles of production design (*mise-en-scène*) and authorship (*cinéma d'auteur*), including that of writer-director Yousry Nasrallah, writer-director Youssef Chahine, writer Wahid Hamed, director Marwan Hamed and director Inas al-Degheidy. Directors Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah's films are examined in depth in this chapter. I argue that they are the only two Egyptian directors who depicted homosexual characters with emotional integrity while others depicted homosexuality in an unrealistic way.

In Chapter Four, 'The Making of *Egypt's Celluloid Closet*', I discuss how I made my documentary. Throughout all three stages of making the documentary (pre-production, production and post-production), I was conscious of the ethical challenges working on a sensitive topic like this posed. I describe my motivations, why I wanted to make a documentary, the context of the literary quotation that opens the film, how I selected interviewees, and my decisions around the language, tone and mode of the film. I also discuss

how I conducted interviews, the use of clips and B-roll, and issues around copyright, permissions and raising awareness. I also explain my intentions around distribution.

In the conclusion, I summarise the findings of the thesis and documentary around the regression of representation of homosexuality in Egyptian films across the decades, and how censorship has played a role but has not been the main factor. I describe how authorship plays an important role in depicting homosexual characters realistically. I also reflect on the importance of actors' personal and professional opinions of playing homosexual characters. I share my hopes that this project will help make progressive change and concerns for possible repercussions for me personally. I consider areas of potential further research, including how Egyptian films might represent homosexuality in the future and the role of the new wave of Egyptian young filmmakers living abroad.

## **Chapter One**

### **Homosexuality and Egyptian literature, censorship and cinematic adaptation**

In this chapter, I look at representations of homosexuality in Egyptian literature and the various responses to them, including how they relate to colonial experiences. This includes first-hand expressions of homosexual desire by, for instance, the major writer Abu Nuwas, and also attempts to portray homosexuality as something imposed from outside Egypt. I also look at how homosexual representation relates to structures of censorship and cinematic representation in Egyptian society and culture. I look at the historical development of the rules governing censorship and the restrictions they have put in place. I also look at how filmmakers have always been able to find ways around some of these restrictions, including representation of homosexuality, if they feel strongly enough about it, yet few have done so and even fewer have done so with empathy or respect. I explore how this has affected cinematic representations of homosexuality in Egypt and what we can learn by comparing novels with homosexual characters to films adapted from those novels – particularly how the films tend to be more regressive in their representation. I also look at how international coproduction has affected this situation.

#### **Homosexuality in Egyptian literature**

It is important to examine literature when studying film and representation in this research context. Cinema is a hugely influential cultural form in modern Egypt and Egypt is the centre of the film industry in the Arab world (as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two). As this thesis will show, many Egyptian films are based on novels, especially those dealing with controversial subjects including homosexuality. These novels in turn are part of a literary culture that goes back centuries. In some cases, their authors have knowledge of historic texts that explicitly express homosexuality, showing links between the literature of the past and the cinema of the present. Many Egyptians today do not even know such texts exist. Understanding literature therefore helps us understand cinema. This chapter will therefore unravel the history of homosexuality in Arabic literature and the relationship between literature and film.

At the same time, it is important to understand differences in representation between literature and cinema. A number of Egyptian novels (which I analyse in the thesis) contain

varied and sometimes sympathetic depictions of homosexual characters and explicit portrayals of love between two men. When these novels were turned into films their stories were made more accessible and popular with the public. Yet representations of homosexuality were often made less sympathetic and sometimes quite hostile. I feel there is a direct connection between literature and negative depictions in film. How decisions were made on the characters' personality and how they were eventually altered and portrayed should be explored. The writer Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel prize and had many novels adapted for cinema and also led Egypt's censorship authority, said censorship of films is more important than censorship of books, because films have larger audience and are in every home, while the numbers of book readers is limited.<sup>33</sup> This shows that authorities believe cinema can be more influential than literature. It also implies they think this influence should be used to make homosexuality seem less sympathetic not more sympathetic.

Joseph Massad, the Jordanian writer, is one of the most prominent scholars of Egyptian literature and his book *Desiring Arabs*, is one of the most cited books on homosexuality and homosexual desire in Arabic literature.<sup>34</sup> Massad focuses on the history of the representation of sexual desires of Arabs. He examines the literary work of several figures and events that caused anxiety to modern Arab writers. In the first chapter, he focuses on sexual life during the Abbasid period and specifically on Abu Nuwas, the Arab Persian poet whose poems explicitly portrayed sexual desires and practices that were considered immoral.<sup>35</sup> Abu Nuwas's collected Diwan includes a section called *ghazal* (love poems in the masculine), which includes 1,000 couplets about the love of young men. Writer Jim Colville translated 120 of Abu Nuwas's poems in his book, *Poems of Wine and Revelry: The khamriyyat of Abu Nuwas*.<sup>36</sup> Colville translated the following two poems:

“May the lord make a toast to that boy who was mine  
With the willowy figure and wiggling hips;  
When he laughs then his laughter's like bubbles in wine

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<sup>33</sup> Hussein Bayumi, *Al-riqaba 'ala al-sinema - Al-quiud wa-l-hudud [Censorship on Cinema - Restrictions and Limitations]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'amma li-l-Kitab, 2012), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 51-98.

<sup>36</sup> Jim Colville, *Poems of Wine and Revelry: The khamriyyat of Abu Nuwas* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005).



Or like flawless, white pearls behind ruby red-lips.

In his glance there is magic: his dark, sultry eyes  
Have a radiant charm that could spellbind the moon;  
In his wake, is the fragrance of perfume that lies  
And suffuses the air like a spring afternoon.

Like an old, ragged shirt he has cast me aside  
And ignores me now, yet there was no fault of mine;  
Had he lain awake nights, embers burning inside,  
He would give me his love 'til the last day of time.

Still, my God make a toast to that memorable time,  
Before heartless rejection ignited this fire;  
When together we lay with our bodies entwined  
And the leaves of lust shook on the tree of desire."<sup>37</sup>

A young fawn kept me company,  
His sweet words drove me to attack;  
He gave his kisses easily  
But when I touched him, he drew back.  
Yet, undeterred, I poured him more;  
Then, looking at me sleepily  
He fell face down upon the floor,  
Whereat I jumped, impatiently.

He woke and said, "It's sin you have bought!"  
Said I, "Then let me do my worst!"  
Upon his pretty face I thought  
A pomegranate had just burst.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 64.

I kept on riding that sweet boy,  
And taking pleasure all night long.  
At last he started to enjoy  
The act and sung that well-known song:

*“O empty camp in desert land,  
The raindrops fall upon the sand!”<sup>38</sup>*

Massad discusses the different interventions made by Arab and European writers on Abu Nuwas, who was considered a companion of the fifth Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid and later his son, al-Amin, the sixth Abbasid Caliph. Abu Nuwas’s ghazal explicitly portrayed love for young men and were reluctantly tolerated though not approved by those in power, which did not stop them from being distributed and easily obtained by the public. He analyses the views of writers who praised Abu Nuwas, but also others who disagreed with him. The German Orientalist Adam Mez attributed the love of boys among Arabs to Persian origins in his book on medieval Arab society.<sup>39</sup> In his book *Alhan al-Han, Abu Nuwas fi Hayatih al-Lahiyyah (The Melodies of the Tavern: Abu Nuwas in His Whimsical Life)*, the Egyptian writer ‘Abd al-Rahman Sidqi echoed what Mez wrote.<sup>40</sup> The Egyptian literary historian Ahmed Amin agreed with Sidqi in his book *Duha al-Islam (The Forenoon of Islam)* and accused Abu Nuwas of producing “lewd literature” and blamed Persian culture for influencing society and making debauchery and the love of youthful boys in the Abbasid period acceptable: if the Persian influence did not exist in the Abbasid period and the Umayyad dynasty, wrote Amin, “you would not have seen rhapsodies for youthful boys, nor this torrential river of singing girls, and you would not have seen abundant luxury and opulence”.<sup>41</sup> However, the Egyptian Arabic literature professor Muhammad al-Nuwayhi did not agree with other writers who attributed sexual deviance to Persian origins.<sup>42</sup> Taha Hussein is among the writers who

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed Amin, *Duha al-Islam [The Forenoon of Islam]* (Cairo: Matba‘at Lajnat al-Ta’lif wa-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 1933), vol. 1, 120, quoted in Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 74-75.

<sup>42</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 86.

praised Abu Nuwas's ghazal. Massad cites two references of same-sex practice made by Egyptian writer Taha Hussein in his autobiography *Al-Ayyam (The Days)*: Hussein describes his personal experience in his youth with what he called "Nuwasite" classmates during his studies at Al-Azhar University (Egypt's oldest university), which is famous as Sunni Islam's most prestigious university.<sup>43</sup> Hussein describes readers of Abu Nuwas's poetry saying: "They enjoyed the love poetry ghazal as much as those poets had and they created for themselves ideals of beauty to which they wrote love poetry and rhapsodies."<sup>44</sup> The second reference to same-sex practice made by Hussein is at the same university. At the age of thirteen, he recalls a young man nicknamed Abu Tartur who regularly visited the student apartments of Al-Azhar university at night to have sex with students.<sup>45</sup> Hussein recalls observing Abu Tartur choosing a different student every time he visited. Occasionally, students would whisper about Abu Tartur in a secretive and conservative way.

Massad's citing of Abu Nawas's poetry and examination of how writers criticised Abu Nuwas's work is very important for my thesis because the views of Abu Nuwas's detractors contrast with modern Egypt and how homosexuality is perceived in society and depicted in films. Abu Nuwas's father was an Arab, but his mother was Persian, so his work was seen as Persian influenced because it did not fit with society's views at that time. The idea of associating homosexuality with foreigners or Western society was discussed by other scholars, especially in studies that are focused on colonialism and gay tourism in the Arab world. In the article 'Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox,' Nicole Kligerman explains how the blooming of Western colonialism in the Middle East and Muslim world established the concept of hatred against homosexuality.<sup>46</sup> She notes: "The concept or category of 'deviance' came to the Middle East [through the agency] of the West".<sup>47</sup> Kligerman adds:

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<sup>43</sup> Michele Brignone, "Does al-Azhar Speak for All Sunnis?", *Oasis*, July 1, 2017, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/does-al-azhar-speak-all-sunnis> (accessed April 20, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Taha Hussein, *Al-Ayyam [The Days]* (Cairo: Dar al-ma'arif, 1978), vol. 3, 16-18, translated by E.H. Paxton, Hilary Wayment, and Kenneth Cragg (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1997), quoted in Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Kligerman, "Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox," *Macalester Islam Journal* 2 (2007): Article 8.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Dunne, "Homosexuality in the Middle East: An Agenda for Historical Research," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 12 (1990): 1-18, quoted in Kligerman, "Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox," 59.

“Until Western influence, homosexuality did not carry a negative connotation in the Muslim world.”<sup>48</sup> In his book *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, Robert Aldrich focused on homosexuality in colonies, especially in both the British and French empires.<sup>49</sup> He mentioned that homosexuals fled Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and France because of legal persecution, social disapproval, or criminal prosecution if they were exposed, but in the colonies, they were left to themselves so long as they were discrete.<sup>50</sup> “Certain colonies gained fame as sites of homosexual license. Indeed, in French slang, *‘faire passer son brevet colonial’* (literally, to give someone an examination for a colonial diploma) meant to initiate him to sodomy. Europeans fantasised about ‘vice’ in the Islamic world, and writers from Gustave Flaubert to Paul Bowles were seduced by the hammam, the kasbah and the desert.”<sup>51</sup> He added, “Sydney in the mid-1800s was called the ‘Sodom of the South Seas’”. Aldrich examined the sex lives of five European explorers, in South America, the Indian sub-continent, Central Asia, the Libyan Desert and the ‘Empty Quarter’ of Arabia, Henry Morton Stanley being among those explorers, with each case involving homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> Despite the fact that Egypt is not examined in Aldrich’s book, his study, to some extent, confirms what Kligerman wrote, that homosexuality existed and was tolerated more in the colonies than in Egypt, even though, to a certain extent, it was tolerated in Egypt long before colonialism.

Massad examines a number of novels that involve representing Arab sexual desires and concludes that the direct impact of novels is small when compared to cinema and television, and novels become even more popular when made into films.<sup>53</sup> Joel Gordon, the political and cultural historian of modern Egypt and the Middle East, added to that in his book *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt*.<sup>54</sup> Gordon mentioned that before 23 July 1953, restrictions on writing literature were less restrictive than on filmmaking: for example, Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *New Cairo (al-Qahira al-gadida)* was published in 1945 and it is clear that students promote socialism, nihilism and Islamism

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<sup>48</sup> Kligerman, “Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox,” 59.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 271-272.

<sup>54</sup> Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Middle East Documentation Centre, 2002).

in this novel but raising any political issues was avoided on screen.<sup>55</sup> Considering what Massad and Gordon wrote, it is true that film is considered a powerful way to reach wider audiences and certainly helped make novels more popular but literature and specifically novels that show Egyptian society in a more realistic way are not often taught at schools. My thesis and documentary explore how homosexual characters' treatment in novels was different from films, but more importantly, the thesis and documentary show how these representations were often altered and made more negative in the film version.

We can see then that representation of homosexual experiences of various kinds have long been part of Egyptian literary culture, in ways that have been tolerated if not approved by authorities, and sometimes attributed to foreign influence. Literature of colonial times shows how, in this period, some colonists found more leeway for homosexual acts in occupied regions than in their homelands, which in turn enabled conservative Egyptians once again to frame homosexuality as a foreign influence. More recent novels show how writers faced less censorship than filmmakers – an area I will now explore in more detail.

### **Homosexuality and Egyptian censorship**

As censorship rules in Egypt are a factor in restricting creativity and freedom of expression, it is vital to understand the restrictions filmmakers work under. The censorship of religion, sex and politics is not unique to Egypt and was enforced in other countries at different times. In his book, *Censorship: A Beginner's Guide*, Julian Petley discusses the history of censorship and how it took different forms in the past.<sup>56</sup> Petley explains how book-burning events played an important part in censoring religion, sex, politics and other taboo areas. In regard to homosexuality, he talks about the most prominent book burning event of the twentieth century, which took place in Berlin in the early days of the Third Reich in 1933, when over 25,000 'un-German' books were burned outside the State Opera House. These included books taken from Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, which was famous for championing liberal causes such as the legalisation of homosexuality and abortion.<sup>57</sup>

There are, however, important ways in which Egyptian censorship is distinctive and specific to the country. Viola Shafik, an Egyptian-German film scholar and filmmaker whose

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Julian Petley, *Censorship: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 23-24.

work focuses on Arab and particularly Egyptian cinema, wrote two books on Arab and Egyptian cinema. *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* focuses on different aspects of film, culture and national identity in the Arab world.<sup>58</sup> In regard to Egyptian cinema, Shafik explains that all films must pass two stages in order to be released in the cinemas: the first is a state committee which issues permission to start filming; if this permission is granted, a second license is then needed to show the film commercially. In addition, Joel Gordon explains that, in 1947, the government issued a series of sixty-one rules that made things more difficult for filmmakers. The rules are divided into two categories. Of the sixty-one prohibitions, thirty-seven are related to social morality. This category calls to mind the words of Mustafa Darwish, chief censor in the mid-sixties: “began with religion and ended with sexuality and violence”.<sup>59</sup> Gordon notes some of the taboos: “Religious restrictions centred on inflammatory or derogatory depictions of faith and the faithful. Corporeal depictions of God’s power or the prophets, recitation of – even possession of – the Quran by insincere or villainous characters. Any satirical or negative depictions of religious actions such as prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, or funeral processions were strictly forbidden (religious figures, however, could be mocked). National and Arab pride mitigated against depictions of urban or rural deprivation: squalid alleys, hand carts, peddlers, the inside or outside of ramshackle peasant huts, or beggars.”<sup>60</sup> Gordon agreed with most critics that no realistic depictions of Egyptian society and its antisocial behaviour or social ills were filmed, but social relations, in general, were deemed filmable.

The 1947 prohibitions covered many other aspects of life. Gordon notes: “The ordinances even banned direct allusions to titles, ranks, or decorations, as well as any exhortations that served to belittle the power of government ministers, religious, judicial or medical officials. In the realm of sexuality, the code banned full or partial nudity, discussion of or reference to sexually transmitted diseases, childbearing, or other medical affairs ‘of a private nature,’ similarly. The code also forbade any depictions of suicide, torture, hanging,

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<sup>58</sup> Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Mustafa Darwish, “Al-Riqaba wa-l-sinema al-’ukhra: shahadat raqib” [Censorship and the Other Cinema: Testimony of a Censor], *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995): 93, quoted in Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 59-60.

suffering, or scenes of excessive violence or cruelty.”<sup>61</sup> Other prohibitions “related to national security and public safety. Politically inflammatory issues topped the list: communism or any anti-establishment ideologies; expressions of popular mass dissent, such as mass gatherings, demonstrations, strikes, or even discussions and certainly speeches related to incendiary issues like labor rights. Political violence and the depiction of anti-social behavior such as drug abuse were also strictly forbidden.”<sup>62</sup> The code outlawed any depictions of resistance against foreign occupation and historical characters even in pharaonic dress.

These rules certainly had significant consequences in terms of representing homosexuality in Egyptian cinema. In 1988, Garay Menicucci concluded in his article ‘Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film’ that Tunisian directors had much more freedom in representing homosexual characters or any other sexual issues because censorship codes are less strict, and the majority of Tunisian films are co-produced with France.<sup>63</sup> Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid, he added, is considered the first Arab director to represent an entire story that is about characters with sexual identity problems involving homosexuality. In *Man of Ashes/Rih Essed* (1986),<sup>64</sup> Bouzid represents three young carpentry apprentices who are molested by the head carpenter; when they become young adults, they cannot face the expectations of their society and the idea of marriage.<sup>65</sup>

In 1955, less than three years after the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the Ministry of Guidance/Wizaret al-Irshad cancelled the strict 1947 censorship rules and replaced them with new censorship rules, law number 430/1955, proposed by the head of Egyptian lawyers ‘Abdelrazik al-Sanhury.<sup>66</sup> Even though a new law was formed, it expressed the same principles as the 1947 law. The main change in the new law was the emphasis on justifying the reasons for having a censorship authority, which was explained by vague statements indicating that social morality should be protected, and national security should be kept under control.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Garay Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film,” *Middle East Report* 206 (Spring, 1998), 32-36, 36.

<sup>64</sup> *Man of Ashes*, directed by Nouri Bouzid (Cinétéléfilms and Satpec, 1986).

<sup>65</sup> Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet,” 36.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Ali Abu Shadi, *Al-Sinima wa-l-siasa [Cinema and Politics]* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriya al-‘Amma li-l-kitab, 2000), 51.

Without any specific details, the final decision on any production was left to the head of the censorship office, who still had the option to refer to the 1947 rules. Also, section nine in the new law gave the censor the right to withdraw any permit that was given in the past if necessary.<sup>67</sup> The 1947 censorship rules included one section about morality which says: “Immorality can be represented throughout the story as long as morality wins at the end.” For economic reasons, some leeway was permitted around this rule for Egyptian productions exhibited domestically. But such films would then not be permitted international distribution.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, the definition of what is moral and what is not, and whether a film was screened domestically or internationally, was left to the judgment of the censor. This means morality is questionable because it is depending on an individual’s opinion and not a set of rules that are followed, and judging morality could be affected by the head of censors’ personal opinion on homosexuality. This ambiguity possibly increased after 1955. In 1959, Egyptian writer (and later Nobel Prize Winner in Literature in 1988) Naguib Mahfouz held the position of the head of censorship authority. Mahfouz said that “censorship rules are clear and not negotiable, but a section such as (protecting public morals) could be debated”.<sup>69</sup> Mahfouz’s 1947 novel *Midaq Alley (Zuqaq al-Midaq)* was made into a film in 1963, and the film represented three stereotypes of gay characters. But director Youssef Chahine, on the other hand, was able to use the ambiguity in the censorship rules to his benefit and represent gay characters in a positive light: Chahine’s film *The People and the Nile/al-Nass wa-l-Nil* (1972), represented two gay characters subtly and without any stereotyping.

This ambiguity was recognised by those at the heart of the censorship structure. Film critic and head of censorship office from 1996 to 1999 and 2004 to 2009 ‘Ali Abu Shadi later suggested: “The 1955 censorship law was formed to define the relationship between the 1952 regime and filmmakers. And even though it consisted of some sections that restricted total freedom, the new law was better and offered more freedom for film producers, but because of the old fears and repression which were created before the revolution, filmmakers did not

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<sup>67</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 23-24.

<sup>68</sup> Mahmoud ‘Ali, *Al-sinema wa-l-riqaba fi Masr: 1896-1952 [Cinema and Censorship in Egypt: 1896-1952]* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘Amma l-qusur al-Saqafa, 2004), 91.

<sup>69</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 48.



take advantage of the new censorship law and kept presenting stories that serve the regime as they used to do before the revolution."<sup>70</sup>

Censorship rules regarding other subjects, and not just homosexuality, seemed unclear in several cases in the past. For example, in 1955, an adaptation of Naguib Mahfouz's 1945 novel *New Cairo (al-Qahira al-gadida)* was submitted to censorship for approval. The novel raises political issues and its student characters promote concepts such as socialism, nihilism and Islamism. The screenplay was refused and, according to director Tawfik Saleh, the censor refused to meet him to discuss the reasons for refusing the screenplay. However, after changing the title to *Cairo, 30/al-Qahira talatin* (1966), the same story was submitted for approval by the censor, this time by director Salah Abu Seif, and the screenplay was approved without any comments.<sup>71</sup> The same situation happened with Saleh when he submitted a script for a film initially titled *The Big Case*. The film was refused shooting permission twice, but actor 'Omar El-Sherif showed interest in the story, and helped Saleh to get in touch with Dollar Film for distribution and the company agreed to produce the film. Saleh informed producer Helmy Rafla that the story was rejected by censors and Rafla informed Saleh that he should not worry because Rafla was able to receive a censorship approval of any subject. Saleh resubmitted the same exact rejected script and changed the title to *We Are the Students/ehna al-talamza* (1959). Eventually, the script was praised and accepted in less than a week.<sup>72</sup> These kinds of situations show that in practice motivated and well-connected filmmakers have been able to find ways to sidestep what might seem like strict censorship rules around representation of controversial subjects. This suggests that if more filmmakers wanted to represent more progressive stories and characters involving homosexuality it might have been possible. The door was not fully closed but few tried to pass through.

The 1955 censorship law provides the main legal structure for Egyptian censorship until the present day.<sup>73</sup> However, its terms have been amended since then with some relevance to the representation of homosexuality. In 1976, Minister of Culture Gamal El-'Outifi added some strict amendments (number 220) to the 1955 rules, which are considered very regressive because they came at a time when Egyptian society was becoming more liberal in

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<sup>70</sup> Abu Shadi, *Cinema and Politics*, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>73</sup> Abu Shadi, *Cinema and Politics*, 52.

other ways.<sup>74</sup> For example, *The Malatily Bathhouse/Hammam al-Malatily* (1973),<sup>75</sup> which included Egyptian cinema's first fully developed homosexual character, was screened a few months before the October 1973 war. The film was classified as "adults only,"<sup>76</sup> but still was permitted screening. The amendments made in section two of the 1976 rules tightened restrictions on several subjects such as showing funerals, bodies, sex and inappropriate scenes, promoting suicide, corrupting religious beliefs, protecting the country and its international relationship with other countries, and protecting the country's national security.<sup>77</sup> The reason for these changes was put under the umbrella of protecting Egypt's social stability and the international image of Egypt.<sup>78</sup> As Shafik summarises:

Heavenly religions [i.e., Islam, Christianity, and Judaism] should not be criticized. Heresy and magic should not be positively portrayed. Immoral actions and vices are not to be justified and must be punished. Images of naked human bodies or the inordinate emphasis on individual erotic parts, the representation of sexually arousing scenes, and scenes of alcohol consumption and drug use are not allowed. Also prohibited is the use of obscene and indecent speech. The sanctity of marriage, family values, and one's parents must be respected. Beside the prohibition on the excessive use of horror and violence, or inciting their imitation, it is forbidden to represent social problems as hopeless, to upset the mind, or to divide religions, classes and national unity.<sup>79</sup>

According to Shafik, religion, sex and politics were also on top of the list of strictly monitored taboos.<sup>80</sup> Political sensitivities were a major concern. For example, all Egyptian films produced from 1971 to 1973 that portrayed or even mentioned Egypt's defeat by Israel in the 'Six Days War' of June 1967 were banned.<sup>81</sup> Youssef Chahine's film *The Sparrow/al-*

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<sup>74</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> *The Malatily Bathhouse*, dir. by Salah Abu Seif (Salah Abu Seif, 1973).

<sup>76</sup> E'tidal Momtaz, *Mozakirat raqiba sinima'iyā [Diaries of a Film Censor]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'Ammā li-l-kitāb, 1985), 48.

<sup>77</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

'*Usfur* (1971)<sup>82</sup> had its release date delayed by two years because it tackled the 1967 war. However, there are filmmakers that challenged these rules. For example, *The Belly Dancer and the Politician/al-Raqissa wa-l-siyasi* (1990) was permitted to be screened in cinemas even though the film includes strong criticism for the regime. This criticism reached a degree of even accusing the regime of promoting drugs and heroin.<sup>83</sup> This shows that there was some flexibility around even these tighter rules.

The sex section in the censorship law includes many prohibitions, such as showing men and women in the same bed or in an inappropriate position, kisses that are intense and provoke sexual arousal, scenes of prostitutes, subjects or incidents that are related to venereal diseases, showing naked bodies by either filming them or using shadows, dancing that provokes sexual arousal, and showing any body parts that should be covered, especially women's body parts such as abdomen, breasts, and legs.<sup>84</sup> One of the regulations prohibits "Mashahed al-shuzuz al-gensy".<sup>85</sup> This phrase roughly translates as "homosexual sex scenes," leaving room for directors to show both sympathetic and unsympathetic representations of homosexuality that do not show sexual acts. For example, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof/Qeta 'ala nar* (1977) was made the year after, and depicts a stereotypical gay character, but there are no sex scenes in it. Another example is *Alexandria.. Why?/Iskindiriya lih?* (1979), which was made a few years after. It is worth mentioning that 'Adel, the homosexual character in *Alexandria.. Why?* explicitly expresses his love for Tommy in the film through erotic dialogue such as "I should have never offered you my bed, never spent the whole night looking at you". Chahine clearly did not show "homosexual sex scenes" but cleverly conveyed his message and the love story between two men through subtle dialogue and eyes gazes.

In June 1992, the Egyptian parliament made some amendments which affected the main rules of the law and called it censorship law number 38 for the year 1992.<sup>86</sup> In practice, these amendments made little difference to the representations of homosexuality. As throughout this period, censors had the legal power to deny production of any film, but in

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<sup>82</sup> *The Sparrow*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and ONCIC Algeria, 1971).

<sup>83</sup> 'Ali Abu Shadi, *Men aflam al-tes'emat - Maqalat naqdiyya [Films from the 1990s - Critique Articles]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'Amma li-l-kitab, 2001), 50.

<sup>84</sup> Bayumi, *Censorship on Cinema*, 128-130.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

practice they did not act only to shut down freedom of expression or discussing taboo subjects. After leading the censorship authority from 1996 to 1999, Abu Shadi confirmed in an interview with *The Seventh Art/al-Fan al-Sabe'* magazine dated September 24, 2000, that parts of the censorship law which focus on protecting public morals can be debated. He described this section as "Matat",<sup>87</sup> which can be translated as flexible or elastic, which implies it can be interpreted in different ways by different people. Abu Shadi also held the same position from 2004 to 2009. He argues that, while leading the censorship authority, he often supported freedom of speech and respected the opinions of others even if the ideas represented went against his own political or cultural point of views.<sup>88</sup> In a seminar held on September 30, 2001 at the Egyptian Film Critics Association, film critic Samir Farid argued that censors had not banned any film since 1984, and that journalists, and sometimes film critics are the people who ask to ban films, sometimes provoking cultural controversy.<sup>89</sup> Some censors even welcomed exposure to subject matters that would seem to be against the spirit of the law. For instance, when talking about the distribution of American films in Egypt, film censor E'tidal Momtaz mentioned that she "enjoyed watching American productions as part of her job because these productions provided her with information which she did not know about lesbians".<sup>90</sup>

In fact, censors sometimes prevented self-censorship among directors. For example, Egyptian director Magdy Ahmed 'Ali was screening his film *The Hero/al-Batal* (1997) at Al-Mansoura city in Egypt and during the screening one of the audiences shouted, "Where is the censorship?" 'Ali visited Abu Shadi who was leading the censorship authority at that time and suggested deleting the scene that the audience did not like because he does not want any clash with the audiences, but Abu Shadi (the censor), refused to cut the scene and encouraged 'Ali to stick to his artistic vision.<sup>91</sup>

To my knowledge, only two filmmakers used this flexibility around censorship in practice to bring sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality to the screen. Director Youssef Chahine's screenplays and films were approved by censorship, and appeared during the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 150-151.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 153.

1970s, the 1980s and 1990s. Later, in the late 1980s, director Yousry Nasrallah started showing honest depictions in his first film *Summer Thefts/Sariqat sayfiyya* (1988) and continued until the year 2000.

It is important to recognise that international partnerships, especially French co-productions, have played an important part in producing several such films in Arab countries, especially films that involve sexual or social issues. According to Shafik, France is considered the largest market for Arab art house films. Between 2006 and 2011, more than thirty-seven percent of all Lebanese films were French co-productions.<sup>92</sup> Shafik mentions *Salvation Army* (2013),<sup>93</sup> shot partly in Morocco, as an early example of an Arab film whose primary focus is the life of a homosexual man.<sup>94</sup> Abdallah Taia approaches the subject from a different direction and shows the many aspects of queer boyhood. He treats the subject as a true representation of what occurs in Moroccan society void of any Western connection.

International co-productions can enable the work of directors who want to depict homosexual characters realistically and with emotional integrity, such as Youssef Chahine. Menicucci argues that in Egypt, international co-production has contributed to the making of Chahine's films and to his involvement with other directors. His film *The People and the Nile* (1972)<sup>95</sup> is an Egyptian-Soviet production.<sup>96</sup> According to Shafik, *The Sparrow* (1971)<sup>97</sup> and *The Return of the Prodigal Son/Awdat il-ibn al dal* (1976)<sup>98</sup> were co-produced by the former ONCIC in Algeria.<sup>99</sup> The French Ministry of Culture and French Television also helped Chahine to finish the majority of his high budget films including *Adieu Bonaparte/Wada'n Bonaparte* (1985), *Alexandria Again and Forever/Iskindiriya kaman we kaman* (1989), and *The Emigrant/al-Muhager* (1994).<sup>100</sup> Yousry Nasrallah's three films which are analysed in the

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<sup>92</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 235.

<sup>93</sup> *Salvation Army*, directed by Abdallah Taia (Les Films de Pierre, Les Films Pelléas and Rita Productions, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 235.

<sup>95</sup> *The People and the Nile*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Cairo Cinema Company and Mosfilm, 1972).

<sup>96</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 35.

<sup>97</sup> *The Sparrow*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and ONCIC Algeria, 1971).

<sup>98</sup> *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Misr Co and Office National pour le Commerce et l'Industrie Cinématographique, 1976).

<sup>99</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 186.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

documentary and thesis are also international coproductions.

These examples show that censorship plays a part in framing the depiction of homosexual identity and experience but is not the only factor determining how such representation is shaped. Writers' and directors' treatment of homosexual characters is crucial but often stereotypical, and despite the fact that more positive depictions could be represented, the number of directors who represented homosexuals in an unrealistic way outweighs the number of directors who depicted them with emotional integrity. Given all of this, we can see that throughout this period censorship structures did not simply and completely block representations of taboo subjects including homosexuality. Evidentially, homosexual characters have been depicted in different ways, with both negative and positive depictions permitted by censors. The question that emerges from this is why only two directors were both motivated and able to challenge *both* the interpretations of censorship rules on homosexual scenes *and also* the expectations of society, and found ways to deliver honest and sympathetic stories engaging with homosexuality.

I have found that there is a new wave of young filmmakers attempting to challenge censorship rules in Egypt, tackling taboo subjects which do not meet the expectations of Egyptian society and audience. *Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?/Bashta'lak Sa'at* (2022)<sup>101</sup> is a good example: the film was financed and made entirely in Germany, showing again the potential role of international coproduction.<sup>102</sup> Mohamed Shawky Hassan adapted the Arabic iconic style of *One Thousand and One Nights* to tell a complex story about three male lovers in a polyamorous relationship, while using several Egyptian and classical Arab songs. Represented from a queer Egyptian perspective, the film normalised the homosexual world which is not often seen by people who are not familiar with it.<sup>103</sup> It is true that these kinds of films do not have a direct impact on Egyptian audiences because they are not screened in cinema theatres in Egypt, but they do have an online presence and their influence

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<sup>101</sup> *Shall I compare you to a Summer's Day?*, directed by Mohamed Shawky Hassan (Amerikafilm and Aflam Wardeshan, 2022).

<sup>102</sup> Jay Weissberg, "Egyptian queer experimental cinema comes into its own with this playful, visually inventive sex-positive short feature that repurposes 'One Thousand and One Nights' using gay Arab cultural signifiers," *The Film Verdict*, February 11, 2022, <https://thefilmverdict.com/shall-i-compare-you-to-a-summer-s-day/> (accessed June 14, 2022).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

is huge on the internet. *Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?* (2022) was one of the films I intended to analyse in the documentary. I was fortunate to get in touch with Mohamed Shawky Hassan, the director of the film, who agreed to be interviewed and to provide the clips to be included in the documentary. Unfortunately, it was too late to include the film since I was at the last stage of editing the documentary. Hassan's film could lead to future research dealing with Egyptian filmmakers that are living abroad and representing gay characters.

For the Egyptian film sector, then, censorship has restricted a very broad range of representations of potentially sensitive or controversial subjects, including but not limited to homosexuality. These restrictions have upheld nationalistic power structures, in some cases proving more restrictive than censorship in other Arab countries. Some filmmakers have found ways to stretch or bend these restrictions, for instance through European co-productions or coded representations, though these can come with their own challenges or drawbacks.

### **Homosexuality in Egyptian cinema and adaptation**

Homosexual characters are present in Egyptian cinema and have been appearing in it for a long time.<sup>104</sup> Some of the film characters and dialogue I am analysing in my documentary have entered the discourse of the gay community in Egypt, becoming shorthand to refer to certain stereotypes. For example, Siksika, which is the name of the character in *Alley of Desire/Darb al-Hawa* (1983),<sup>105</sup> had an influence on the public imagination where in Cairo street parlance the word Siksika is used to refer to a man with feminine mannerisms.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, the line in *Terrorism and Kebab/al-Irhab wa-l-kabab* (1992),<sup>107</sup> when the gay character says "If you want me to be Medhat, I can be Medhat," is one of the most famous lines about sexual submission

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<sup>104</sup> Amin El Sharqawy, "Censorship and Queer Representation in Egyptian Cinema," *Medium*, January 31, 2020, <https://medium.com/the-politics-of-representation/censorship-and-queer-representation-in-egyptian-cinema-f7f163aeff94> (accessed November 11, 2021).

<sup>105</sup> *Alley of Desire*, directed by Hossam al-Din Mustafa (Gina Film, 1983).

<sup>106</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 35.

<sup>107</sup> *Terrorism and Kebab*, directed by Sherif Arafa (Essam Imam, 1992).

in Egyptian cinema.<sup>108</sup> Hence, the name Medhat became a sign of degradation,<sup>109</sup> and a verbal shorthand among the younger generation in Egypt to refer to people equated with this type of depraved character.<sup>110</sup>

The representation of these characters and the subtext in most Egyptian films suggests that homosexuality is a foreign import, something external to Egyptian culture, and this concept or myth is an untruth perpetuated to dangerous ends.<sup>111</sup> This tendency echoes conservative responses to representations of homosexuality in Egyptian literature before cinema, as detailed earlier in this chapter. It also aligns with the tendency of Egyptian regimes to fund films as a means to maintain political and moral control over the audience and to shape the audience's perspectives to suit government ideology.

The issue with this mode of representation is the biased outlook on the character. It is used to toe the party line and reinforce the negative effect homosexual men allegedly have on a 'decent' society. Analysing these characters through a documentary, as I do in the creative part of this research project, is important to expose the constructed nature of representation and the suffocating effect it has on Egyptian society, filmmaking, and creativity. The majority of these characters are signified through how they look and behave, not how they feel, portraying the message that gay people are not allowed to be positive and successful or even to experience human emotions.

Homosexual characterisation in Egyptian cinema has been discussed in articles by several Egyptian and international writers.<sup>112</sup> However, none of these writers have discussed

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<sup>108</sup> Mohamed Magdy, "Dor al-Shaz asbah ma'lofan fi al-Sinima al-Misriya" [The homosexual character became familiar in Egyptian cinema], *Vetogate*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.vetogate.com/1228446> (accessed June 23, 2022).

<sup>109</sup> Karim 'Othman, "Khamsat 'ashr filman tanawalat al-mithleya al-genseya fi al-Sinima -al-Misriya" [15 films that represented homosexuality in Egyptian cinema], *Elwatan News*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/2554338> (accessed June 23, 2021).

<sup>110</sup> Nashwa Al-Houfi, "Hal ghayarat al-Sinima al-Misriya men eslobha fi al-ta'amol ma'a qadaya al-shuzuz?" [Did Egyptian cinema change the way it represents homosexuality?], *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, June 30, 2006, <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=9896&article=370752#.YrNJnXbMI2x> (accessed June 22, 2022).

<sup>111</sup> El Sharqawy, "Censorship and Queer Representation in Egyptian Cinema".

<sup>112</sup> Adham Youssef, "Constructing and echoing social perceptions: Gay characters in Egyptian film," *Mada Masr*, October 5, 2017,



in detail the importance of the particular storytelling devices that are used in these depictions. More importantly, the majority of the critics did not address the ways by which these misrepresentations reinforce the harmful stereotypes and misconceptions held by mainstream audiences, gay and straight alike. These representations contribute to stereotyping and distorted perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community that, if absorbed uncritically, can have a direct effect on how many gay men in turn perceive themselves and consider their place in Egyptian society. In this context, it is no wonder that secrecy around sexuality and unresolved identity crises are difficult topics to discuss with family and friends alike. These harmful stereotypes can erode a person's mental state, fuelling feelings of loneliness, substance abuse and even self-harm and suicidality. I maintain that exposure to homosexual narratives, and most importantly a more complex if not outright positive representation of homosexual characters, is crucial to prevent the isolation and alienation of living as an LGBTQ+ person in Egypt.

It is vital to be aware of the distorted view that these films embrace, specifically as they are compared to the mainstream representations of gender identity and relationships in a heteronormative culture. By showing the distorted lens through which gay characters are often depicted, my documentary also aims to reveal the struggle to express honest, sympathetic stories with emotional depth that depict homosexual relationships with the same value, beauty and validation as heterosexual narratives.

Unlike homosexuality, male crossdressing is a queer trope that gained much prominence in Egyptian cinema. Menicucci shows that the history of transvestite performers goes back to pre-Islamic times and notes that transvestite performers became more prominent and popular in Egypt when Mohamed 'Ali banned female dancers: they were replaced by men who dressed in women's clothes and danced at social events, named Khawalat.<sup>113</sup> Khawalat ("male transvestite dancers of the 19th century and pre-1952 days") played an important part in films and were used to indicate the existence of homosexuality or changing sexuality. They played the role of servants for prostitutes in brothels, and belly dancing teachers. These characters were used as 'cinematic code' to portray homosexuals in a degraded way and as 'sissy' characters, frequently having a sarcastic sense of humour,

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<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/10/05/feature/culture/constructing-and-echoing-social-perceptions-gay-characters-in-egyptian-film/> (accessed March 15, 2019).

<sup>113</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 32.

and a level of personal integrity.<sup>114</sup> In *Midaq Alley* (1963),<sup>115</sup> an adaptation of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* published in 1947, the character Kirsha is openly attracted to young men but there is also the brothel worker called Susu. The main character Hamida finds herself lured into prostitution when she goes on a tour to a brothel. She sees a man dressed like a woman and wearing make-up instructing other belly dancing prostitutes. The character in the film is represented as a symbol of the absolute moral degradation which Hamida has fallen into. It was presented as an extreme sexual character. Menicucci shows that Khawalat were given bigger and more starry roles in the 1980s and 1990s: he describes Siksika in *Alley of Desire* (1983)<sup>116</sup> as "a fully developed character" who, despite the fact that he wears make-up and has no moustache or beard, always keeps his personal dignity and is also clever and funny.<sup>117</sup> This character shows how homosexuality is always associated with femininity, and it also shows that homosexuals necessarily play the passive role (wanting to be penetrated), a 'role' associated with women in Egypt. In his book *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, Khaled El-Rouayheb reports that the "passive male sodomite was seen as being in a possession of a female sex drive".<sup>118</sup> El-Rouayheb also explains how many gay men would rather be cast in the active role as the passive role was considered too feminine and not manly.<sup>119</sup> Bruce Dunne adds to that, in his article 'Power and Sexuality in the Middle East': "Sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, continue to be understood as relations of power linked to rigid gender roles. In Turkey, Egypt and the Maghrib, men who are 'active' in sexual relations with other men are not considered homosexual; the sexual domination of other men may even confer a status of hyper-masculinity."<sup>120</sup>

Menicucci notes: "Directors have faced problems in realistically depicting homosexuals, even when they are required by adaptations from literature. Neither the word nor outright acts can appear on the screen because they violate censorship codes that ban

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>115</sup> *Midaq Alley*, directed by Hassan al-Imam (Ramses Naguib Films, 1963).

<sup>116</sup> *Alley of Desire*, directed by Hossam al-Din Mustafa (Gina Film, 1983).

<sup>117</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 35.

<sup>118</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Bruce Dunne, "Power and Sexuality in the Middle East," *Middle East Report* 206 (Spring, 1998): 10.

the word 'homosexual' or obvious depictions of same-sex sexual behaviour."<sup>121</sup> Despite this restriction, homosexuals were still being represented in films, but each characterisation is dependent on the period the film was produced and the regime at that time.

Gordon praises Egyptian director Salah Abu Seif as one of the filmmakers who succeeded in pushing boundaries despite the strict censorship rules.<sup>122</sup> Menicucci expands on Gordon's analysis in an article that says Abu Seif represented "one of the most fully drawn gay characters" in *The Malatily Bathhouse* (1973).<sup>123</sup> The film tells the story of a young man who leaves his home city, Isma'iliya, goes to Cairo to work and attend college. Because he cannot afford to live in Cairo, he sleeps in a bathhouse that is visited by a gay man named Ra'uf. The gay character is an artist who sketches nude men at the bathhouse. Ra'uf succeeds in taking the young man to his house and tries to seduce him by offering him wine, which is representative of the loose morality indulged in the Western world and seen as the catalyst of its eventual downfall. In this film, Abu Seif made a clear statement for acceptance of sexual differences in the seduction scene, where the character imagines having unrestricted freedom in modern society. There are also scenes in the film of him walking around in downtown Cairo in unmanly clothes and wearing a wig. People are surprised and stare at him in the street. The artist's homosexuality in the film is explained through a love/hate relationship with his overbearing mother; he despises having sexual encounters with women but also likes to dress like women. Menicucci concludes: "Thus, homosexuality is associated with women's supposed emasculation of men, transvestism, perversion and the social ills accompanying rapid urbanization."<sup>124</sup> In contrast, Joseph Massad concludes in *Desiring Arabs* that the film and the novel offered two differing accounts on homosexuality: the film blamed the mother figure and the novel blamed the motherland for allowing an immoral lifestyle that leads to homosexuality, prostitution, drugs and delinquency.<sup>125</sup> This study plays an important part in my thesis because it focuses on Abu Seif's background and follows Shafik's observation: "In Egypt from 1971 to 1973, after Sadat's seizure of power, all films that addressed the 1967 defeat by Israel were prohibited."<sup>126</sup> It is worth mentioning that

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<sup>121</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 35.

<sup>122</sup> Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 60.

<sup>123</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 35.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 313.

<sup>126</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 35.

during my interview with Arab film specialist Joseph Fahim, he described director Salah Abu Seif as a “moralist”.<sup>127</sup> I would argue that director Salah Abu Seif only pushed boundaries that are related to politics and used the homosexual character negatively as a way to approach political and other forbidden topics to signal the country’s defeat in 1967 by Israel.

Menicucci praised director Youssef Chahine: “More positive images of gay people appear in the films of the renowned Egyptian director Youssef Chahine. Gay people appear as they are without the heavy moralizing of most other Arab films with gay characters.”<sup>128</sup> He added, in *The People and the Nile* (1972),<sup>129</sup> the storyline involves a friendship between a male Soviet technician and an Egyptian worker from the South of Egypt. In Chahine’s trilogy – *Alexandria.. Why?* (1979),<sup>130</sup> *An Egyptian Story/Hadduta Masriyya* (1982),<sup>131</sup> and *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989)<sup>132</sup> – homosexuality is represented and not associated with any negative stigma.<sup>133</sup>

Massad examines a number of Arabic fiction works including Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *Midaq Alley*.<sup>134</sup> Beside examining each character, Massad focuses on Kirsha’s backstory, which is detailed in the novel. Before he started selling drugs to British soldiers and acquired his deviant erotic practices, Kirsha was active politically: “In his youth, he had acquired a reputation in the world of politics that rivals what he became reputed for later in other matters.”<sup>135</sup> He added: “Indeed Kirshah [sic] is said to have participated in the anti-British 1919 revolution as a fighter. He was also a hero in the violent battles of the revolt as well as an enthusiast for electoral battles in which he played an important role in 1924 and 1925.”<sup>136</sup> Massad does not focus very much on the film version of the novel. Even though Kirsha is

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<sup>127</sup> Joseph Fahim interview, March 16, 2020.

<sup>128</sup> Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet,” 35.

<sup>129</sup> *The People and the Nile*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Cairo Cinema Company and Mosfilm, 1972).

<sup>130</sup> *Alexandria.. Why?*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and Algerian Television, 1979).

<sup>131</sup> *An Egyptian Story*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, 1982).

<sup>132</sup> *Alexandria Again and Forever*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, Paris Classics Productions, La Sept, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication and Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1989).

<sup>133</sup> Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet,” 36.

<sup>134</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 269-334.

<sup>135</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1947), 147, quoted in Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 279.

<sup>136</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 279.

represented as a deviant in the film, we do not see any other details of Kirsha other than his relationship with his wife, who despises her husband and is humiliated by his relationships with young boys. Kirsha's drug dealing is driven by his desire to please the British troops (i.e., the colonisers). In turn, his moral degradation is blamed on Western influences. The film adaptation therefore flattens the character, making him less rich and sympathetic than the equivalent in the novel.

Massad also discusses 'Ala' Al-Aswany's novel *The Ya'coubian Building* (*'Imaret Ya'coubian*).<sup>137</sup> Massad mentions the film version but again does not explore in detail the adaptation's changes to the representation of a homosexual character, Hatem, apart from concluding "Hatim [sic] is depicted in much more negative terms in the film version than he is in the novel".<sup>138</sup> The film's director, Marwan Hamed, neglects the emotional integrity of Hatem, which is discussed in the novel, and instead depicts him as highly promiscuous and as one who quickly looks for the next man he can pick up off the street to have sex with. *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006) is a good example of how homosexuality is associated with the West in Egyptian films. The mother of the homosexual character in the film is French and his father is Egyptian. Walter Armbrust examines two Egyptian films in his article 'Islamically Marked Bodies and Urban Space in Two Egyptian Films'.<sup>139</sup> Armbrust does not give the homosexual character the same consideration as the other characters but refers to him as a "horny homosexual editor of a French-language Egyptian newspaper" and a "predatory gay man [who] picks up soldiers and other marginal men and seduces them with wine and comforts beyond their wildest dreams".<sup>140</sup> Armbrust's description of the character illustrates how most homosexual characters are represented: they are often sexually active, using alcohol to seduce other men and have the so-called decadent Western lifestyle. My thesis fills in some of the gaps in Massad and Armbrust's studies by discussing in detail the ways filmmakers change and often misrepresent homosexual characters from novels in a more negative way. The thesis shows how censorship did not help the acceptance of homosexual characters in films, and how the directors' approach to censorship rules often worsened

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<sup>137</sup> 'Ala' Al-Aswany, *'Imaret Ya'coubian [The Ya'coubian Building]* (Cairo: Mirit Lil-Nashr wa-l-Ma'lumat, 2002).

<sup>138</sup> Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 410.

<sup>139</sup> Walter Armbrust, "Islamically Marked Bodies and Urban Space in Two Egyptian Films," *Material Religion* 3 (2012): 354-373.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 359-360.

these representations.

We can see, then, that despite censorship homosexual male characters have been a regular aspect of Egyptian cinema but have generally been stereotyped with negative connotations such as femininity and foreign influence. Some directors have sidestepped bans on the depiction of homosexuality by using crossdressing characters but these characters are typically negative stereotypes too. This tendency is further illustrated by observing how relatively complex and sympathetic homosexual characters in novels often become more flat and negative when the stories are adapted for cinema.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I looked at relationships between homosexuality and Egyptian literature, censorship and cinematic representation. The chapter showed that homosexuality has long existed in Arabic literature, including in positive ways, and played a major part in it, although conservative critics have often linked the subject to moral failings and foreign influence. Literature has been subject to a certain amount of censorship but less than cinema, where direct representation of homosexuality has been prohibited. I explored the history of Egyptian censorship and how it relates to filmmaking and representations of homosexuality. Some filmmakers have been able to represent homosexuality on screen thanks to sometimes lenient censorship practices, as well as coded representations and international co-production structures. But with some important exceptions these representations have often been stereotypical and negative, including in films adapted from novels that make homosexual characters on screen more crude and unsympathetic than the characters on the page. I showed how we can compare novels to films adapted from those novels and see the regressive tendencies of most Egyptian film representations of homosexuality. To contextualize these findings and their implications, in the next chapter I will discuss the importance of film as a medium in Egypt, and how it serves as a vital tool for the government to promote ideologies, as well as for individual filmmakers to express themselves.

## Chapter Two

### Egyptian cinema and Egyptian identity

In this chapter, I describe the effect of representation of homosexual characters in Egyptian cinema on me growing up and as a young adult, my motivations for this research and how I selected the films I look at in this thesis and my documentary. I give an account of the history of the Egyptian film industry and its place as the only major national film industry in the region, including its origins under colonialism, its expansion, its nationalisation after the revolution and later reprivatisation and the limited opportunities in the industry for expression outside the bounds of censorship. I show how in the years since the revolution of 2011 the industry has become more conservative and aligned with the government's desire to promote police and military figures as national heroes. This works to strengthen and promote the government's image and position domestically and, considering the position of the Egyptian cinema industry as a media powerhouse, throughout the Arab-speaking world. I also show how the industry has historically shown negative representations of various different minorities, religious and racial as well as sexual. But while some of these have improved in recent years, representation of homosexuality has got worse.

#### The power of film – a personal perspective

This research has been driven by the influence of several on-screen homosexual characters on me growing up in Egypt, and by my passion for cinema, which started in my youth. One of the most profound scenes that stayed with me as a teenager is the first scene I show in the documentary; the scene is from *Midaq Alley/Zuqaq al-Midaq* (1963) and it is less the visual composition or the dramatic stakes of the scene that stuck in my mind but rather the line of dialogue that referred to Kirsha, the homosexual character, which says "Kirsha is sick and I hope God cures him". It was so striking to me because it is so confidently asserted as a fact by the actor. The film is widely known among Egyptians and was often screened on television. Another character that had a big effect on the way I looked at homosexuality is Ra'uf in *The Malatily Bathhouse/Hammam al-Malatily* (1973).<sup>141</sup> Ra'uf was the perfect example of the common cinematic stereotype, which was also common in society, in which the homosexual's

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<sup>141</sup> *The Malatily Bathhouse*, directed by Salah Abu Seif (Salah Abu Seif, 1973).

personality is related to mental illness, which in this case justifies his actions of luring young men in the hammam. I found out that when homosexual characters are depicted in films there is often a statement or a scene that claims to explain their homosexuality as the consequence of negative factors such as being mentally ill, having non-consensual sex or being spoiled at a young age. I watched a character committing suicide because of his homosexuality, and I watched homosexuality being associated with AIDS, and I watched big commercial film stars mocking homosexuals in their films. Over the years, I watched more characters that even made homosexuality worse in the eyes of myself and my friends. Even so, I did not see homosexuality as a bad trait; my conclusion was that the screen made them seem like villains.

I waited to see more homosexual characters, until *The Ya'coubian Building/Imaret Ya'coubian* was released in 2006. This film was one of the reasons I started this research: the characterisation in this film suggested that the cause of homosexuality is not one single reason but a combination of all the negative traits I have seen in every other film. The scene when Hatem, the homosexual character, is strangled to death at the end played a crucial part in the way I perceived homosexuality on screen. I despised that scene and always felt it is unfair to represent homosexuals in such ways. This scene had a major effect on me personally and pushed me to have a closer look at these depictions in my early twenties. This film somehow distorted my vision of downtown Cairo, this part of the city is where most gay men hang out and meet: on one hand, the film shows the beautiful streets of downtown; on the other hand, as an audience member and unconsciously, I made a connection between Hatem, the homosexual character who tries to pick up men from the streets of downtown, and places where I used to enjoy my time with my friends.

These negative depictions drove me to think and ask if there is any different side of these stories, a bright side that me and my friends can look at. Like many other Egyptians, I grew up believing that Youssef Chahine's films are too philosophical to enjoy, and that not everyone would understand them because they are made for festivals audiences. When I was twenty-two years old, a few years after realising that I am attracted to the same sex, I invited a group of friends and I organised a screening of Chahine's *Alexandria.. Why?/Iskindiriya lih?* (1979). I felt the need to connect some dots in an unfinished circle. Chahine's film gave me and the people who attended a direction to look at and discover because we found a different representation. We watched two homosexual characters that are not being judged by society, or family or friends. I started digging deeper to see which other directors follow Chahine's



method in depicting homosexuals. In the same year, I managed to organise another screening of Yousry Nasrallah's film *Summer Thefts/Sariqat sayfiyya* (1988), and I remember profoundly how each of my friends was trying to figure out if the relationship between Yasser and Liel in the film was just a friendship or something beyond that.

I realised that many of the depictions of homosexual characters in Egyptian cinema have somehow shaped our perceptions on homosexuality, but more importantly these depictions shaped the way we see ourselves. For this reason, I have decided to take on such an important subject to me and my community in Egypt and try to alter these perceptions and point out that cinema is a powerful tool that could have a big impact on generations in general and not just homosexual people.

There were various films depicting homosexual characters that I was familiar with before starting this research. But since I wanted my analysis to be as comprehensive and credible as possible, I tried to find as many Egyptian films with male homosexual characters as I could. Most of these came after 1972, when the Egyptian film industry shifted toward showing more complex and sometimes controversial social conditions and connections. (The one earlier exception was *Midaq Alley* from 1963, mentioned above). I identified a total of twenty-three films made between 1963 and 2018.

These films played a crucial part in the way I saw gay characters but also the way general audiences perceived gay characters. The films include many different styles and genres: some big budget films with famous film stars such as 'Adel Imam and Nour El-Sherif, some written by the acclaimed writer Wahid Hamed and some directed by pioneers of Egyptian cinema such as Salah Abu Seif, Hassan al-Imam and Samir Seif. Negative and stereotypical representations far outweigh realistic or positive ones, as I will show. These films were and are still often screened on Egyptian national television, so their influence continues to this day. They span a crucial period so analysing them will be helpful to understand the history of Egypt and its film industry at this time. To understand them it is useful in turn to understand the context of the history of film production in Egypt.

### **Egypt's film sector – the first century**

Egypt has a long history of prominence in the audio-visual market.<sup>142</sup> The sector has its roots in a vibrant theatrical scene that has been active since the end of the nineteenth century. In discussing the history of Egyptian cinema, Viola Shafik identifies Egypt as “the only Arab country able to develop a national film industry during the colonial period”.<sup>143</sup> This was the case for many reasons. Egypt enjoyed a ‘multicultural’ life, and the native Egyptians always had an important role to play which was left relatively undisturbed by the colonisers.<sup>144</sup> In early 1900, the first cinema was built in Cairo by the French company Pathé.<sup>145</sup> Nationalistic businessmen, such as Tal’at Harb, took important steps to advance an independent national film industry.<sup>146</sup> Two films were produced each year at first.

In the early 1930s, the first two films with sound came out, *The Song of the Heart/Unshudat al-fu’ad* (1932), directed by Mario Volpe, and *Sons of Aristocrats/awlad al-zawat* (1932), directed by Youssef Wahbi.<sup>147</sup> Comedies had strong popular appeal. During the 1930s, popular comedians Naguib al-Rihani and ‘Ali al-Kassar played stereotypical roles which they originally played in theatres, such as al-Rihani's Kish Kish Bek and al-Kassar's Nubian ‘Uthman ‘Abd al-Basit. These characters, like the stereotypical Jewish character Shalom (played by various actors), portrayed unprivileged indigenous people living in traditional settings who frequently got into trouble, primarily due to their poor economic situation.<sup>148</sup> The characteristics of minority groups like peasants, Jews, Copts and Nubians originated in Egyptian theatre, where these characteristics were used in a comedic light and these same characteristics appeared in the early films.<sup>149</sup> These representations formed a strong link between the depictions on-screen and society.

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<sup>142</sup> Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>143</sup> Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>148</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 20-21.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

The industry continued to expand with the construction of the studio Masr, starting in 1934 and rapidly expanding in the decade after. By 1948, six new studios were built.<sup>150</sup> Around 48 films were produced every year from 1945 to 1952.<sup>151</sup> The Egyptian industry was confirmed as dominant across the Arab film sector and international distribution was an important part of the industry.<sup>152</sup> Demands and regulations of the local Egyptian film market and audience taste were among the many reasons for Egyptian filmmakers to unite.<sup>153</sup> One aspect of this was the unifying power dictated by the needs of Egyptian cinema and driven by the representation of national and local issues. This tendency was reflected as well in the films produced by foreign nationals who were settled in the country.<sup>154</sup> The idea of national unity in Egypt was seen in film narratives, as well as in the shifting composition of the country's early film industry.<sup>155</sup>

Following the revolution of 1952, a new republic under military government was established in 1953, at first under Mohamed Naguib as president and then Gamal 'Abdel Nasser from 1956. Post-independence cinema promoted national triumphs.<sup>156</sup> At the same time, salient themes and character types familiar from traditional Egyptian cinema would resurface over time. Love stories in films were set among the working class as well and not only upper-class people.<sup>157</sup> The 1955 censorship law (which I discussed in detail in Chapter One) meant filmmakers could only represent subjects that supported conventional morality, national security and the supreme interests of the state. It remained highly influential until the 1970s.<sup>158</sup> The films made in this period have been called the 'cinema of fear', being afraid to face and represent the present.<sup>159</sup> They celebrated the military with army officers starting to appear as main characters in films such as *Give My Heart Back/Rod Qalby* ('Ezz El-Din Zulficar, 1957) and *God Is With Us/Allah Ma'na* (Ahmed Badrakhan, 1955).<sup>160</sup> Many films

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<sup>150</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 12.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>153</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 20.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>158</sup> Dorreya Sharaf El-Din, *Al-siasa wa-l-sinema fi Masr: 1961-1981 [Politics and Cinema in Egypt: 1961-198]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'Amma li-l-kitab, 2002), 79.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 19.

criticised the times before the 1952 revolution or presented badly made nationalistic stories.<sup>161</sup>

The film industry was nationalised in 1963, giving the government control over film production and exhibition.<sup>162</sup> This led Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian producers to withdraw investment from Egypt in favour of Lebanon.<sup>163</sup> In Egypt, filmmakers still avoided depicting realistic social and economic situations and there were no clashes between filmmakers and censors with not a single film banned from screening during the 1960s.<sup>164</sup> In 1967, Egypt lost the war against Israel.<sup>165</sup> The regime did not allow representations of the loss but it had deep effects. According to Viola Shafik: "The 1967 defeat led not only to a changed perception of the individual and his position in society, but in some films also challenged the prevailing myth of virility."<sup>166</sup> There were some attempts at realism. In 1968 the New Cinema Union was started by a group of filmmakers hoping to show more complex realities. Two films were allowed to be released but the movement had no support among the state funders controlling the sector and made no more films.<sup>167</sup>

Sadat became president in 1970 and reprivatization of the film industry began, though studios and laboratories remained state property.<sup>168</sup> Shifts in film production included the return of 'purely commercial cinema' after the melodrama *Take Care of Zuzu/Khalli balak min Zuzu* (Hassan al-Imam, 1972) proved a big hit.<sup>169</sup> The number of productions began to increase.

After Egypt's victory against Israel in the October 1973 Yom Kippur war, the taboo on showing things related to the 1967 defeat was relaxed.<sup>170</sup> A new wave of films praised the October war.<sup>171</sup> In the 1970s, freedom of speech was allowed for the first time, and films discussed the failures of the former political figures during the 1960s and blamed them for

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>162</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 28.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Sharaf El-Din, *Politics and Cinema*, 75-76.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>166</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 197.

<sup>167</sup> Sharaf El-Din, *Politics and Cinema*, 122.

<sup>168</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 25.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Sharaf El-Din, *Politics and Cinema*, 124.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 154.

the 1967 defeat.<sup>172</sup> Some auteur filmmakers began making films “questioning the traditional view of manhood and its negative socio-political effects”.<sup>173</sup> This time also saw the advent of regular representations of homosexual male characters. *The Malatily Bathhouse* (1973), which I discuss in this thesis, is considered one of the films that focused on the depression and absence of hope among the public that followed the defeat; such representations also focused on the negative change in social morals in Egyptian society.<sup>174</sup>

After Sadat died in 1981 there was a flourishing of ‘new realism’, whose representatives include ‘Atef El-Tayeb, Beshir El-Dik, Mohamed Khan, Khairy Beshara, ‘Ali Badrakhan and Daoud ‘Abd El-Sayyed.<sup>175</sup> These films criticised what Viola Shafik calls ‘new enemies’: “Instead of the old landowners, it is unscrupulous businessmen, corrupt nouveaux riches, and thieves that have made it good. It is not poverty that is reproached now but uncontrolled materialism, which started, according to many films, during the period of the economic Open Door Policy (*infitah*) initiated by Sadat. The new materialism endangers even the unity of families.”<sup>176</sup>

The number of feature productions dropped from a peak of seventy in 1992 to sixteen in 1997.<sup>177</sup> Factors included underinvestment in cinema and the growth of electronic entertainment, including a surging transnational Arab satellite television sector that got bigger audiences, made more money and could pay more to use production infrastructure.<sup>178</sup> Related to this, there was a rise in the number of Egyptian directors making European co-productions, including Youssef Chahine, Yousry Nasrallah and many others.<sup>179</sup> Making films for international audiences opened up more space for representing homosexual characters in different ways. Domestic production grew stronger in the following decade thanks to new digital technologies and higher budgets along with the rise of popular genres including action movies, the “new comedy” (whose stars remain powerful today), and “shopping-mall films” aimed at middle-class youth.<sup>180</sup> This economic upturn went alongside generally more

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>173</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 197.

<sup>174</sup> Sharaf El-Din, *Politics and Cinema*, 161-163.

<sup>175</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 142.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>177</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 217.

<sup>178</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 43.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>180</sup> Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 217-218.

conservative representations, with some actors and filmmakers facing criticism for work that some thought was not respectable, though realist productions were also still produced.<sup>181</sup>

### **Egypt's film and television sector since 2011 – promoting police and military power**

In 2011 came the uprising that led to Mubarak's resignation as president. This was followed by the military coup of 2013. As things stand, in the period following the 2011 revolution, the Egyptian state often uses fiction films and television series to promote and create a heroic image of the army and police officers. Big budget films and television series like *The Choice/al-Ekhteyar* (2020)<sup>182</sup> regularly depict the military in a benign light. The release and distribution of such productions are often timed to maximise impact. For example, the holy month of Ramadan in Egypt is considered the peak season for Egyptian television series. In 2019, the number of television series was reduced to twenty-four while there were forty new series produced in the previous years. Fifteen of these series are produced by Synergy.<sup>183</sup> The company is considered an off-shoot of the Egyptian Media Company (EMC) which is a military-linked production company.<sup>184</sup> Producer 'Aly Mourad said: "We have to understand why Synergy is gaining this much control... it's also very clear that some series [this year] have an almost didactic direction, promoting particular ideas such as improving the image of police officers. Mandating which themes are to be discussed and which won't be is not censorship, it's indoctrination."<sup>185</sup>

In 2017, Synergy produced *Handcuff/Kalabsh*,<sup>186</sup> a suspense drama for television that follows the story of a police officer wrongly convicted of murder. In the end he is depicted as a hero. The company produced two more seasons and the series became very popular among the Egyptian audience. Synergy also produced *The Choice* in 2020, *The Choice 2* in 2021 and

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>182</sup> *The Choice*, directed by Peter Mimi (Synergy, 2020).

<sup>183</sup> Neveen Youssef, "Hal bat al-intag al-drami fi Misr taht saytareet al-dawla?" [Is the Egyptian state controlling drama production?], *BBC News*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-48178108> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>184</sup> Yasmin El Banhawy, "Why is the Egyptian state monopolizing the entertainment industry?," *OpenDemocracy*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/why-egyptian-state-monopolizing-entertainment-industry/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> *Handcuff*, directed by Peter Mimi (Synergy and Verdi Production House, 2017).

*The Choice 3* in 2022, all directed by Peter Mimi, the director of *Handcuff*. While in the first season the army officer is depicted as a martyr who dies to save the country, in the second season, police and army officers are depicted as heroes protecting the country from the danger caused by the ‘terrorist’ Muslim Brotherhood, a religious and political group that the current regime overthrew in 2013. The third season focuses on the situation in Egypt during the years after the 2011 Egyptian revolution and marked the first time the president of Egypt had been featured on screen while still alive. President ‘Abdel Fattah El-Sisi (played by Yasser Galal) is featured when he was a minister of defence and before he becomes president. Echoing Mourad, producer Ebrahim Hamouda says: “It’s no secret that [Synergy and EMC] have a particular agenda. We all know the type of content they want to create.”<sup>187</sup>

Promoting nationalism and representing police or army officers as heroes has become the theme of big budget films as well. Yasmin El Banhawy notes:

One in particular, the war film *Al-Mamar (The Passage)* [2019], stands out, tackling the Arab-Israeli conflict in Sinai during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It casts the army as saviors and protectors, undeniably a propaganda stint under President Sisi’s regime. The film is produced by the newly formed United Group for Media Services, sponsored by state intelligence affiliate and telecommunications company WE (formerly branded as Telecom Egypt).<sup>188</sup>

Controlling the themes of television series and films has affected other producers and production companies such as El-‘Adl Group, El-Shorouk for Media Productions and others that are not interested in praising the army and following the government’s guidelines. This confirms what the film critic Joseph Fahim mentioned during my interview with him, that corrupt police officers are no longer seen on screen and nor is anybody that is showing disillusionment with the regime or the military. And the representation of gay characters is part of this “streamlined view or portrait of the society” that the regime is certainly forcing, as the analysis in my documentary shows. Overall, these productions uphold a patriarchal and

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<sup>187</sup> El Banhawy, “Why is the Egyptian state monopolizing the entertainment industry?”.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

militaristic worldview that promotes a stereotypical and limiting concept of masculinity and are implicitly homophobic.

Producing fictional feature films that challenge this worldview can be very difficult, if not impossible in contemporary Egypt, as I know from personal experience as a filmmaker. Scripts must be submitted for inspection by the censorship office, which can refuse content for any reason or ask for any changes they want. Even if the script is accepted, the censors ask to see the final cut of the film and may still ask for specific scenes to be edited out or not approve it at all. In the last few years, I have been working on receiving funds to direct a feature film called *Ismail*. The screenplay is written by K E (a pen name to preserve their anonymity) and is based on an article written by Robert Fisk.<sup>189</sup> The film is about Ismail, a martyr of the chaos of the Egyptian revolution. His body remains unclaimed in a hospital mortuary. After discussing the storyline and producing several drafts, K E delivered the complete screenplay. In 2019, I started looking for funding opportunities again to be able to direct the film, but the screenplay needed to be registered for copyright in Egypt. I contacted the writer to do that and after several attempts, using the strategy of self-censorship, I was told that he does not want to be credited as the writer of the screenplay. When I asked why, he said that the story does not serve the current political regime and having his name attached to it will result in him being blacklisted and not being able to work in Egypt anymore. It is true that the antagonist in the film is a police officer who is not represented as a hero. It is worth mentioning that this writer is the son of a renowned producer M E, who owns one of the biggest production companies in Egypt and is active in producing television series every Ramadan. To be able to direct the film, we agreed to have a ghost-writer agreement and I now own the screenplay, including any copyrights and sale or distribution rights, and I will be the only credit on the screenplay or future versions of it including films. Similarly, producer Sabry El-Samak commented on the process of receiving approval for screenplays: “The screenplay is delivered to the censorship office and then it is taken to Ministry of the Interior, and it is possible to receive a refusal of producing it which means the state is controlling it.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Robert Fisk, “Cairo's 50,000 street children were abused by this regime,” *The Independent*, February 13, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-cairo-s-50-000-street-children-were-abused-by-this-regime-2213295.html> (accessed April 1, 2022).

<sup>190</sup> Youssef, “Is the Egyptian state controlling drama production?”



K E's response was not a surprise for me. It is a result of an indirect apparatus of the state which disseminates its ideology.

Until now, Egypt succeeded in holding its place as the powerhouse for film and television series in the Middle East, even with the rising competition in the Arab market and the visible variety of products and services in the Arab media industry. Egypt nourishes a countless number of other broadcasting channels with television series (*Musalsalat*), chat and quiz shows, specifically in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>191</sup> Egyptian films with famous stars are still screened all over the Arab world. These films were made for huge audiences and were distributed more broadly, whereas the occasional and marginal *cinema d'auteur* or 'art house movies' from the Maghreb and the Fertile Crescent failed to impress the regional elites, lacking mass appeal or succeeding as lowbrow art.<sup>192</sup>

### **The representation of minorities**

As Amin El Sharqawy argues, cinema is a significant medium for the mainstream Egyptian viewer to see the lives of different minorities represented.<sup>193</sup> It is important to note that through most of the history of the Egyptian film sector, minorities have not been positively or realistically represented. This does not only apply to homosexuality but to religious and other minorities too. From the mid-1920s to the 1950s, for instance, it was clear that the Copts were not integrated into Egyptian films, and if they appeared they were portrayed like all other marginalised groups as figures to be derided and laughed at.<sup>194</sup> For example, the Coptic bookkeeper in *Salama is Doing Fine/Salama fi khayr* (1937)<sup>195</sup> is shown as a weird looking, unmistakably grumpy person who is short and skinny, wearing large eyeglasses. And when another character asks him a question, he answers in a chant like Coptic liturgical hymns.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, the depiction of Copts after national independence in 1952 was rarely included but where it was remained vague or nondescript.<sup>197</sup> Until the year 2005, only a few films dealt

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<sup>191</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 4.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Amin El Sharqawy, "Censorship and Queer Representation in Egyptian Cinema," *Medium*, January 31, 2020, <https://medium.com/the-politics-of-representation/censorship-and-queer-representation-in-egyptian-cinema-f7f163aeff94> (accessed November 11, 2021).

<sup>194</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 42.

<sup>195</sup> *Salama is Doing Fine*, directed by Niazi Mustafa (Studio Masr, 1937).

<sup>196</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 42.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

seriously with the Coptic plight. There were approximately 3100 fiction films released during that period.<sup>198</sup> The representation of Copts eventually developed, and they were included in more films because this substantial minority could not be easily excluded.<sup>199</sup> A different example which is related to one of the characters I am discussing would be the Nubians, which is another important minority representation. Because of their darker skin colour, it made the Nubians stand out and become subject to more attention.<sup>200</sup> Until the 1960s, Nubians who starred in Egyptian films worked as nannies, servants or doorkeepers in a wealthy elite setting, and these representations related to the fact that serving at homes, hotels and restaurants was the most common occupation for Nubians in Egyptian cities at the time. These old-fashioned ideas reveal a racist attitude to the Nubians.<sup>201</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Nubians were rarely portrayed on screen but did appear occasionally in a comic way. The quality of their representation has advanced a little since 1990. They were not often shown as servants anymore but had become an integral part of the plot.<sup>202</sup> This kind of traditional and stereotyped representation is also very clear in *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006),<sup>203</sup> in the context of sexual abuse at a young age supposedly causing homosexuality. In a crucial scene, the homosexual character Hatem has a flashback in which we see him as a child crying; in the background we see, appearing from behind the bed, the Nubian servant, coarsely suggesting a sexual assault had just happened. The story of the novel is taking place during the 1990, and the servant is Nubian, but the characteristic of the Nubian character could have been changed. (When I spoke to Dr 'Ala' Al-Aswany, author of the novel, he mentioned that when he agreed to sell the rights to adapt the novel, he did not have any requests that the characters should be portrayed with the exact same characteristics mentioned in the novel.) Homosexuals, then, are only one of many minority groups that have been negatively affected by screen representations and their degradation shares many characteristics with that of other minority characters. Through these representations, Egyptian films help constitute the 'other' and by negation 'normal' Egyptians.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>203</sup> *The Ya'coubian Building*, directed by Marwan Hamed (Good News, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how cinema plays an important role in Egypt, and how it has a major impact on forming both national and sexual identities in Egyptian society and culture. I have discussed the impact of the sector's output on my own emerging identity and sexuality and my motivations for wanting to analyse and challenge some aspects of industry practice. I have traced the history of Egypt's national film industry from its origins under colonialism through revolution, renationalisation, limited liberalisation and then greater conservatism since 2011. I have demonstrated how minorities – including but not only sexual minorities – have been affected by their early and later representations in Egyptian films. I have shown that there has been some improvement in the positive depiction of Coptic and Nubian characters in recent years. The representations of homosexuals, however, has regressed further. My discussion in the next chapter is dedicated to how specifically homosexual characters are categorised and often associated with particular stereotypes, but also how these stereotypes have been challenged and changed by only two directors.

## Chapter Three

### The representation of homosexual characters and experiences

In this chapter, I draw on Stuart Hall's ideas about representation and power to explore how negative representations of homosexuality on screen make LGBTQ+ and other disadvantaged people more vulnerable. I show how fears around "damaging the image of Egypt" can lead to some people's very citizenship being thrown into doubt, and how such fears have affected me personally. I analyse the roles of production design (*mise-en-scène*) and authorship (*cinéma d'auteur*), including the work of writer-director Yousry Nasrallah, writer-director Youssef Chahine, writer Wahid Hamed, director Marwan Hamed and director Inas al-Degheidy. Directors Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah's films are examined in depth in this chapter. I argue that they are the only two Egyptian directors who depicted homosexual characters with emotional integrity while others depicted homosexuality in an unrealistic way.

#### The power of representation and 'damaging the image of Egypt'

The cultural critic Stuart Hall analyses the connections between representation and ideology.<sup>204</sup> Hall shows how cultural representations always tell us about power in a given society including how media messages are based in assumptions about how people think and act and which things society values. This can have subtle but powerful effects, making some groups seem less valid than others, possibly becoming targets for exclusion, repression or violence. My argument is that the way homosexuality is represented in Egyptian cinema, with just a few exceptions, plays a role in making LGBTQ+ people more vulnerable in society today. Most films showing homosexuality use familiar stereotypes (explored in detail in my film), including *khawal* – meaning "sissy" or "faggot". My own experience watching and discussing these characters played a crucial part during my research, especially the little things that I did not notice watching these films at an early age. The most profound of these things is how gay characters are described by straight people in Egypt, and one of the most upsetting lines I heard is when people say "the *khawal* character". In Chapter One, I explained that the word

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<sup>204</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 13-58.

was used for effeminate male dancers before 1952, but what is striking is how this derogatory, degrading word nowadays is commonly used among the public to describe almost every gay character. I have become furious every time I hear this word before or during my research journey. Furthermore, the way some of these characters are represented created a sense of mocking among the public when talking about gay men and the audience often uses the character's "comic" or dramatic traits as if gay men are a subject to mock or pity when talked about. These characters seem absurd but also in some way guilty or a threat to society in general. Film critic Tarek El-Shenawy says: "When a homosexual character is portrayed in Egyptian drama, it is usually judged morally."<sup>205</sup>

For many Egyptian LGBTQ+ people, the 2011 revolution brought hope of positive change. This has not proved to be the case and in fact in some ways things have got worse, including in film representation. Even the most 'positive' portrayals of homosexual characters are negatively framed. *Family Secrets/Asrar 'a'elya* (2014)<sup>206</sup> is a clear example of this regression. The homosexual character, Marwan, is revealed to have been sexually abused as a boy by his older brother who in turn, is himself a victim of sexual abuse. It is a middle-class family and the perpetrator this time is the family driver. The film portrays a chain-reaction scenario suggesting sexual abuse as a cause and consequence of homosexuality and in turn, associates homosexuality with trauma, lack of consent and loss of innocence. Marwan learns to recognise his sexuality as an illness. Disturbingly, on medical advice, he attempts conversion therapy. One of the therapists writes him a prescription, which should reduce his sex drive, and anti-depressants, which should ease his anxiety. Other therapists advise him to watch straight porn. And another therapist tries to convince him to finish his studies and go live abroad. The film offers its own version of a happy ending for the main character. As the last scenes unroll, we see Marwan finally being 'cured' of his homosexuality, an outcome that restores his person – at least superficially, one would think – in the eyes of his father, who eventually accepts his 'corrected' son and restores his relationship with him.

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<sup>205</sup> Thayer Mansour, "Egyptian lawyer calls for stripping director of citizenship for film on gay couple," *The New Arab*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/news/uproar-egypt-over-film-portraying-gay-couple> (accessed April 1, 2023).

<sup>206</sup> *Family Secrets*, directed by Hani Fawzi (Ihab Khalil, 2014).

It is revealing that fifteen actors refused to play the role of Marwan. When the film was finally made, the censors asked the director to make thirteen changes.<sup>207</sup> In preparation for the role of the homosexual character, the actor Mohamed Mahran, who played the character, crudely claimed in an interview that the film “encouraged people to start seeing a therapist to cure homosexuality”.<sup>208</sup> He went on to say in other interviews that he had “met fans on the street who have this ‘disease’ and they mentioned that the film helped them to seek psychiatric help and start curing their homosexuality. I have seen that with my own eyes”.<sup>209</sup> He adds: “In order to prepare for the role, I visited a therapist who is specialized in curing homosexuality.”<sup>210</sup>

The example of *Family Secrets* is particularly poignant for two reasons. Firstly, the film came out three years after the 2011 Egyptian revolution, a time when the gay community in Egypt was hoping to see themselves represented on screen realistically. Secondly, the film suggests that homosexuality is caused by more than one life event, i.e., sexual abuse at a young age and the absence of the father. *Family Secrets*, while perhaps presenting itself as a film with sympathy for the difficulties of contemporary Egyptian life for gay people, persists in framing homosexuality as a psychological disorder warranting medical treatment. This perspective is supported by influential cultural understandings rife in Egyptian society. Rather than encouraging inclusion, dialogue and understanding, such an interpretation of homosexuality risks driving many gay Egyptians towards self-denial and rejection of their own sexuality, which is perceived as a curable ailment.

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<sup>207</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “Egyptian debut director Hany Fawzy fears for film on homosexuality,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/05/egyptian-director-hany-fawzy-fears-film-homosexuality-gay-love-family-secrets> (accessed February 15, 2020).

<sup>208</sup> Mohamed Mahran, “*Asrar ‘a’elya* sa’ed fe’lag marda al-shuzuz al-gensi we mahadesh sa’alni ‘an dori” [*Family Secrets* helped cure people of homosexuality, and no interviewers asked how I prepared to play the part], *YouTube*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svJBvqJqykk> (accessed March 1, 2022).

<sup>209</sup> Mohamed Mahran, “Etkhadet men *Asrar ‘a’elya* we al-film sa’ed marda al-shuzuz al-gensi” [I was hesitant to play the part, and the film helped cure people of homosexuality], *YouTube*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtijZXy1OS4> (accessed March 1, 2022).

<sup>210</sup> Mohamed Mahran, “Mohamed Mahran, allazi qadam shakhseyt Marwan al-shaz genseyan fi film *Asrar ‘a’elya*” [Mohamed Mahran played the gay character in *Family Secrets*], *YouTube*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj9dWjPwH5w> (accessed March 1, 2022).

This is still a relatively positive depiction in the context of Egyptian filmmaking. Thinking about Stuart Hall's ideas about representation and power, we can see how these representations of homosexuality make it seem like a problem or even a threat to society. Sometimes this kind of objection is made on behalf of an imagined idea of 'the Egyptian people'. In 2022, lawyer Ayman Mahfouz accused the Berlin-based Egyptian director Mohamed Shawky Hassan of "promoting homosexuality" by making a German-produced film that portrays a gay Egyptian couple.<sup>211</sup> Mahfouz stated: "The Egyptian people will not accept this type of film" and even officially asked the government to take away the director's citizenship.<sup>212</sup> This shows how some people believe not only that homosexuality itself is against Egyptian values but that even representing homosexuality in an Egyptian context should disqualify someone from being considered Egyptian at all.

It is important to understand that homosexuality is not the only subject that can face objections like this. Egyptian director 'Ateyyat El-Abnoudy faced a lot of harsh criticism when she represented the life of an Egyptian peasant in her film *The Possible Dreams/al-Ahlam al-momkena* (1983).<sup>213</sup> Some audience and film critics despised the idea of representing a poor Egyptian hardworking woman as the stereotype or the symbol of Egyptian women. Furthermore, a film critic officially asked the directors' guild to cancel El-Abnoudy's membership/permission as a director and the authorities to drop her citizenship and take away her Egyptian nationality.<sup>214</sup> This shows how high the stakes of screen representation can be.

I myself experienced a similar situation. In 2009, I was enrolled on an acting course in an independent actors' studio run by the renowned acting coach Mohamed Abdel Hadi. I decided to put some practice into the work and make a fictional short film about the daily routine of a homeless man around Cairo, who I played. I talked to a friend who is a cinema enthusiast and he agreed to shoot the short film. We headed to shoot the first sequence in Downtown Cairo. In one scene I am taking the stairs of Sixth of October Bridge and crossing

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<sup>211</sup> Mansour, "Egyptian lawyer calls for stripping director of citizenship for film on gay couple".

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> *The Possible Dreams*, directed by 'Ateyyat El-Abnoudy (Fauest Film Munchen and Abnoud Film Cairo, 1983).

<sup>214</sup> Hussein Bayumi, *Al-riqaba 'ala al-sinima - Al-quiud wa-l-hudud [Censorship on Cinema - Restrictions and Limitations]* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, 2012), 65.

the street. On the other side of the street there is the Hilton hotel. It was only me and my friend with the camera and no big crew. We were suddenly stopped by a police officer who noticed my friend holding the camera and filming me crossing the street. My friend is originally from Guinea so his skin is relatively dark in an Egyptian context. Ironically, my costume and look were convincing to the degree that the police officer ignored me and addressed my friend: “Why are you filming this homeless guy, where are you from? And where is this going to be screened? And are you trying to damage the image of Egypt abroad?” Here I had to step in and explain that this is just a practice project, and we were let go.

This shows that a regular policeman understands the political power of representation, not only those directly involved in censorship. It is also a good example of a very widespread idea about representation and power in Egypt: what I would call the myth of “damaging the image of Egypt”. This is a concept that applies to gay characters and also other kinds of people considered less “valid” on mainstream terms. This idea of damaging the image of Egypt might have been part of the reason the lawyer Ayman Mahfouz objected to the German-produced film. This is not a new idea. Director Youssef Chahine faced problems with censorship regarding his second film *The Son of the Nile/Ibn el Nil* (1951).<sup>215</sup> Some edits were made by censors in Egypt for domestic screening, cutting scenes of street kids playing and references to illegal drugs. But there were further problems around international screenings. In 1959, the film was sent to a company called Hungaro in Hungary for international screening, but when the film was seen by the Egyptian Representative at the Egyptian consulate there, he sent a letter to the Ministry of Culture and Guidance in Egypt asking to stop screening the film because it damages the image and reputation of Egypt.<sup>216</sup>

Whether it is a homeless guy walking around the streets in Cairo, a group of kids wearing dirty clothes and living in the countryside of Egypt or any other negative portrayals, they are all put under the umbrella of damaging or distorting the image of Egypt. These issues are taken seriously in terms of domestic audiences but considered even more damaging in international contexts, sometimes even bringing calls for filmmakers to lose their status as Egyptians altogether. These incidents show the power of cinema and how these representations can have an effect on the public, and how some minorities are excluded or

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<sup>215</sup> *The Son of the Nile*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Mary Queeny, 1951).

<sup>216</sup> Mahmoud ‘Ali, *Al-sinema wa-l-riqaba fi Masr: 1896-1952 [Cinema and Censorship in Egypt: 1896-1952]* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘amma l-qusur al-Saqafa, 2004), 207.



alienated as if they do not exist in Egyptian society. It is for this reason that I believe this to be a significant problem for Egyptian society in general, and in my own experience for LGBTQ+ people in particular. If more positive representation reaches the screen, including my own film, this can help empower vulnerable groups against ignorance and attack.

For over twenty years, Egyptian cinema has rarely shown gay characters in a positive light, which caused an imbalance in the number of gay characters represented. Currently, the negative depictions outweigh the positive depictions. One of the issues with film representation is its potential naturalising or “real-isation” impact, which makes it easier for viewers to confuse cinematic discourses on reality with real-life events. This is especially true when there are no other representations or accurate information available. There is a good chance that local and existing conditions may vanish from view. In this regard, stereotypes may be crucial in forming or validating particular perceptions.<sup>217</sup> The role of criticism was explained by the renowned Egyptian film critic Samir Farid, who said: “There’s a great need for criticism because without it, chaos in film and all other art forms shall ensue.”<sup>218</sup> Audiences benefit from guidance in filtering the huge number of artworks that are created every year and all over the world. This relates to the responsibility of filmmakers who want to represent their community: in my case, I feel my role starts by guiding the viewer by criticising, analysing, and challenging the work produced by other filmmakers.

My documentary is particularly concerned with representation and misrepresentation in fictional feature films. The fictional feature film is important because of its popularity and is an ideal place for the government to reinforce their philosophy. Cinema attendances in Egypt remain high, and it is an easy way of measuring the public’s likes and dislikes, depending on the success or failure of the film. The level of inclusion or equality cannot be determined by the positive and negative portrayals, nor do they imply that audiences unconditionally accept and identify with these portrayals. However, as Viola Shafik notes, depending on the setting of production and distribution, ideological position of funders and audience and film

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<sup>217</sup> Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>218</sup> Joseph Fahim, “One-on-one with Egyptian film critic and Berlinale honoree Samir Farid,” *Al Arabiya English*, March 7, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/entertainment/2017/03/07/One-on-one-with-Egyptian-film-critic-and-Berlinale-honoree-Samir-Farid> (accessed April 4, 2022).

style, films may help to either affirm or challenge particular perspectives and political agendas.<sup>219</sup>

My documentary is intended to target the Egyptian and international LGBTQ+ community as its audience. I am hoping to empower the gay community through reflecting and dissecting the mechanisms of filmmaking and the devices of representation in Egyptian films. The documentary hopes to offer them a voice or another space for reflection. It will give a voice to homosexuals in Egypt, especially the people that do not understand film language and how these homosexual characters are written and portrayed. This in turn will help LGBTQ+ people feel better about themselves and resist claims that they are less valid as Egyptians or as human beings.

### **The role of production design (*mise-en-scène*)**

*Mise-en-scène* elements such as image composition, set design, location, props, camera angles, lighting, costume design, makeup and performance are all used to give an overall feeling or style to a film, but each scene with its elements is meant to convey a specific message about a character or a place. These elements play an important part in the overall message, and it is crucial to explain to the audience the subtext behind the use of these elements. For example, location as an element could say or imply something about the character's roots or where he lives and where he can often be found. In *Midaq Alley/Zuqaq al-Midaq* (1963),<sup>220</sup> when the lead female character goes to a brothel, she sees a man dressed like a woman, wearing full make-up, and mentoring other belly-dancing prostitutes. He has an exaggerated body language and he is effeminate. This type of character is called 'Khawal,' which is a derogatory word as mentioned earlier.

The brothel is also used as a location in *Alley of Desire/Darb al-Hawa* (1983),<sup>221</sup> where the gay character works. Besides his heavy feminine make-up, he often makes it clear with both dialogue and body gestures that he does not have a problem flirting with the men who come to the brothel. In *Terrorism and Kebab/al-Irhab wa-l-kabab* (1992),<sup>222</sup> the gay character is found at a toilet, when the protagonist Ahmed (played by 'Adel Imam) goes to the

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<sup>219</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 24.

<sup>220</sup> *Midaq Alley*, directed by Hassan al-Imam (Ramses Naguib Films, 1963).

<sup>221</sup> *Alley of Desire*, directed by Hossam al-Din Mustafa (Gina Film, 1983).

<sup>222</sup> *Terrorism and Kebab*, directed by Sherif Arafa (Essam Imam, 1992).

Mogamma' (government building in Tahrir Square) to finish some paperwork, and while trying to find a government bureaucrat named Medhat, he goes around the building calling his name. Eventually, he is told that Medhat does not use the toilets in the building and prefers to use the luxurious toilets of the hotels nearby. Imam finds himself in a hotel toilet, still shouting 'Medhat,' and suddenly, he looks with surprise at a feminine man coming out of a toilet stall: "If you want me to be Medhat, I can be Medhat," the man says. The man leaves and again we see Imam surprised to find another man coming out of the same bathroom stall a few seconds later.

In *The Ya'coubian Building/Imaret Ya'coubian* (2006),<sup>223</sup> the street is the location. The lights in Downtown Cairo are usually soft in the evening and at night, which makes it look and feel gloomy. Downtown with its mysterious look is present throughout the film, and this look is well integrated with the lighting to help introduce Hatem as a sexual predator when he decides to walk around and pick up 'Abdu off the street to have sex with. Alcohol is always used as an aid to help relax the men he picks up. In the case of *The Malatily Bathhouse/Hammam al-Malatily* (1973),<sup>224</sup> the gay character Ra'uf uses the bathhouse to sketch nude men, pick them up and take them home, and like Hatem in *The Ya'coubian Building*, he uses alcohol to get them in the mood. The prop element in *Fishtail/Diel al-Samaka* (2003)<sup>225</sup> is different: the gay character urges a heterosexual meter-reader to take a blue pill, and he also offers him a feast of seafood. In Egypt, it is understood that seafood increases the sex drive and in films it is used to imply that sexual intercourse may happen. The same concept is used in *The Ya'coubian Building*: Hatem takes 'Abdu to a luxurious restaurant and orders a feast of seafood.

Some films show significant similarities in the locations and *mise-en-scène* elements they apply to homosexual characters, contributing to making negative stereotypes in audiences' minds. For example, the softly lit bedroom of Hatem in *The Ya'coubian Building*, and the seduction scene he creates before attempting sexual intercourse, is very similar to scenes in *The Malatily Bathhouse*, when Ra'uf takes a younger man home and tries to seduce him. Both films share a scene that is nearly identical. When Hatem struggles with his sexuality, he stands in front of his parents' framed picture, he blames both for his homosexuality and

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<sup>223</sup> *The Ya'coubian Building*, directed by Marwan Hamed (Good News, 2006).

<sup>224</sup> *The Malatily Bathhouse*, directed by Salah Abu Seif (Salah Abu Seif, 1973).

<sup>225</sup> *Fishtail*, directed by Samir Seif (Wahid Hamed Films, 2003).

he remembers being sexually abused as a boy by his parents' servant. Similarly, Ra'uf stands in front of his mother's framed picture, and blames her for his homosexuality. Such direction implies that the characters display characteristics of a sexual predator because of their homosexuality, with implications that homosexual characters are deviants.

### **The role of authorship (*cinema d'auteur*)**

#### ***Yousry Nasrallah***

During the journey of my PhD, I found out that gay characters were more likely to be represented in a more complex, less stereotypical way when the director was also the writer of the film. From the twenty-three films I analysed, only two directors wrote or co-wrote their films and all the other films that depicted gay characters negatively were not written by the director. These two directors are Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah. Garay Menicucci concluded that Yousry Nasrallah, who is considered Chahine's long-time student and collaborator, has shown homosexuals even more explicitly.<sup>226</sup> Nasrallah is also the writer or co-writer of the three films he directed that included gay characters. He wrote and directed his first film, *Summer Thefts/Sariqat sayfiyya* (1988)<sup>227</sup> and his second film *Mercedes* (1993)<sup>228</sup> and he co-wrote *The City/al-Madina* (2000)<sup>229</sup> with Egyptian screenwriter Nasser 'Abdel Rahman and French director Claire Denis. Nasrallah's cinema appears to show more emotional integrity than other works by his contemporaries. His characters are shown more respect, no stereotyping. For example, the cause of them being gay is not necessarily discussed or pathologised or freely linked to childhood traumas, as happens in other films discussed.

This is especially apparent in Nasrallah's *Summer Thefts*. In this film, we experience a childhood friendship between Yasser, the son of a rich landowner, and Leil, the son of a poor Egyptian peasant. The two characters become closer in adulthood. The sexuality in their

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<sup>226</sup> Garay Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film," *Middle East Report* 206 (Spring, 1998), 32-36, 36.

<sup>227</sup> *Summer Thefts*, directed by Yousry Nasrallah (MISR International Films, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, 1988).

<sup>228</sup> *Mercedes*, directed by Yousry Nasrallah (MISR International Films, Paris Classics Production and La Sept, 1993).

<sup>229</sup> *The City*, directed by Yousry Nasrallah (MISR International Films, Ognon Pictures, La Sept, Foundation Montecinema Verita, ACCT and Procirep, 2000).

relationship is not clear, and the subtlety in conveying any emotions between the two youths makes the audience confused as to the nature of their relationship, but later they are separated when Yasser leaves to work abroad. After 20 years, Yasser goes back to the same town and searches for Leil, passionately tries to find him and when he does, they both go and sit on the banks of the river Nile. Yasser tells Leil: "I have never loved anyone as much as I loved you." And when Leil asks Yasser "What did you bring me from Lebanon?" Yasser shows him a photo of Leil that he kept on him for the past 20 years.

During my interview with Yousry Nasrallah, he told me that "the whole gay theme/gay sensitivity in the film came from a very sincere yearning as a kid and as a young man, which I have always had, to transgress, how to transgress social boundaries". Indeed, the dialogue is often very emotional, often ambivalent, at times even erotically charged. To my knowledge, this is the only gay film in the Egyptian canon where one man says to another man, "I love you": a brave, straightforward line of dialogue between two men on screen. Perhaps ironically, Nasrallah also added: "Maybe it can be interpreted as a love story."

It is important to mention that the censors rejected the script and threatened to ban the film. Interestingly though, the problem was not the two men stating their love for each other, but what was perceived as a politically sensitive issue. One of the censors said the film was against Gamal 'Abdel Nasser, the second Egyptian president, who served Egypt throughout the late fifties and sixties. It took Nasrallah a long time to prove that the script is neither against nor pro-Nasser and this was eventually accepted. Not one single scene was cut from the finished film.

In his second film, *Mercedes* (1993), which is about al-Nubi, a communist man who meets a woman who is the double of his mother, Nasrallah tackles social changes in Egyptian society of the time. Other themes of international events find their way into the film, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. To tackle these issues, Nasrallah went for a very satirical style, but more importantly, according to Nasrallah, the film dealt with "something that is culturally very hard to deal with in Egypt and probably most of the Arab world, it is accepting differences". Nasrallah made a clear statement of accepting difference in the film but on a metaphorical level.<sup>230</sup> The story of the two gay characters is very clear, and there is nothing ambiguous about it. Gamal, the protagonist's half-brother, is kicked out of the house because

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<sup>230</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 59.

his father discovered he is gay. Gamal leaves the house and lives with his lover Ashraf regardless of his father's actions. One of the most homoerotic scenes in the film is when al-Nubi goes to a rundown cinema (called "third-class cinema" in Egypt), to search for Gamal. As Nasrallah told me, "there is a lot of cruising around, it is like a dark room sort of ambience, and it is very realistic".<sup>231</sup> This gives an insight into their deep, intimate relationship. In another scene at the cinema, we see Gamal kissing Ashraf on his forehead, a very intimate act of apology in Egypt. Despite Nasrallah's best efforts, gays are still depicted as having sexual encounters in a "third-class run-down cinema," which implies that certain stereotypes are hard to break. The film passed censorship in Egypt but it is interesting that, when the film was shown at the San Francisco Film Festival, after the screening Nasrallah was asked something he did not expect. One of the audience members asked him: "Why do you show gay people in such seedy places?" Nasrallah answered: "Because this is the way it is." The audience member replied: "Yes, we know but you do not have to show it."

Nasrallah co-wrote his film *The City* (2000), another major, brave step in representing gay characters. "Osama is obviously gay in the film and in love with 'Ali," Nasrallah told me.<sup>232</sup> In this film, Nasrallah represented a youth culture that is very familiar among Egyptians. Osama and 'Ali's relationship in the film is filled with erotic eye contact and the dialogue is very subtle. For example, in a very warm scene while both are smoking and talking, Osama says: "'Ali, you never asked me if I love anyone." 'Ali answers: "You never tell me." Youth culture is represented through scenes of traditional activities that guys do around the river Nile in Cairo. We see the whole group of friends singing on a Felucca in the river Nile, and sometimes we see them shirtless, chatting and drinking beer in the river.

Nasrallah also co-wrote films with Youssef Chahine such as *Adieu Bonaparte/Wada'n Bonaparte* (1985)<sup>233</sup> and *Alexandria Again and Forever/Iskindiriya kaman we kaman*

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<sup>231</sup> Yousry Nasrallah interview, March 7, 2022.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> *Adieu Bonaparte*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, Lyric International, Renn Productions and TF1 Production, 1985).

(1989),<sup>234</sup> which depict homosexuality, but not explicitly. It is also worth mentioning that Nasrallah and Chahine are internationally known for supporting the *cinema d'auteur*.<sup>235</sup>

### ***Youssef Chahine***

When discussing Chahine's films, Viola Shafik mentioned that "very few Egyptian filmmakers showed the way to a real 'heteroglossia' or a representation of inclusive difference, as Youssef Chahine began to do in the 1970s".<sup>236</sup> In Chahine's Russian-Egyptian production *The People and the Nile/al-Nass wa-l-Nil* (1972),<sup>237</sup> co-written by Youssef Chahine and 'Abdel Rahman El-Sharqawy, the storyline involves a friendship between a male Soviet technician named Nikolai and an Egyptian worker from the South of Egypt named Buraq.<sup>238</sup> Homosexuality is not explicitly represented but the performance implies that Nikolai and Buraq have strong affection for each other. Shafik also added that this film should be seen as an exception because it included an honest and truthful portrayal of Nubians as well.<sup>239</sup>

Of key interest here is Chahine's trilogy consisting of the films *Alexandria.. Why?/Iskindiriya lih?* (1979),<sup>240</sup> *An Egyptian Story/Hadduta Masriyya* (1982)<sup>241</sup> and *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989). In his semiautobiographical film *Alexandria.. Why?*, written by Mohsen Zayed, Chahine represented a romantic love story between an Egyptian man and a British soldier with emotional integrity. 'Adel, the gay character, is an Egyptian nationalist who assassinates British soldiers during World War II but, rather than killing a British soldier he targeted for assassination, he falls in love with him.<sup>242</sup> Chahine used the most erotic lines of dialogue to show the intimate and genuine love between the two men. Lines of dialogue such as "I should have never asked you your name, never offered you my bed, never spent the

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<sup>234</sup> *Alexandria Again and Forever*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, Paris Classics Productions, La Sept, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication and Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1989).

<sup>235</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 57.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>237</sup> *The People and the Nile*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Cairo Cinema Company and Mosfilm, 1972).

<sup>238</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 36.

<sup>239</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 72.

<sup>240</sup> *Alexandria.. Why?*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and Algerian Television, 1979).

<sup>241</sup> *An Egyptian Story*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, 1982).

<sup>242</sup> Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet," 36.

whole night looking at you” are verbally delivered and with clear affection. The film is clearly making a call for accepting the existence of other beliefs and differences by representing a Jew, a Marxist that marries a Muslim, and a gay character.<sup>243</sup>

As discussed in the Introduction, using autobiography can be a form of queer representation. In an interview with the renowned writer Joseph Massad (dated 25 September 1998), Chahine said: “It was the inevitable growth in character, though it takes a lot of courage to do the autobiographical thing. It makes you vulnerable; it’s difficult to look into yourself and be very honest about it, because we also, sometimes, fall into the trap of accepting an image, or creating an image of ourselves which is not real.”<sup>244</sup> It is interesting to note that when Massad described the trilogy as semifictional, Chahine answered: “No. It used fiction as little as possible and only in keeping with dramatic necessity. Most scenes were real lived scenes.”<sup>245</sup> This suggests that Chahine sees great value in writing from personal experience as a way of expressing the reality of life in Egypt, rather than writing based on stereotypes or political complicity. In Massad’s words: “The relationship of the autobiographical genre to the question of the social is a complicated one. It is through exploring one’s own life through a wider historical and social lens that autobiography emerges not merely as individual experience but as social critique. Chahine shows his mastery of this transformation through his autobiographical trilogy.”<sup>246</sup>

We find a powerful example of filmmaking that resembles lived experience rather than stereotypes in the second film of Chahine’s trilogy. *An Egyptian Story* (1982) represents queerness through homoerotic gazes in a rear-view mirror between the main character Yehia (played by Nour El-Sherif) and his friend’s driver, Andrew. In the car, Yehia starts a conversation with Andrew and asks questions such as “Are you married?” The conversation continues and Chahine uses close-ups through the rear-view mirror to create a sense of closeness between the two characters even though they do not know each other. Later, when they arrive at the destination, Yehia changes his mind and invites Andrew to have a bite. Andrew agrees, and they both proceed to a bar to talk. Chahine’s placement of the two

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<sup>243</sup> Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 58.

<sup>244</sup> Youssef Chahine and Joseph Massad, “Art and Politics in the Cinema of Youssef Chahine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 1999), 77-93, 91.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



characters and how close they sit next to each other indicates how comfortable they are being together. Later, we see Andrew coming back to give Yehia his lighter which he forgot, and they both exchange a conversation that includes a strong homoerotic gaze. Yehia says, “I hope we will meet again,” and Andrew says, “We will.” When Andrew leaves, Yehia follows him with his eyes. This scene is a rare example of how queerness is depicted in the most subtle and empathetic way as Chahine used powerful storytelling devices such as framing the characters very close to each other at the bar to show the emotional connection between these two human beings rather than explicit dialogue or a “seedy” location.

*Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989), a very important film on homosexuality, also reveals important aspects of Chahine’s personal life and shows the elements that defined his film style. Chahine plays himself and he is obsessed with the lead actor in the film. The signals of the romantic connection are frequently strongly coded.<sup>247</sup>

It is notable that Chahine’s films have been viewed by mainstream Egyptian audiences as part of mainstream Egyptian culture, despite consistently representing aspects of queer experience. These offered rare examples in popular Egyptian cinema of homosexuality viewed in a neutral or even positive way. They also helped Western audiences imagine queerness in Egyptian society, especially through Chahine’s films being presented in the international festival circuit. He was increasingly celebrated internationally later in his career, including being given a Lifetime Achievement Award at Cannes Film Festival in 1997.<sup>248</sup> Crucially, they made positive examples of queerness available to queer Egyptian viewers through mainstream Egyptian screen culture, seeing themselves represented with empathy rather than judgment or ridicule. As Schoonover and Galt observed: “Cinema does not merely offer a convenient institutional space of distribution and exhibition in LGBT film festivals and cosmopolitan art houses. Rather, it produces queer identification, desire, and figurability as a constituent feature of the medium.”<sup>249</sup> In other words, queer viewers can find queer meaning in film texts wherever they encounter them. Throughout his career, Chahine has enabled many such encounters. Massad noted: “Chahine’s films are sprinkled with scenes not only of

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<sup>247</sup> Menicucci, “Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet,” 36.

<sup>248</sup> Chahine and Massad, “Art and Politics in the Cinema of Youssef Chahine,” 77.

<sup>249</sup> Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 20.

the heteroerotic but also of the homoerotic variety.”<sup>250</sup> Aside from the trilogy, similar scenes appear in *Destiny/al-Masir* (1997), *The Emigrant/al-Muhager* (1994), *Adieu Bonaparte* (1985) and other titles.<sup>251</sup> Growing up and watching these films, the queer meaning I took was easily distinguished from that related to unsympathetic representations. Rather than seeing homosexual experience as abject, dangerous and pathetic, in Chahine’s films, queerness was often integrated as a crucial part of the story, but more importantly, unsensational. Furthermore, this kind of queer representation in Chahine’s films helped me personally to imagine the possibility of having queer identity in Egyptian society. So Chahine’s films represent queerness as a consistent part of life. For audiences, this affirms the idea of queer experience as an existing, valid aspect of human experience. It also opens up space to engage imaginatively with the potential of queer being in Egyptian society now and in the future.

In terms of representation, being queer in Chahine’s films does not feel like failure, as it does in most Egyptian films. Jack Halberstam has described how failure on mainstream terms can be of use to queer people by potentially pointing the way to “alternatives to hegemonic systems” that are taken by the mainstream as “common sense”.<sup>252</sup> In other words, someone “failing” at being normal might also be trying to be something different or better. Chahine’s films convey this openness not only around sexuality but with relevance to other marginalised groups in Egyptian society such as Jews, Nubians and Copts. Depicting the other or respecting the other is an element in most of Chahine’s films.

### **Wahid Hamed**

While researching the writers of the films I found out that authorship is also related to writers. The renowned Egyptian screenwriter Wahid Hamed was the highest-profile writer to write about gay characters. Of the twenty-three films I analyse, he wrote five that include fully developed gay characters, especially the khawal type, a secondary gay character or a gay character that appears in one scene but has a big impact on audiences.

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<sup>250</sup> Chahine and Massad, “Art and Politics in the Cinema of Youssef Chahine,” 85.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 86. *Destiny*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films, 1997). *The Emigrant*, directed by Youssef Chahine (MISR International Films and Films A2, 1994).

<sup>252</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 89.

In *The Belly Dancer and the Politician/al-Raqissa wa-l-siyasi* (1990),<sup>253</sup> written by Hamed and directed by Samir Seif, and based on the novel of the same name by Ihsan 'Abdel Quddous, the character Shafik Terter works as the belly dancer's assistant. His effeminate traits are clear to the audience, especially the way he talks, walks and explicitly shows interest in men. This character shares some feminine traits with Siksika in *Alley of Desire* (1983).<sup>254</sup> Terter and Siksika are played by the same actor, Farouk Falawkas. When asked about his role in the film, he said: "It is a disaster, the audience believed it very much to a degree that they thought I am like that in real life, and my family and I faced problems because of this role."<sup>255</sup>

In *Highly Dangerous Man/Mosagal khatar* (1991),<sup>256</sup> written by Wahid Hamed and directed by Samir Seif, Hamed represented Tamer Sameh, nicknamed Tutu (played by Hatem Zulficar), the pimp's personal guard who has feminine body language, and surprisingly has an ear piercing. Like Terter in *The Belly Dancer and the Politician* (1990), he explicitly flirts with men using homoerotic and double-meaning dialogue. "This is Tamer Sameh, and he goes by Tutu, he is one of my men," says his boss when introducing him to another character named Mustafa Abu El-'Ezz, and Mustafa replies: "A man, right?" Tutu's boss continues to say that Tutu is his personal security guard. Mustafa is surprised and asks, "In this state? How come?" In another scene, Tutu is told by a prostitute "If you are jealous, go get an operation," hinting at gender-affirmation surgery. Hamed introduces Tutu in this scene in a mocking and degrading way. The character dies in the film, like Hatem in *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006), which is also written by Hamed. He also wrote *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992) and *Fishtail* (2003), discussed earlier.

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<sup>253</sup> *The Belly Dancer and the Politician*, written by Wahid Hamed and directed by Samir Seif (Screen 2000, 1990).

<sup>254</sup> Adham Youssef, "Constructing and echoing social perceptions: Gay characters in Egyptian film," *Mada Masr*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/10/05/feature/culture/constructing-and-echoing-social-perceptions-gay-characters-in-egyptian-film/> (accessed March 15, 2019).

<sup>255</sup> Farouk Falawkas, "Abraz ta'lek men Farouk Falawkas 'ala doroh allazi tasabab fi mashakel le abna'ho" [Farouk Falawkas talks about the part that caused problems to his children], *YouTube*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb7zL0-HrLc&t=13s> (accessed June 22, 2022).

<sup>256</sup> *Highly Dangerous Man*, written by Wahid Hamed and directed by Samir Seif (Aflam Misr al-'Arabiya, 1991).

### **Marwan Hamed**

Director Marwan Hamed, the son of writer Wahid Hamed, directed two films that are explored in my documentary. The first film is *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006), which portrayed homosexuality as the result of being sexually abused at a young age; moreover, the gay character is strangled to death by a thief. The second film is *Diamond Dust/Turab al-Mass* (2018),<sup>257</sup> based on the novel of the same name by Ahmed Mourad.<sup>258</sup> In *Diamond Dust*, we first see a gay character in a police station, a young man called Karim, who has been arrested when the police raided an apartment where a group of young guys were gathered. The police officer receives a phone call from the secretary of a high-profile businessman called Hani Birgas, who asks him to release Karim. The young man does not get released, and later we see the secretary interviewing another young man to take his place and explaining what he should and should not do when he meets Hani, the businessman. We see that Hani cares about Karim (the guy who was arrested) and we understand that there must be a deeper connection between the two: he gets angry with his secretary when she could not use her connections to get Karim released. Surprisingly, we see the secretary telling Hani: "I have a surprise for you." From that moment, we see two events happening at the same time and mixed in a way that I would describe as cruel and inhumane. We see a man entering the prison cell, checking a photo of Karim that he kept in his hand, then the camera moves in a way that implies he is looking for one specific person. We see Hani doing the same act but looking erotically at the young guy who is been waiting for him ("the surprise") and when he is just about to get closer to him, the scene cuts to the man in the prison cell going towards Karim and sitting next to him. We see Hani sitting next to the new guy and talking about music and dancing; when we see Hani touching the man's legs, we expect the scene to continue but instead we are faced with a sudden cut to the prison cell where we see the inmate casually slashing Karim's throat. We then go back to Hani taking a shower after apparently having sex. This shows how the gay character is portrayed as if he is the same as a murderer. Furthermore, it was clear that Hani is a sexual predator. He was angry that his secretary did not manage to get him Karim for the night but, a few minutes later, he is totally happy to have sex with another man while his favoured partner is being murdered in a prison cell.

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<sup>257</sup> *Diamond Dust*, directed by Marwan Hamed (New Century Production, 2018).

<sup>258</sup> Ahmed Mourad, *Turab al-Mass [Diamond Dust]* (Cairo: Dar Al Shorouk, 2010).

### **Inas al-Degheidy**

Egyptian director Inas al-Degheidy is listed among a number of up-and-coming “Arab women who are challenging the conservatism and sexism of the Middle East community”.<sup>259</sup> She discusses delicate issues that other Arab filmmakers have avoided, such as “marital infidelity, forced marriages, girl child molestation, drug abuse, AIDS, homosexuality, virginity, premarital pregnancy, and a legal system that is tougher on women accused of adultery than on male adulterers”.<sup>260</sup> In regard to homosexuality, al-Degheidy has discussed the topic openly on television. She openly declared to have “gay friends and love them”.<sup>261</sup> She is outspoken about gay people, something that opened her to overt criticism. In another television interview she added, “gays hide their sexuality because of the pressure of society”.<sup>262</sup> Al-Degheidy also mentioned in the same television interview that “the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned in the Quran, and I think they are punished”. When she was asked if she agrees with introducing a law to allow gay marriage in Egypt, she replied: “No, I cannot imagine it, let them be unmarried, our understanding of marriage is different from degradation, they do not produce babies so why marriage, it will not benefit them.”<sup>263</sup> Al-Degheidy represented gay characters in more than one film, but the representation certainly did not serve the characters.

“The educational system, drugs, homosexuality and extremism among youth”<sup>264</sup> were all issues addressed in *Disco Disco* (1994).<sup>265</sup> Metwali, the lower-middle-class gay character,

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<sup>259</sup> IvyPanda, “Inas El Degheidi's Life History and Impact on Art,” September 27, 2020, <https://ivypanda.com/essays/inas-el-degheidis-life-history-and-impact-on-art/> (accessed June 23, 2022).

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Inas al-Degheidy, “‘Andy asdeqa’ mithlyeen we bahebohom we regala we mosh barfod zawaghom” [I have gay friends, I like them and I am not against gay marriage], *YouTube*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgOfzDInfKE> (accessed June 23, 2021).

<sup>262</sup> Inas al-Degheidy, “Mo’zam asdeqa’i al-Regal mithlyeen” [Most of my male friends are gay], *YouTube*, February 07, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evI9lrK6c6E> (accessed June 23, 2021).

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Mariam Fam, “Director Forges Ahead Despite Controversy and Death Threats,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2002, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-feb-20-et-fam20-story.html> (accessed June 23, 2022).

<sup>265</sup> *Disco Disco*, directed by Inas al-Degheidy (Aflam Misr al-‘Arabiya, 1993).

is a young man working as a DJ and his dream is to emigrate to the United States. He explicitly shows his affection to his lover and it is often portrayed through dance. He goes to the hospital to give blood to his sick father. Later in the film, Metwali's story unfolds when he is mistakenly arrested for stealing jewellery and, when he is about to be released from police custody, he is told he cannot go home and he has to go to the hospital under security because his blood test showed he is HIV positive. We see him getting arrested by two assistant police officers and meanwhile we hear the woman who is in love with him calling his lover's name and wishing he goes to hell, implying that the lover is the reason why Metwali is now HIV positive. This film introduces another trope of being gay, the association with HIV, AIDS and disease. Furthermore, Metwali's lover in the film is not Egyptian and speaks broken Arabic, which associates homosexuality with the West. In *Let's Dance/Mateegy nor'os* (2006),<sup>266</sup> which is a remake of the American film *Shall We Dance* (2004), a middle-aged woman (played by Yousra) who is tired of her daily routine and bored of her marriage decides to join a dance school. At the dance school, she meets an assortment of characters, each using dance as a way to reduce the stress of life, including two gay characters. Throughout the film, we do not see much of their life outside of the dance school and we get to see them talking only once with the head of the dance school, in a scene that calls for sexual acceptance. Even though it is the only scene in the film calling for acceptance, al-Degheidy's placement of the characters in the school did not do any justice to their representation as the majority of the characters at the dance school are considered to be abnormal.<sup>267</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how film representations can demonstrate, and play a part in, power dynamics within society that can negatively affect LGBTQ+ and other vulnerable people. I have shown how production design, authorship and other elements regarding the depiction of homosexual characters are used and mostly contribute to the construction of negative stereotypes, specifically through elements such as locations or habits that are

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<sup>266</sup> *Let's Dance*, directed by Inas al-Degheidy (Five Stars for Cinema and Video, 2006).

<sup>267</sup> Ramy Abd Al-Razik, "Mateegy nor'os, qalel men al-raqs, kather men al-Ifti'al" [*Let's Dance*, a little bit of dance and too much exaggeration], *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, November 29, 2006, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2156548> (accessed June 24, 2022).

considered taboo in Egyptian society. I have also shown a number of directors, writers and writer-directors have played an important part in depicting homosexual characters negatively for the most part but with some exceptions. In the next chapter, I outline how these observations as well as others are reflected in my documentary, which describes the making of films mentioned in this chapter and invites my interviewees to provide their deep insight into how homosexual characters were written and represented on screen.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The making of *Egypt's Celluloid Closet***

In this chapter, I discuss how I made my documentary. Throughout all three stages of making the documentary (pre-production, production and post-production), I was conscious of the ethical challenges working on a sensitive topic like this posed. I describe my motivations, why I wanted to make a documentary, the context of the literary quotation that opens the film, how I selected interviewees, and my decisions around the language, tone and mode of the film. I also discuss how I conducted interviews, the use of clips and B-roll, and issues around copyright, permissions and raising awareness. I also explain my intentions around distribution.

#### **Why documentary?**

I wanted to use cinema to explore a reality that I have experienced as a gay filmmaker and scholar from Cairo with the hope of stimulating discussion on the sensitive topic of sexuality. Growing up in Cairo, I quickly became aware of the social inequalities faced by gay Egyptians. Becoming a filmmaker gave me a new lens through which to view how cinema has played a role in shaping conceptualisations of homosexuality in contemporary Egypt and how these ideas are also reflected back on screen. I have become passionate about revealing this unspoken part of our Egyptian heritage. Over the years, I witnessed several releases of films with gay characters, and I found that the subject is always discussed in the media, but in the same stereotyped way. The discussion always revolves around censorship rules, and how the gay character in the film should behave, and if the film is acknowledging homosexuality, and if it does, to acknowledge it in a negative way for an Egyptian audience. My aim is to encourage the audience to take a more critical look and to create a clear index and a historical account of gay characters' representations, but more importantly, to raise questions about the similarity between the approaches by which these characters are created and depicted by writers and directors. This will hopefully start a conversation around the role of stereotyping in discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities in Egypt.

I had to decide what the best form for this aim would be. The theorist of documentary cinema Bill Nichols states that: "Filmmakers who set out to represent people whom they do not initially know but who typify or possess special knowledge of a problem or issue run the



risk of exploiting them.”<sup>268</sup> In making my film, I am trying to represent my community and engage in a discussion on how filmmaking devices and the powerful medium of film representation can shape the ways we perceive reality and our place – specifically as gay men – in it. I hope it can also contribute to changing people’s perception of the gay community in Egypt, lessen the stigma attached to homosexuality and help kickstart a conversation around a topic that, to this day, is still perceived as taboo in Egyptian society. All these negative themes recur again and again in many productions. This representational approach has not improved. Instead, it has created anger and frustration among the gay community in Egypt, especially after the 2011 Egyptian revolution.<sup>269</sup> My discussion in Chapter Three of *Family Secrets/Asrar ‘a’elya* (2014)<sup>270</sup> showed how mainstream feature film representations have regressed.

In contrast, a documentary film could provide a framework for understanding and contextualizing attitudes towards homosexuality between Egyptian society and Egyptian cinema, igniting discussion on a subject long considered too taboo to broach. In comparison, creating a fictional film would not give the subject matter the honesty and urgency it requires to be taken seriously. It would risk remaining another shallow fictional representation that can be easily dismissed and forgotten about. By making a documentary, I can ‘quote’ the fiction films I am engaged with and speak directly about the conditions, processes and consequences of media production, distribution and consumption that would be harder for a fiction film to capture. In this way I can help progress the conversation by holding up a mirror to familiar film texts and helping people see them in a new way and their effects on society. For example, my documentary includes clips from *Midaq Alley/Zuqaq al-Midaq* (1963),<sup>271</sup> in which Kirsha, the homosexual character is sitting with a young handsome man called Samir, and while Kirsha is looking at him with passion, we hear Kirsha’s neighbour on the next table saying, “Kirsha is sick and I hope God cures him.” Such explicitly stated conclusions have an

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<sup>268</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 36.

<sup>269</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “Egyptian debut director Hany Fawzy fears for film on homosexuality,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/05/egyptian-director-hany-fawzy-fears-film-homosexuality-gay-love-family-secrets> (accessed February 15, 2020).

<sup>270</sup> *Family Secrets*, directed by Hani Fawzi (Ihab Khalil, 2014).

<sup>271</sup> *Midaq Alley*, directed by Hassan al-Imam (Ramses Naguib Films, 1963).

enormous effect on audience. It attempts to create a religious link and homosexuality becomes similar to a curse from God, something that indeed only God can cure.

There have been many impactful documentaries in the history of the form that have contributed to meaningful social change. One renowned example is the American documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) by Errol Morris.<sup>272</sup> The film challenges received ideas about the justice system in the United States by exploring the story of Randall Adams, who was convicted of murdering a police officer in 1976. Morris's investigation and interviews with witnesses suggested that Adams was innocent. Furthermore, parts of the documentary were used in an appeal which led to proving that the testimonies of certain witnesses were not truthful.<sup>273</sup> Adams was released in 1989, one year after the film was released.

I believe now is a good time to use such an approach in the Egyptian context. In the last decade, Arab cinema has advanced significantly, and full-length documentaries specifically have become a more popular and now common occurrence; their screening is no longer limited to only niche cultural venues, but now documentary films have a place in the film industry. This is a major step forward.<sup>274</sup> Documentaries are commonly used as a creative medium to address social and political inequalities, to shed light on silenced subjects, and to tackle unquestioned and unspoken-of issues in society. This has been the case in Egypt as elsewhere.

A case in point here is *On the Fence* (2020),<sup>275</sup> a documentary that explores Egyptian expectations of women in society from a feminist perspective.<sup>276</sup> Director Nesrine El-Zayat challenges traditional standards and beliefs about the rules of gender in Egypt. In one scene,

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<sup>272</sup> *The Thin Blue Line*, directed by Errol Morris (American Playhouse, Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Productions Inc, 1988).

<sup>273</sup> Brian Eggert, "The Thin Blue Line," *Deep Focus Review*, June 4, 2017, <https://deepfocusreview.com/definitives/the-thin-blue-line/> (accessed September 15, 2021).

<sup>274</sup> Joseph Fahim, "One-on-one with Egyptian film critic and Berlinale honoree Samir Farid," *Al Arabiya English*, March 7, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/entertainment/2017/03/07/One-on-one-with-Egyptian-film-critic-and-Berlinale-honoree-Samir-Farid> (accessed April 4, 2022).

<sup>275</sup> *On the Fence*, directed by Nesrine El-Zayat (Hala Lotfy, Nesrine Elzayat, 2020).

<sup>276</sup> Ann-Marie Corvin, "Cairo Filmmaker Nesrine El-Zayat Turns Lens on Family to Deliver Nuanced Portrait of Women's Status in Egypt," *Variety*, December 6, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/global/nesrine-el-zayat-cairo-film-festival-1234847393/> (accessed March 1, 2021).

we see the director's own mother, who is displeased by her daughter Nesrine smoking. The director says, "Why can't I smoke when my brother Yasser is smoking?" The mother replies: "Yasser is a man, and he can do whatever he wants." El-Zayat represented rooted beliefs and ideas in Egyptian society, but more importantly, she challenged them by showing confrontational questions and conversations with her mother. My hope is that my film will also play a role in demonstrating and challenging deep-rooted ideas around homosexuality and contributing to positive change for LGBTQ+ people.

## **Pre-production**

### *Opening quotation*

I decided to start my documentary with a quote from literature, specifically a poem by the great writer Abu Nuwas. It serves conservative forces in Egypt to frame homosexual desire and identity as things that come from outside Egypt without roots in Egyptian society and culture. I wanted my film to help challenge these ideas to increase understanding and freedom. However, from my own personal experience, I know that many people in Egypt today, even those who think of themselves as against the conservative/authoritarian beliefs of the government, have unconsciously come to believe ideas about homosexuality being a relatively modern phenomenon in Egypt linked to the influence of foreign countries.

I wanted my film to show that homosexuality existed in Egypt before colonisation. But I also thought a lot of historical information might put off audiences whose main interest is contemporary film culture. I thought one way to address this would be to show an example of work that was clearly part of traditional Egyptian culture yet also expressed experiences of homosexual desire. In Chapter One, I described why Abu Nuwas is so significant in terms of artistic expressions of homosexuality in the region before colonisation. Given my familiarity with his work, I immediately thought that some of his poetry would be a good way of helping contemporary audiences in Egypt quickly understand that expressions of homosexual desire are in fact part of the region's deeper cultural heritage. Today's Egyptian audiences would know Abu Nuwas's name and reputation so quoting his work would quickly and powerfully show the existence of homosexual desire in the region before colonisation. More than this, modern audiences who know Abu Nuwas as a great literary figure might not know that he wrote beautifully about homosexual desire. As I described in Chapter One, these works of his are far less widely published and read than his works about other subjects such as wine and

women. This would increase the power of the point I wanted to make: not only was homosexuality in fact part of pre-colonial Egyptian literary culture, it was a key subject of one of the most influential individual writers within that tradition.

During my research, I looked for Abu Nuwas's poems in several bookstores in Cairo, but I could not find any books about his poems so I expanded my research and visited al-Azbakiyya Wall Book Market/Sour al-Azbakiyya that is known for rare books. I was disappointed that I found a few books of Abu Nuwas's poems about wine and women but not his poems about men. I was fortunate to find several books of Abu Nuwas's poems about his love for men in Arabic and English at the British Library in London and used these for the film.

### *Interviewees*

My choice of interviewees came from an appreciation of the importance of criticism in the context of Arab cinema. Film critique in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco is particularly strong, authoritative and with a veneer of worldliness. It may not have the intended effect on all audiences and readers, but it has a considerable effect on filmmakers.<sup>277</sup> Interviewees I selected include Egyptian director Yousry Nasrallah, who is one of the two directors to challenge censorship rules and depict gay characters in a realistic way; Egyptian-German film scholar and filmmaker Viola Shafik, who is famous for her extensive studies of Arab and Egyptian cinema; Arab film specialist, curator and film critic Joseph Fahim, who is the former director of programming of the Cairo International Film Festival and also the Arab delegate of the Karlovy Vary Film Festival; American film critic and film historian and expert on Egyptian/Arab cinema Jay Weissberg; Egyptian assistant director Ahmed Soliman, who worked on several films and had direct contact with censors; and lastly, Egyptian actor and activist Khaled Abol Naga who narrates the voiceover commentary. Abol Naga is currently in self-imposed exile in the United States, and he is known for his explicit criticism of the Egyptian military regime and the unfair human rights conditions in Egypt.

### *Language and tone*

There were reasons to consider both Arabic and English as the documentary's primary language. If Arabic was the primary language, the documentary would feel closer to the lived

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<sup>277</sup> Fahim, "One-on-one with Egyptian film critic and Berlinale honoree Samir Farid".

experience of people in the Arab world but would be less accessible to audiences in other parts of the world. If English was the primary language, the documentary would reach more audiences globally without severely affecting its accessibility to Arab speaking audiences. This is because English-language films with Arabic subtitles are very common in the region. I also made sure to discuss language choice with the interviewees. The first interview was shot in English with the American film critic Jay Weissberg who did not speak Arabic, but all the other interviewees decided to speak English, except assistant director Ahmed Soliman who chose to speak Arabic during the interview for convenience. Therefore, English emerged as the documentary's primary language.

I could have approached the subject using various tones, for instance, a jokey autobiographical tone might have resonated with younger audiences or an angry protesting tone might have been justified to push for political change. However, I decided my priority is to address this controversial subject in a serious and sincere non-sensational tone. As discussed, if homosexuality is acknowledged as a subject at all in Egypt then it is usually seen as absurd, pitiful or dangerous. However, I wanted to take it seriously and for the audience to take it seriously, based on the evidence from Egyptian cinema and credible professional experts. The resulting relatively formal tone seemed relevant and respectful to me given the significance of the subject.

### *Mode*

I chose to combine aspects of participatory, performative, and expository documentary filmmaking modes. Within the participatory mode, the filmmaker interacts and generates a conversation with the interviewee,<sup>278</sup> and what takes place in front of the camera turns into an index of the interplay between the filmmaker and interviewee.<sup>279</sup> Participatory aspects are reflected in the way the filmmaker's interactions and his own points of view influence directly the overall message of the documentary.<sup>280</sup> In the case of my documentary, the latter treatment can be identified in two elements. The first has to do with my personal involvement as a filmmaker in the representation of gay characters through my script and my questions to the interviewees, and the second is reflected in the historical development of these

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<sup>278</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 137.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

representations through the responses of my interviewees and the film footage I chose.<sup>281</sup> It needs to be said that participatory documentaries do not always focus on the filmmaker's perspective or the conversation that is generated between the filmmaker and interviewee.<sup>282</sup> The filmmaker could also offer to show a wider view, frequently a historical view. In this case, the opinions of the interviewees intertwine to show that point of view.<sup>283</sup> Despite the fact that I am off camera all the time and that the conversations are not always the result of the interaction between me and my interview subjects – an important element in the participatory mode of documentary – the overall perspective and messages of the film are revealed through the creative use of the interviewees' voices and the selected film footage. Even though my role as a filmmaker plays an important part in the film's overall message and editing, my aim was to give space to the footage and opinions of the interviewees and let the footage and script convey the message to the audience.

Gay film critic Tom Waugh recognised that "it is within a performative mode of representation that gay and lesbian documentary has primarily flourished".<sup>284</sup> Choosing a performative documentary style comes from the eloquence of the images selected from the various films that I chose to represent in my documentary. I use them to express my point of view as a filmmaker and to show the audience how I perceived these depictions.<sup>285</sup> According to Bill Nichols: "The performative mode raises questions about what counts as knowledge."<sup>286</sup> I maintain that performative documentary highlights the subjectivity of our knowledge of the world to underline how complex our understanding of it is.<sup>287</sup> Essentially, performative documentaries intensify the emotional complexities of a specific experience, rather than attempting to create an event per se. If they indeed have a goal, it is to give us a better understanding of how something will feel. More than understanding on an intellectual level, they invite the audience to feel on an emotional level. They amplify the urge to be appealing and link it to an expressive one—to make us feel or experience the world in a specific way as

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<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, 145-146.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*.

intensely as possible.<sup>288</sup>

Expository documentaries rely on the commentary to frame the B-roll footage, but also to guide the viewer, providing insight into how the chosen B-roll footage supports and sheds light on what we hear.<sup>289</sup> Moreover, the film's perspective will be expressed by the voice-over commentary, which is also my perspective as a filmmaker. Many films use the practice of combining modes.<sup>290</sup> The elements of each mode are used to shape the documentary, and not to define every detail of its structure and arrangement.<sup>291</sup> Such considerations are behind my decision to make a documentary that combines participatory, performative and expository modes. I intend to use interviews and film footage as an "eye opener" to create an insight into the distorted representations imposed on homosexual people in Egyptian cinema through repetition.

## **Production**

### *Use of clips*

As a filmmaker, I wanted to draw the audience's attention to the importance of the representation of the experiences of these fictional characters and how details of *mise-en-scène* elements are important in the way these characters are represented and misrepresented as well as the derogatory locations where the homosexual characters are often found, and the similarity between the representation of many of these characters, in particular, the khawal and sexual predator types. In Chapter Three, I described the nearly identical scenes in *The Malatily Bathhouse/Hammam al-Malatily* (1973)<sup>292</sup> and *The Ya'coubian Building/Imaret Ya'coubian* (2006),<sup>293</sup> where homosexual characters stand in front of parents' framed pictures and blame them for their homosexuality. Using the clip from both films enabled me to make the argument that these films imply such characters are sexual predators or deviants.

Creative practice research allowed me to use film as the medium to critique such representation by focusing on the significance of the stories told in these films and their

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>292</sup> *The Malatily Bathhouse*, directed by Salah Abu Seif (Salah Abu Seif, 1973).

<sup>293</sup> *The Ya'coubian Building*, directed by Marwan Hamed (Good News, 2006).

relation to the director's authorship visuals. I found Yvonne Tasker's study of women filmmakers and visibility relevant to some Egyptian directors who represent gay characters. Tasker's argument focuses on current filmmakers and cinema culture, specifically the challenges faced by female filmmakers at a time when the filmmaker's visibility, whether as a personality or as an author, is usually emphasised.<sup>294</sup> She states: "While I agree absolutely that women filmmakers matter for a feminist cultural politics, it can be difficult to establish precisely why, not least since authorship is often regarded as a methodology that film studies has in many ways moved beyond. At worst reductive, at best naïve, auteurism privileges the authored text over the complexities of context."<sup>295</sup> While my aim is not to focus on the sexual orientation or the gender identity of any of the directors – and none was implied – I instead focus on authorship and its relation to specific directors, especially in cases when the director is also the writer of the film. I maintain that this kind of authorship created a distinct 'realistic queer cinema'.

In the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995),<sup>296</sup> directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, when talking about homosexual characters in Hollywood, actor and screenwriter Harvey Fierstein said: "My view has always been visibility at any cost. I would rather have negative than nothing."<sup>297</sup> Of course, visibility of any gay character is important, but to acknowledge them and their existence matters more. Full visibility, especially in Egypt, where homosexuality is condemned, can be dangerous and leads to misunderstandings and divisions in society.

### *Interviews*

Documentary interviews can be carried out in various modes. In *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), for example, the interviews are presented in a confessional approach.<sup>298</sup> In order to establish trust between me and the interviewees, but more importantly not make them feel that I am

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<sup>294</sup> Yvonne Tasker, "Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies," in *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*, ed. Vicki Callahan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 214.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, 213.

<sup>296</sup> *The Celluloid Closet*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (Home Box Office, Channel 4 and ZDF/Arte, 1995).

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>298</sup> Eggert, "The Thin Blue Line".



intervening to receive specific answers, I filmed each interview as if it was a discussion. I was careful to prepare unbiased questions that did not invite specific answers but asked interviewees to express their opinions on their own terms. Asking any leading questions would have given me specific answers and allowed me to make sure they said what I wanted, but I felt this would affect authenticity of the answers. Certainly, I made a list of questions before I met my interviewees and I was expecting that some of the interviewees would not agree on answering some of these questions, but my aim was to let the interviewees express their point of views, and I would carry on the conversation or pick it up from where he/she had stopped and move on to the next question without guiding the answers. Also, as part of not intervening, I planned to be always off-screen, to let the audience become engaged in the discussion, focus on what was being said with few distractions and perhaps start analysing the characters using the interviewees' answers and coming to their own conclusions.

As a filmmaker with a background in documentary filmmaking, my experience in using creative practice research has been an educational and rewarding learning curve and has given me a greater insight in producing my documentary and this thesis contextualizing its findings. By doing a creative practice PhD, I have learnt that I needed to approach the subject in a fresh, individual way and look much deeper into the way films construct, overtly or not, narratives and messages, their underlying subtext and how this impacts the LGBTQ+ community. This has given my work a more personal and analytical approach and allowed me to discern which ideas I should incorporate in my work and which ones I should take a more critical view on. With an iterative approach, I could now include unexpected information revealed during the course of the interviews. This happened on more than one occasion, and I had to adapt to include contributors' insights and follow the directions they led me in, taking action, rather than ignoring things that did not fit my pre-conceived ideas.

For example, assistant director Ahmed Soliman revealed an incident that happened when he was watching *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006) at the cinema. As Hatem's story unfolds, and he is no longer with 'Abdu, we see Hatem entering his flat with a new guy he picked up off the street to have sex with, and the seduction scene with alcohol is repeated, but the guy turns out to be a thief. Hatem lies in bed and waits for the guy to take his clothes off and joins him. But the guy comes from behind and aggressively strangles Hatem to death using his belt. He steals Hatem's valuables, spits on him and leaves. Soliman recalls that the majority of the audience at the cinema clapped when Hatem is strangled and killed at the end

of the film because the gay character received his punishment. The audiences have tolerated and shouted their approval to the thief's criminal action, only because he showed them the punishment Hatem deserved. I acquired flexibility in my thoughts and filmmaking. These types of incidents reveal important aspect of the audiences' expectations in Egypt, but it also shows that filmmakers do not try to challenge these expectations.

The clips I used play an important part in creating a story of each character I studied in the documentary. Even though showing the selected images is vital to understanding the influence it caused, on the other hand it could also alter the message the documentary is conveying. Interviewees would not know in advance which clips would go with their appearances. The ways I established trust with my interviewees varied. The interviewees that I met in person were certainly more open to give more detailed answers to my questions. I obtained a consent from every interviewee, but because of the sensitivity of the subject and how this exposure on screen might affect some of my interviewees, I offered them the opportunity to review the finished film and approve the clips used in the film. *Variety* magazine film critic Jay Weissberg agreed to sign the consent form but also wrote below his signature that he would need to approve the final cut of the film as well. Weissberg also joked about being banned from entering Egypt after talking about homosexuality in the interview.

A major challenge in producing my documentary was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I used several strategies to overcome this. The interview with Joseph Fahim was prepared remotely with him and we planned to film it over two days in Berlin. I arrived on the first day of the lockdown in Germany, which made production more difficult as the cameraman had difficulties coming from Munich to Berlin. Eventually we managed to shoot the interview in one evening because I had to come back to London, quickly, assuming that the pandemic would worsen. Although it posed challenges to the PhD in regard to time management, I intentionally chose to film interviews face-to-face rather than conducting and recording them online so that image and overall film quality were not compromised.

Viola Shafik's interview was a very different case. I did not meet her in person, and I wanted to make sure I built trust with her. I did not want to direct her with my questions, especially as she mentioned that she would like to talk about some of the films but not all of them, as her opinion is very important for the project. We agreed that she would make a list of points to talk about, during the interview I let her talk rather than direct her with questions,

and this was a better strategy which benefited the documentary because she talked about issues that I was not expecting.

Director Yousry Nasrallah's interview was the most challenging because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I could not travel to Egypt, and I did not want to compromise on the film quality, therefore I did not want to use online recordings for his interview, but rather I waited for a face-to-face interview. It was very important for me to build trust with Nasrallah because his input is valuable for the project. Nasrallah is the only director whose films are being analysed in the documentary whom I interviewed. Our first meeting was very short and he was very happy to be interviewed but because of his busy schedule we could not set a date for the interview. Meanwhile I filmed assistant director Ahmed Soliman's interview, whose insight was very valuable because he had direct contact with the censorship office in Cairo. More importantly, Soliman talked about how self-censorship exists among Egyptian directors and how sometimes they are unconscious of it. I kept chasing Nasrallah and, only two days before I came back to London, he confirmed his availability and gave me only forty-five minutes of his time. But more importantly, before I travelled to Cairo to film my interview with Nasrallah, I contacted M.I., a friend with contacts in the Cairene police. Having made the purpose of my project public during the crowdfunding stage, I wanted to know whether my name had been signalled to the security forces. Fortunately, it was not signalled, and I was relieved to be able to visit Cairo and shoot the interviews.

Another challenge has been the unsatisfactory media coverage and public debate in Egypt (the "closet" in my title), and the reluctance of actors and filmmakers to speak freely on issues connected to homosexuality. After the release of a gay-themed film, actors who play homosexual characters are often interviewed to discuss their acting experience in portraying a gay character. It was often disheartening having to watch reruns of interviews in which actors would describe their experience of interpreting a homosexual character as one of shame. Interviewers often ask questions based on the idea that any association with homosexuality is shameful or risky such as, "Were you afraid to play that character?" or, "Did you worry your fans would associate you with homosexuality?" or, "Did it upset your family?", as if, regardless of the script, the mere act of portraying a gay person automatically warranted shame and disgust. When asked about his reasons for turning down the role of Hatem in *The Ya'coubian Building* (2006), actor 'Ezzat Abou 'Ouf, said: "Even though it is acting, I did not

want my children and grandchildren to see me playing this role.”<sup>299</sup> Interestingly, he played a heterosexual character in the television series based on the same novel, showing that some actors are concerned about being associated with specifically homosexual roles rather than the overall production.

I have found that the personal opinions of actors and directors are crucial for the various types of depictions explored in the documentary, especially when these opinions are screened on national television or on the internet, which is accessible to many Egyptians. The example of ‘Ezzat Abou ‘Ouf is one of many. For example, Hani Fawzi, the director of *Family Secrets* (2014), asserted in an interview that homosexuality is a disease and encouraged people to get treatment.<sup>300</sup> These personal opinions will affect the films produced and how the characters are written.

My own ideas around state censorship had a big impact on making the documentary because during the interviews the subject of state censorship often changed to a conversation about how some directors tried and succeeded to circumvent state censorship rules.

### **Post-production**

Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds describe a practice-based PhD case study in which “[t]he theory in many ways drove the practice but the practice also brought out clearer theoretical questions to be investigated”.<sup>301</sup> In my documentary, the practice drove the theory. Warren Buckland notes that Aristotle defines *technê* as “a form of knowledge that has a function or purpose – the production or making of concrete artefacts (whereas theory in itself does not produce artefacts)”.<sup>302</sup> In my case, this generates an individual way of making the documentary unique from my own perspective, and herein lies the importance of the creative

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<sup>299</sup> ‘Ezzat Abou ‘Ouf, “Rafadt dor al-shaz fi film ‘Imaret Ya‘coubian, we nedemt nadam shaded ‘aleh” [I refused to play the gay character in *The Ya‘coubian Building*, and I very much regretted it], *YouTube*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7aPh-uEaLo> (accessed February 20, 2019).

<sup>300</sup> Viola Shafik interview, February 10, 2021.

<sup>301</sup> Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, “Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line,” *Leonardo Journal*, The MIT Press 51, no. 1 (2018): 63-69, 68.

<sup>302</sup> Warren Buckland, “Scholarly Exploration of the Creative Process: Integrating Film Theory and Practice,” in *Creative Practice Research in the Age of Neoliberal Hopelessness*, ed. Agnieszka Piotrowska (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 134.

practice. Throughout the process of making my documentary, questions arose. I believe the critical approach I have taken is a form of knowledge. This bears out Candy and Edmonds's suggestion that "[t]he attraction of this form of research for creative practitioners is that by connecting closely to existing practice, it provides a means of exploration that extends that work in a personal sense as well as contributing to the wider picture".<sup>303</sup> Ultimately, the findings produced by the practitioner while focusing on exploration become the knowledge that contributes to the field of practice research: here, knowledge gained through filmmaking.

Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan raise an important question about the knowledge produced by creative practice research: "What are the best ways to think, define and strategise about this process of making knowledge via filmmaking?"<sup>304</sup> It is important to note that throughout the process of making a film, making the 'knowledge' as mentioned earlier comes from two elements: a production part, which is making the film, and equally important, a postproduction process which includes using all the assembled material in the final creative piece to craft a complete, seamless piece filled with emotion and compassion. With knowledge should come answers. For example, while editing, I assembled different interview clips that discuss the same character, intertwining Joseph Fahim and Jay Weissberg's analyses of Hatem in *The Ya'coubian building* (2006) to give a richer insight into the representation of this character. Raising awareness of the importance of these storytelling devices used in film was a key aim while working on this project.

### *Use of B-roll*

The clips I chose were picked because they illustrated my narrative, which argued that the representations of gay characters in Egyptian cinema have regressed in recent years, but would also raise questions in the viewer's mind rather than just being a series of well-chosen flickering images. Understanding that the clips should be more than just illustrations to my narrative gave me a greater flexibility and understanding and opened up space for different kinds of B-roll footage. The 2011 Egyptian revolution is an important element that I added in my documentary because it gave hope to Egyptians that society would progress — politically,

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<sup>303</sup> Candy and Edmonds, "Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line," 63.

<sup>304</sup> Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan, "Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 17 (2018): 215-220, vi.

socially, and artistically. Some of the footage used in the documentary I shot myself during the 2011 revolution, such as protestors chanting at 00:26:20. Minorities thought they would finally be accepted without prejudice — and have a voice. LGBTQ+ people, like other minorities, hoped to see themselves finally represented on screen truthfully and with emotional integrity. But, as stated in the film, in the years that followed, depictions of gay characters became more negative, extreme and radical. The revolution is important not only for Egyptian audiences but even more so to help global audiences understand that the depictions of these characters are related to the political arena now in Egypt. Along with this, each director and his relationship to the political regime has directly affected the way they have made their films. Perhaps if there were more historically favourable representations of homosexual characters, a more positive outcome for LGBTQ+ people would have resulted, fostering inclusion and acceptance. Given the lack of support from human rights organisations, the need for such intervention is even greater and badly needed.

#### *Copyright and permissions*

During the postproduction process, I encountered several challenges as a filmmaker, of both technical and editorial nature. Firstly, the copyright holders of the footage are not likely to be willing to permit filmmakers to use and analyse the scenes with homosexual characters as it could potentially incite negative criticisms of the filmmaker's work. The legal consequences could be serious for me and my career if I used the clips without buying or being granted a permit to use them and as a director I would never be trusted. Secondly, even though directors were very clear in their choice to create and depict homosexual characters, some would not be in favour of being branded as a director who depicts homosexuality, and especially being criticised for it. So far, only director Yousry Nasrallah was happy to talk about his films and to give permission to use his film footage for academic purposes. Nasrallah's input is important for the documentary because it showcases a director who tries to represent gay people in a realistic way. More importantly, it proves that censorship rules did not stop him from representing homosexuals more honestly. Censorship in Egyptian cinema might have the most notable role in restricting a positive depiction of homosexuality as a lived experience. However, as societies evolve and the act of filmmaking moves further towards realistic portrayals of these societies, it is the responsibility of the director to dare to capture and mirror charged tropes unapologetically. In the film's end credits, I included the lines: "This

documentary was made as part of a PhD program at the University of East Anglia in the UK” and “This film was made for non-commercial educational purposes”.

The reluctance of some people to collaborate because of the sensitivity of the subject was also a challenge. I was hoping that the vocals in the end credits of the documentary would be sung by H.S., an Egyptian singer living in London. After getting in touch with H. S., I listened to all her music pieces and attended a concert where she sang a number of songs in different languages. On the same day, I was told that H.S. is reluctant to take part in the project. Despite her deep interest in the theme treated in *Egypt's Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Cinema*, she did not feel comfortable with being associated with the theme of homosexuality in an Egyptian context. I offered her to use a pseudonym, to no avail. For peace of mind, H.S. had decided to abandon the project and avoid potential problems with the authorities in Egypt. In fact, H.S. was extremely afraid of the possible repercussions coming from making the documentary public.

### *Raising awareness*

The crew members that helped make the documentary have different national origins, including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Egypt, the United Kingdom, and the United States. My editor, for example, became passionate about watching Youssef Chahine's films. But what I found fascinating about working with people from different backgrounds is that whenever I mentioned my project before agreeing to work together, the majority of these people asked questions such as, 'Are there gay representations in Egyptian cinema?' These kinds of questions on many occasions led to several conversations about the history of gay characters in Egyptian cinema. More importantly, I have used the research to raise awareness among Egyptians. For example, one of the issues I always wanted to focus on when talking about the project is the difference between the two words 'shaz' and 'mithly': 'shaz' means abnormal or degenerate and it is often used on television and among Egyptians; on the other hand, 'mithly' literally means "like me" and it has a positive impact when heard.

### *Distribution*

I intend to make the documentary available online and show it at venues and festivals if possible. Since documentaries now have more presence in the film market in the Arab world, I am hoping the documentary will be screened at festivals, especially in the Arab region, to

widen its impact and raise awareness among Arab audiences. Another route is LGBTQ+ festivals inside and outside of the Arab world, particularly those with a focus on Arab cinema and where Arab and international filmmakers are brought together. Overall, I intend for the documentary to reach people who work in the Egyptian film industry, wider Egyptian and regional audiences, LGBTQ+ audiences in Egypt and internationally, and academic researchers who can build on this line of enquiry.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed the pre-production, production and post-production processes of my documentary, *Egypt's Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Cinema*. It took me on a journey that led me to better understand my own motivations and political and aesthetic choices as well as what is at stake when engaging with a controversial subject like homosexuality in Egyptian cinema. I learned how to bring in earlier regional culture in simple and powerful ways and how different interviewees and supporting footage can shed light on different dimensions of the subject. I hope all this makes for a more powerful documentary which can contribute to positive change in the region for those of us alive today who know first-hand the consequences of ignorance and fear, and also new generations who I hope will not have to struggle in the same ways I have.



## Conclusion

In this conclusion, I summarise the findings of the thesis and documentary around the regression of representation of homosexuality in Egyptian films across the decades, and how censorship has played a role but has not been the main factor. I describe how authorship plays an important role in depicting homosexual characters realistically. I also reflect on the importance of actors' personal and professional opinions of playing homosexual characters. I share my hopes that this project will help make progressive change, and concerns for possible repercussions for me personally. I consider areas of potential further research, including how Egyptian films might represent homosexuality in the future and the role of the new wave of Egyptian young filmmakers living abroad, such as Mohamed Shawky Hassan, who directed *Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?/Bashta'lak Sa'at*.<sup>305</sup>

## Research findings

This research project set out to explore how the representation of homosexuals in Egyptian cinema has evolved since 1963 and what factors have influenced these representations, including whether censorship was the only element restricting filmmakers from depicting homosexual characters honestly and realistically. This thesis investigated these questions across two components, the thesis and the documentary. The thesis and documentary argued that the representation of gay men in Egyptian cinema has massively regressed over the past years. State censorship plays an important role in shaping these characters, but self-censorship already existed among Egyptian directors. This implies that the majority of Egyptian directors who have tackled this topic in their films have failed to depict a more complex and humane dimension of homosexual characters, either because of ignorance of the topic or because of fear of backlash from a large conservative sector of society. Others, of course, have used the medium to outrightly vilify homosexuality. Gay men characters are often poorly developed and regularly exploited as a vehicle to convey comical or negative moral lessons.

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<sup>305</sup> *Shall I compare you to a Summer's Day?*, directed by Mohamed Shawky Hassan (Amerikafilm and Aflam Wardeshan, 2022).

By examining authorship and its relation to filmmakers, the research project revealed that there are two types of directors in Egypt. The first type is what I would call the “crowd pleaser,” one that panders to the crowd’s expectations, leaning into stereotypes, making little to no effort to sincerely develop the complexities that a character, homosexual or not, deserves. Their films align with the so-called ‘Al-cinema al-Nazefa’/‘Clean Cinema’, a definition used by many directors and actors that means cinema without any kind of erotic sexual content or sexually related scenes that could promote or awaken any sexual behaviour and instincts. This type of director follows censorship rules and is being complacent with the expectations of the audience and Egyptian society as a whole, intentionally framing homosexual characters as ‘deviants’ in films – even when such directors believe themselves to be portraying such ‘deviant’ characters with sympathy. The second type of director is a mirror opposite of this. They creatively find ways to breach censorship rules, brazenly representing homosexual characters with emotional integrity, as real humans, such as Yousry Nasrallah and Youssef Chahine. Ironically, this concept is so out of sync with the historical portrayal of gay characters that, if asked, most Egyptian audiences would say that they do not understand Youssef Chahine’s films because they are too “philosophical”. My case studies of directors and screenwriters helped understand that there is a link between the personal perceptions of specific filmmakers and the representations of homosexual characters. Screenwriter Wahid Hamed is one of the writers who is complacent by fulfilling the expectations of the audience. Such expectations are, of course, reflected at large in stereotypes around being gay that are rife within Egyptian society. So, characters and plots are often scripted by choosing a safe, government-approved stance on the topic.

I also demonstrated the different perceptions of actors in the Egyptian film industry, using case studies such as actor Mohamed Mahran and his point of view. As in other countries, Egypt is a country where the work of actors is often appreciated more than that of directors or screenwriters. As such, in interviews, actors rarely discuss in detail the director or the writer’s work, specifically as to why the characters are shown in a certain way. In their defence, they may not know the writer or director’s intentions. My documentary will provide them with a new lens to view their work, allowing directors and actors to see the details of their work analysed and critiqued on screen. More specifically, this critical analysis will allow them to realise that the elements they used to portray these characters are harmful and negatively influence both homosexual and heterosexual audiences. More broadly, the

documentary will act as a wake-up call for Egyptian directors to realise the self-censorship that exists within their profession, and to realise the influential effects they have on the public through their films and the responsibility they have as a result.

I explained my intentions to make the documentary available online and through venues and festivals in Egypt and internationally. Achieving this goal, my research will reach those who work in the industry as well as wider public audiences. It will also contribute to academic knowledge and make available a new line of research to pursue, to fuel more honest and open debates. Eventually, it will help encourage people to question the validity of archaic laws and, more importantly, to question how homosexual characters will be represented in Egyptian films in the future.

Overall, I have found that the representation of homosexual characters in Egyptian cinema is still considered a taboo subject. The films that portray male gay characters negatively outweigh films that depicts them positively. These negative modes of representations often happen because of either censorship rules that are not challenged and breached by the filmmakers or because the filmmakers' own point of views on the subject. Ultimately the thesis and the documentary will aim to soften conservative views within my country and pave the way for a more accepting and tolerant future.

The potential backlash coming from Egyptian censorship authorities has indeed been on my mind throughout the production of my PhD documentary and the writing of my thesis. It has been a personal struggle steeped in a mixed set of feelings, from fear, on one hand, for repercussions coming from possible listing on some government 'black book' to an ardent sense of retribution linked to what I have always perceived as the unjust way gay men are represented in Egyptian media and therefore in the public sphere.

### **Further areas of research**

The thesis has potential to help further understanding of multiple areas of research. This thesis explored the way that Egyptian cinema has treated homosexuality to 2018 and raises an important question, which is how filmmakers might represent homosexuality in the future? The documentary plays an important part in addressing this question and will be a starting point for further investigations. The distribution plan includes showing the documentary to Egyptian audiences and filmmakers, and making it available with Arabic subtitles. Perhaps acknowledging that the depiction of gay characters in Egyptian cinema has

actually regressed in recent years can act as a wake-up call for Egyptian directors to realise the opportunity they have to have a progressive influence. There is hope in this area from the new wave of Egyptian young filmmakers living abroad, such as Mohamed Shawky Hassan, whose film *Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?* was discussed in Chapters One and Three.

I hope this research will open the door for other film researchers and filmmakers to investigate other queer tropes, themes, and characters in Egyptian films, such as lesbian, bisexual, trans and non-binary identities and non-heteronormative ways of life and communities. This is vital in order to help LGBTQ+ communities to have more acceptance and safety in Egyptian society as well as real, positive, and respectful representations in films.

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## Filmography

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*Salvation Army*, dir. by Abdallah Taia (Les Films de Pierre, Les Films Pelléas and Rita Productions, 2013).

*Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?/Bashta'lak Sa'at*, dir. by Mohamed Shawky Hassan (Amerikafilm and Aflam Wardeshan, 2022).

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*Take Care of Zuzu/Khalli balak min Zuzu*, dir. by Hassan al-Imam (Sharikat al-Sabah al-Sinama'iya and Aflam al-Horreya, 1972).

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*The Thin Blue Line*, dir. by Errol Morris (American Playhouse, Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Productions Inc, 1988).

*We Are the Students/ehna al-talamza*, dir. by 'Atef Salem (Helmy Rafla, 1959).

*The Ya'coubian Building/'Imaret Ya'coubian*, dir. by Marwan Hamed (Good News, 2006).

### **Television series**

*The Choice/al-Ekhteyar*, season 1, 2 and 3, dir. by Peter Mimi (Synergy, 2020).

*Handcuff/Kalabsh*, dir. by Peter Mimi (Synergy and Verdi Production House, 2017).

### **Television programmes**

*Al-Tas'a*, (Channel One, 2022).

*Al-Motawahesha*, (Al-Nahar TV Network, 2016).

*100 Questions*, (Al-Hayah TV Network, 2016).

**Documentary Link to view *Egypt's Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Cinema***

Documentary Link: <https://vimeo.com/771143541>

Password: ECC@LO-2022-pFeM