

CHAPTER V

THE DETERIORATION OF ARAB AND EGYPTIAN CINEMA

"If you want to prove yourself in the society, you can either creep into it as a disease or explode in it as a bomb."

Blzac

5.1 Introduction

In his article "Art and Liberty", Nageeb Mohfuz says, "And since respect the liberty of Arts as much as they respect liberty in general and bestow on it what liberty bestows generally and what it can practice, hence art flourishes where democracy reigns and shrinks where injustice and oppression are the rule."¹ This situation is seen in the Arabian cinema and in particular, the Egyptian cinema which significantly represents the Arab cinema.

In Egypt, the reality of Sadat's pseudo-democratic rule was revealed only the events of 18th and 19th of January 1977. These events revealed the harm caused by the ruling government and the daily-life practices in Egypt. These events were triggered by a sudden raise in the prices of many commodities caused by the 17th January economic decisions. On 18th January 1977, angry demonstrations spread in the country and the armed forces oppressed the demonstrations, which were participated by employees, students and labourers. President Sadat and the security forces accused the "malicious" communists and Nasserists of fueling the riots. They also accused the Soviet Union, Libya and Israel of financing riots, taking advantage of the Egyptian democracy and causing violence.

Analysts, on the other hand, saw that these events were induced by the raise in prices caused by the economic and social conditions in Egypt, which were brought about by the "openness" and the feeling among the Egyptians that they have become second-rate citizens in their own society.

On 5th February 1977, President Sadat decided to call for a general poll about "the citizens protection law, which was meant to hinder vandalism and unrest". The law included a twenty five years with labour sentence for whoever incites public violence and jeopardizes general peace by means of demonstrations, riots or strikes. As a result, the changes or reforms in the Egyptian democracy have affected liberty in general and liberty of arts in particular as discussed by Nageeb Mohfuz

5.2 The Egyptian Cinema in the Seventies

The seventies in Egypt was characterized by a series of polls whose results were predetermined by the ministers of internal affairs. They declared such results to the President who was apparently pleased and approved of such falsehood.

"These polls however, were among the governments most serious mistakes, which were quite a lot, that revealed among the public its undemocratic intentions. A sequence of similar law supported by public polls, collaborated with the censorship's decree number two hundred twenty for the year 1976 to minimize the space of liberty given to the cinema among the variables of the seventies, for what was not prohibited by censorship was prohibited by the citizen's

¹ Mahfouz, Naguib. (16 October 1989). *Art and Liberty*. In *Al-Ahram*, no. 1630, p. 29.

protection law, or that of interior front and social peace protection, or the law of ethics protection against immorality and other laws which formed a new censorship which was, however, not mentioned in the censorship decree."²

The censorship body is the legitimate representative of the state or government, and in 1976 the minister of culture and information made his decree number 220 for the main aim of which was, as expected,

To eliminate the freedom of expression in order to protect this rule presented by a few persons as far as politics were concerned. This decree overlooked decree number 430 for the year 1955 and affected the instructions of the censorship's decrees for the year 1947 that comprised forty-six prohibitions to an effect similar to that of 1947 instructions. That decree also prohibited any scene of social turmoil such as revolutions, strikes or demonstration. It equally prohibited any inhibition of a social problem in a way that provoke feelings of desperation and frustration, cause social or religious prejudice, or disrupt national unity or the social system.³

Minister of Interior Affairs Ahmad Rushdy and the Minister of Culture Ahmad Heikal. After watching the film titled "Al Baree" or *The Innocent*, they censored a number of scenes from the film, which was directed by Atef Al Tayeb, one of the most important and prominent directors of the new cinema. This film was also participated by Eddin Wahba, a writer and the head of the Arab Artist Union. One of the parts in the film that was strictly censored was the last scene. It depicted and showed a peasant-soldier who kills the captain of the detention camp and he was

² Sharif Al-Deen, Douryh. (1992) *Politics and Cinema*, Cairo. Alshoug Press, pp. 228-229.

³ Ibid., *Politics and Cinema*, p. 250.

in a fit of madness after discovering that the political prisoners were not enemies of the country as he had been falsely told.

As a result of the interference, the filmmakers were forced to make declarations before they display or show their film. They were also made to declare that it did not represent the current situation in any way. As a consequence of this case, the other filmmakers in Egypt were also affected.

5.3 Arab Producers in Egypt

The Arab distributors who financed the films production had their own conditions, which ensured the film distribution in certain Arab countries. They demanded a certain type of film that is regressive in thought and production, or what is generally referred to as the underdeveloped taste of the Arab distributors. In view of this fact, the Egyptian film industry has never been compliant to the demands of the national market.⁴

With the liberal age a number of art parasites, who were the offspring of liberalism entered the market and flooded it with films that were totally compliant with the demands of the liberal market, not only in their title, but also in their themes, characterization and dialogue. Thus, titles such as *The Coward and Love*, *My Beloved Uncle Zeezo*, *Look what is Surro Doing?* *What has Love Done to Daddy?*, *Who's Driving Whom Mad?* And others appeared in the market. "When discussing a film and exploring its content, its titled assumes considerable connotations especially

⁴ Al-Kalyoubi, Mohamed (1982). *The Arab and the African Cinema*, Beirut. Dar Al-Hadath Press, p. 130.

when related to the characteristics of the period it represents and to the texture of the film itself⁵. These suggest two important investigations and questions. What can be expected from those films whose titles are of such kind? Would they ever tackle the political aspects of liberty or shed light on its destructive consequences?

Indeed such films were characterized by useless sarcasm and force that aimed at nothing serious - the subjects they tackled were only those that fulfilled the emotional, psychological and artistic needs of the social sectors created by Liberalism. Such films, according to Zaki Ibraheem, help the distortion of personality and the sabotage of mentality with its superficial and illusionary ambitions. They also represented a part of the liberal aberration and reflected the ethics of the liberal policy and propagated them among the public through their depiction of the liberal heroes and their languages, lives and aberrations regarding them as heroic figures. Moreover, these films established new concepts concerning honour and integrity. In other words, they reiterated the lack of honour and integrity, advocating an easy route to success, rejecting hard work, inciting misbelief in ethic values and religious teachings and belittling the worth of educational and culture.

During the seventies, certain models were considered as the models of success. Such models of false heroism certainly had their influence since people used to put themselves in the show of those heroes, and thus unconsciously accepting the attitudes they represented and the roles they acted. "Moreover, those who faced

⁵ Ibid., *Politics and Cinema*, p: 251.

different problems accepted, consciously or unconsciously, the solutions presented through the films for their problems, as these were the solutions presented by the stars”⁶.

Consequently, certain heroic models appeared on the screen of the liberal cinema and acquired great interest during that period. These were the gangsters, the corrupt, belly dancers, power exploiters, drug-dealers, tramps, and bribe-takers and etc. All these were seen through the vista of liberal cinema as heroes. Actors who were originally lured by the cinema out of pubs and cabarets usually played these heroic roles. Only liberalism could have enabled them to appear on the screen. Owing to their physical features, and their behaviours, they represented the individuals of the liberal audience and as the film was more and more involved with them. They were increasingly employed or hired as the audience applauded “their own appearance” on the silver screen, and the cinema traders grew more “avid for money whatever were the means.”⁷

Through these discussions, one may clearly perceive the general characteristics of the Egyptian cinema during the age of liberalism. It was a cinema that exploited the society’s sufferance because of the control of power and because of faults of the liberal policies; as well as the feelings of pride and victory over the October war. The cinema presented the worst forms of the Egyptian cinema as the movies were presented with many violence, sex and corruption scenes. In addition, they also included obscene jokes, poor melodramatic scenes, and corrupt farcical

⁶ Hanafi, Qadri. (1981). *Egyptian Citizen on Screen*. Cairo. Public Press, p. 19.

⁷ Ibid., *The Arab and the African Cinema*, p. 133.

comedy. The audience's taste has also deteriorated because of what was known as "window superstars", a title over which was waged with each other to the extent of suing one another and calling each other names in magazines. The animosity between actor aggravated because of certain critics who were mainly parasites and they gained bread through the artist's dubious banquets. This kind of cinema was called "Contractors' Cinema".

Nasser Hussein, 52, who holds a B.Sc of Arts in cinematography is a prominent advocate of the "Contractors' Cinema". He has directed thirty films to date and among which are titled *What has Love Done to Daddy?*, *They are Killing the Honourable*, *Stoohy on the Tree*, *Satan is Called Suna*, *The Garbage-Man and the Ladies*, *A Killer in the Girls' School*, *The Belly-Dancers' Alley*, *Naughty Girls in Neweba*, *The Upper-Egyptians are Here* and *Sayed the Swindler*.

The titles of Hussein's films undoubtedly reveal the issues they tackle, for the titles of films have always been the first base with which movie traders have attracted the audience through certain connotations that waver between vulgarity and foolishness. Distributors depend mainly on them and for foreign market.. in view of this fact, the producers become only a contractor since the foreign distributors who own the capital and funds control them. For example, when the government decides to build a hospital, it gives the constructions right to a contractor of a big company, which, in return, deals with the private-escorts contractors. This is exactly what has happened in the Cinema Industry. Constricts in cinema meant low or moderate-cost

films shot in a relative short time. This is further illustrated and described in the interview (please refer to Appendix I) with Nasser Hussein.

5.4 Reforms and Changes in the Egyptian Cinema

According to a famous Egyptian director, Nasser Hussein, the reasons for the inferiority of the Egyptian cinema are also caused by factors of declination such as financial, political, social and cultural problems.

Currently, Egypt is facing a difficult political and economic situation. However, there are bright signs in the new Egyptian cinema, which is projected by some cinematologists. They are saving the wonderful cinema art from exploiting money owners that have harmed the cinema and who have grown in numbers during the policy of liberalism in the era of the Egyptian president, Anwar el Sadat.

Some filmmakers from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Palestine have brought important changes and reforms to the new Arab cinema. Their productions have honoured the Arab cinema and regained the trust of art audience. These contributions reflect the quality and standard of commendable films in the fifties such as *Cairo Station* *Bab El Hadid* and the seventies *The Choice* and *The Land*, which was directed by Youssef Chahin. These participations are considered the initial basis for the new cinema in the Arab world. They have established new principles and ideas for the beginning of a new cinema, which has an identity and a special

cinematic language, unlike the entertainment imperialist cinema that has long influenced the Arab world as a destructive fashion for ideas and principles.

5.5 Conclusion

The new Arabian cinema is trying to change the cinema from being trivial to Hollywood influences. It looks for answers about its role and responsibilities in the society. The cinematic of the new Arabian cinema look towards aims beyond entertainment production by including cultural, social and educational dimensions of the Arab world. These later are source from the different Arab cultures, poetry, arts, education, social problems such as immigration, imprisonment and others.

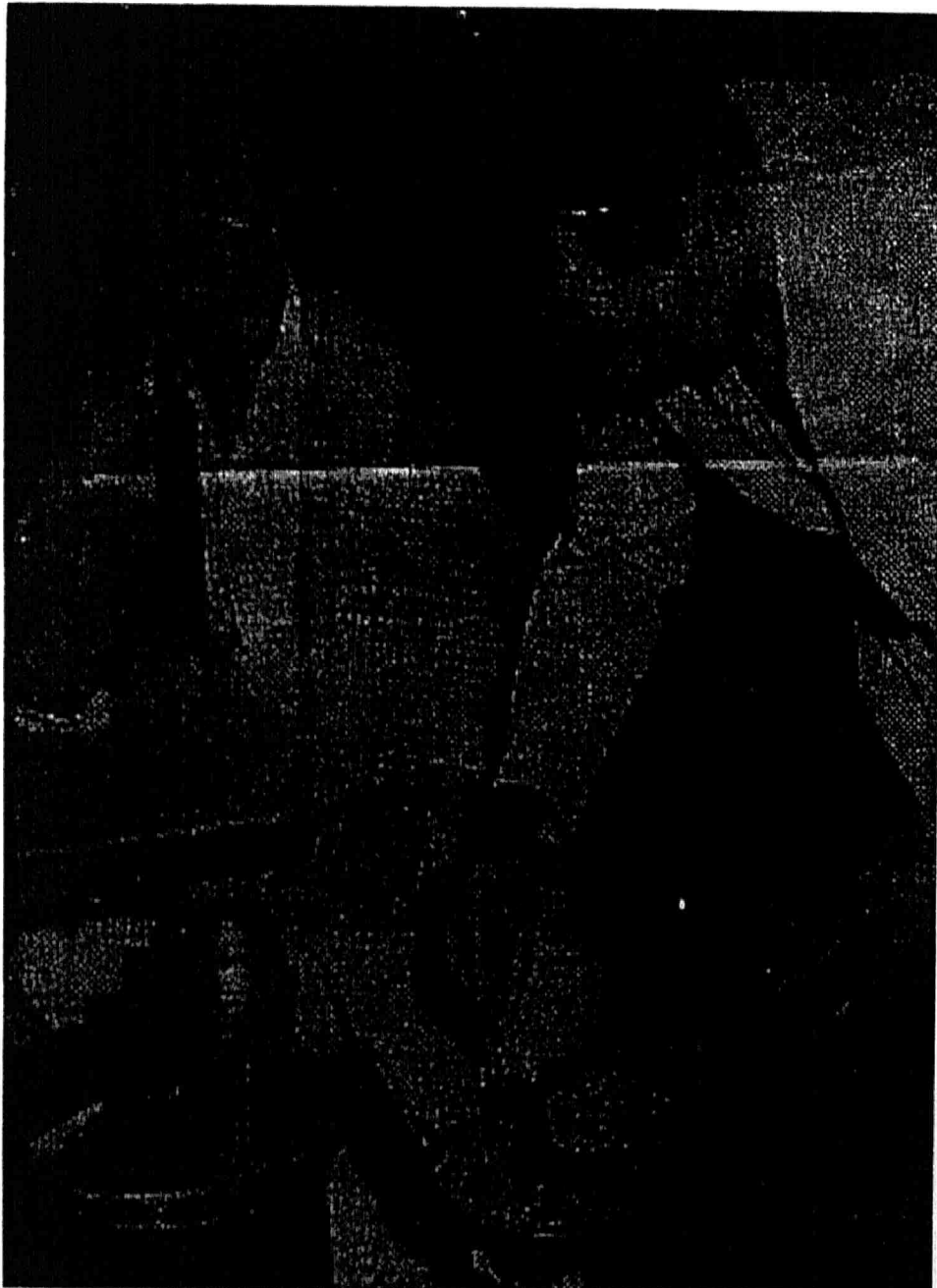
The emergence of the new Arabian cinema has enhanced the immunity of the Arabian audience against the influence of the image, sound, actions and reactions of the entertainment cinema. The entertainment cinema carries values of a consuming society, and an imperialist culture, which are based on religious discrimination, racism and material. The new Arabian films are overwhelmed with deep feeling coming out of the filmmaker souls carrying a typical local expression.

The new cinema is reviving the Arab memories through sorting of the real heroes and giving a true picture of the history rather than narration of the historical events. It translates it into a new living language free of the artistic reactionism. The new cinema presents and expresses the ugliness, cruelty, and misery of the Arab

society that is always hidden. Despite the pessimism that is carried by the new Arab cinema, it promises a greater future mixed with sacrifices. It tries to establish a new form of expression to move the Arab cinema from the imitation stage to an exotic and special style of narration and expression with complete rules, systems and basis. The new cinema gets the audience into deep thoughts in digesting the message. It is directed to free the Arab conscience and consequently the Arab land. However, the traditional Arab cinema has failed in this role-either with good or bad intentions - the most important is the Palestinian issue. The new cinema overrules the censorship laws and erases the roots of retardation and reactionism. It rejects the capitalist division of this art into an entertainment and objective cinema. The new cinema establishes relations with the non-Arab societies, artists and intellectuals with open mind to be able to take off the veil of the overwhelming negative influences of the old cinema. Besides all these challenges, the new cinema is also subjected to fierce objections from those untalented and incapable in the Arab world.



The late director Atef Attaib who directed *The Innocent* Film- New Arab cinema movement



The director Nasser Hussien



(c)

(a) and (b) are scenes from the Film *The Night*, for Mohamed Malas
(c) Director Mohamed Malas receives his Award



(a)



Adel Emam, a rare comedian phenomena and drug abuse in the seventies films

5.6 Thesis Conclusion

The Euphoric of revolution mood of the late 1960s is very apparent in the work of many of the filmmakers who, born mostly in the 1930s and 1940s. This was the generation that created the New Arab Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s; they do indicate how these filmmakers unlike their elders of the 1950s generation could be seen as participating in a collective movement of revolutionary change that had both national and international dimensions. Belief in the political function of cinema was fundamental to all these filmmakers. Typical subjects adopted were the working of justice Abu Zaid's *The Wall*, the corruption of the newly emerged Arab elites Al-Rkaab's *The Barber of the Poors Path*, and rural underdevelopment Khalifi *The Mud People*, The Struggle for national liberation was chronicled in Palestine by Khalifi *The Rhythm of the Stone*, in Algeria by Chahine's *Jamila*. In the early 1970s the cost of advocating change proved to be very high for filmmakers, who suffered censorship, imprisonment, exile, and enforced silence. As a result, the satisfyingly rounded careers achieved by the 1950s generation were no longer possible. At its most extreme, there was no career at all in case of Shadi Abdes-Salam, who was not able to make a second feature to follow his striking debut with *The Night of Counting the Years/Al-Momia* (1969). Abdes-Salam was at least able to remain in Egypt, where he could complete a number of documentaries. But elsewhere, filmmakers were not so fortunate. The pressures on this generation have been immense, but its members have persisted with incredible vigor, their efforts symbolized by the Mauritanian Med-Hondo, who has made all his films in exile, and Chaine, despite his reputation as Arab World's leading film makers, has had a continual battle with the censors in Egypt where his films were released only separate cuts, and Shadi Abdes

Salam film remained banned for eight years. These men were often the founders of their national cinemas, and in some case, as with Chahine and Abu Sife the worked personally to extend the range and function of cinema by taking their films to remote communities. The strongest impression left by New Arab World filmmakers in 1970s and early 1980s is its stylistic diversity and geographical spread, and internationally known talented filmmakers working in just about every part of the Arab World. Even if we ignore both those engaged within the constraints of mainstream commercial cinema and those engaged on esoteric exploration that have yet to find an audience, we are still left with a great number of film makers working individually to express their national social reality. One of the crucial elements in an evaluation of Arab World film making is the location of the film makers astride two cultures, on the one hand using a Western-originated technology and often employing formal structures of narrative derived from the west, and on the other drawing on-and relating the work produced to his or her own native tradition. When we look at Arab world achievements in the 1970s and early 1980s it is, of course, easy to pick out specific instances of direct New Arab Cinema movement influence on the young graduates of the Arab film and television institutes. But in terms of two further tendencies picked out in this research as major contributions of Third World Cinema, it is clear that Arab world filmmakers enter world film history on equal terms. Firstly, the theorization of a political cinema by critics in the late 1960, and early 1970s - the direct influence of the theorization a political cinema by Latin American critics - remains valuable today because it is a theory of film practice. Secondly, the role of the New Arab filmmakers in giving voice to peoples excluded from history and ethnic minorities or even majorities normally denied expression -such as Palestine

Arabs of occupied Palestinian.