

Article

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Surrealist Nuance and Postcolonial Subjectivity: Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria, Again and Forever*



A significant aspect of the surrealist movement's contribution to the theories of aesthetics was the creative incorporation of a convergence between Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. From Marx, it derived the concept of dominant ideology and its emphasis on class hegemony; from Freud and psychoanalytic theory, it integrated the recognition of the liberating potential of artistic and creative utility of the resourceful world of the unconscious. Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, the surrealist theoretical confluence between these two influential schools gave material base for synthesizing political and artistic applications across a myriad of contemporary artistic practices.

Clearly, the surrealist movement transpired as a radical attempt to subvert bourgeois culture in advanced capitalist societies, particularly in Europe. By extension, however, surrealism, as a cultural practice in colonial and postcolonial societies, variously assumed a quintessence of a protracted

struggle between, on the one hand, the old and neocolonial cultural hegemony, and on the other hand, the subversive resistance by the neocolonized, with all the paradoxical elements that are part and parcel of that struggle. This nuance is understandable, considering the nature and dynamics of anticolonial resistant practices, which are ultimately and largely governed and overdetermined (to use Louis Althusser's term) by how they tend to challenge bourgeois hegemony, albeit its monopolistic capitalism phase in colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial as practiced in "third-world" nations and societies.¹

One aspect of the utility of surrealist aesthetics in Arab cinema toward the latter part of the twentieth century has been its fusion of a postcolonial paradigm. In this context, the political character of the original surrealist movement (largely associated with European capitalist conditions of the early part of the last century) tended to incorporate a

nuanced vigor, which indulged a fluid inter-passage between the personal and the political in the form of a more specifically postcolonial subjectivity.

Alexandria, Again and Forever (1990), one of Youssef Chahine's most critically acclaimed films, is a rich example of Arab cinema that celebrates non-normative personal identity while simultaneously rethinking traditional notions of the nation. The film is a dazzling third installment of Chahine's autobiographical quartet, which he intermittently drew over the course of his thirty-year career. As it indulges a complex exposé of Chahine the man, the artist, and the political activist, the film draws on mostly imagined, and partly real, episodes in the filmmaker's life. The narrative struggles to resolve the artist's conflicting attitudes toward love, art, and politics and is set between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, following the international success of his 1979 film *Alexandria . . . Why?*

The protagonist of the film (played by Chahine as the filmmaker Yehia) imagines himself happily married; but on the side, he is enamored by a young man (Amr) who has been working with him as a lead actor in several of his films from the 1970s and 1980s (based on the actor Mohsen Mohieddin). After a personal and career fallout between the actor and the filmmaker, Yehia meets Nadia, a young actress (played by Yousra). As Yehia moves into a new phase in his personal life as a filmmaker and political activist, the actress assumes the role of Chahine's new object of desire. In perhaps one of the most passionate and complex celebrations of bisexuality ever filmed, the events of *Alexandria, Again and Forever* are set in the context of a hunger strike organized by film artists and technicians and joined by the filmmaker. The strikers are protesting emerging inequities in the Egyptian film industry during the Sadat and Mubarak years and the increased influence of producers from Arab Gulf states.

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One of the most critical aspects of the political changes affecting Egypt and the Arab World in the postcolonial period, particularly after the death of leftist nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, was the increased influence of Western financial and economic control in the area. This was largely enhanced by major shifts of economic policies in many Arab countries, from ones that largely favored building a strong, long-term base for agricultural and industrial development and productivity during the direct post-independence era, toward an economic emphasis that privileged open-market dynamics and abided by the rules of international finance capital as regulated by the International World Bank. Within this economic political thrust, Egyptian and Arab economies since the 1980s have witnessed increased dependence on service and consumer-oriented Arab Gulf investments. In turn (as the historically leading base of cultural production and consumption in the Arab World), Egypt's own media and film industries swiftly began to feel the effects of equally major shifts in the cultural sectors, directly resulting from the new and increasing role being played by investors from Gulf states. The consequences here were not only restricted to the financial and economic independence of the cultural sectors as well as its independent practitioners but were also felt in the quality, politics, aesthetics, and the cultural discourse of the country and the region as a whole.

Chahine's film intrusively depicts various early aspects of the systemic changes impacting the Egyptian media and film industries since the early 1980s and directly cites the fast, dominating control by Arab Gulf producers over these industries. Chahine uses this background to explore the changes affecting his own artistic and love life. In the film, when Yehia realizes that Amr (his leading actor) is never coming back to him, he blames the breakup on a petrodollar that has seduced Amr into working for a Gulf state-sponsored and second-rate TV soap opera.

As with his earlier autobiographical films, *Alexandria, Again and Forever* plays like a docudrama (but this time, with Chahine playing himself as Yehia), in which the filmmaker's depiction of his personal experiences, despairs, and anxieties, as well as his hopes and aspirations, are reconciled within loosely connected cinematic episodes of fantasy and reality. *Alexandria, Again and Forever* incorporates the generic conventions of melodramas, musicals, comedies, and cartoons, with a seemingly unsystematic swapping between settings and time frames. But on the whole, most scenes in the film operate like dreams that are largely part of a sequential whole and occasionally bear some elements of organization. In this respect, these dreams find themselves reduced to parenthesis—just like a memory arrogating to itself the right to quote from dreams and to ignore the actual transition—hence, depicting for us a series of dreams rather than one dream.

Within this latitude, the film utilizes surrealist strategies and conventions, taking the shape of freely juxtaposed cinematic episodes of fantasy and veracity. By way of presenting the filmmaker's interpretation of his own personal and political experiences and outlooks, the film employs visual and elemental dislocations and distortions. As such, the film paints a surrealistic rendering of tensions between the personal and the collective, as well as between the sexual and the national, all in the context of the wider transformations affecting contemporary Egyptian and Arab struggles for social and political liberation.

The film consistently provides an interactive link between the private and the public spheres. More specifically, it relentlessly superimposes social and political imaginaries over the private spheres of sexual libido and personal hopes and anxieties, to the extent that distinguishing between these elements becomes virtually impossible. Creating a fluid inter-passage between the personal and the political through a nuanced depiction of struggles for personal liberation under postcolonial conditions, the film incorporates a non-normative sexual discourse, which specifically marks postcolonial challenges and tensions between the personal and the collective, as well as between the sexual and the national.

Certainly, the rendering of bisexual and non-normative desire in *Alexandria, Again and Forever* is more subtle and contained than that found in Western cinemas of the late 1980s. Furthermore, Chahine's renderings are nowhere near as explicit as those celebrated in classical Arabic literature and poetry (*viz.*, the work of seventh-century Arab poet Abu Nuwas, as referenced by Pasolini in his 1974 film *Arabian Nights*). Nevertheless, Yehia's desire transgresses and subverts the bouderies of gender and age, as poetically as any of the classic scribes.

Through Yehia, the alter ego of the filmmaker, Chahine consistently "collapses" any definitions that presuppose sexual limitations and boundaries. Instead, Yehia projects a collage of interchangeable desires within which Chahine's own subjectivity assumes a constantly recurring visual and thematic motifs. An example of this can be seen in a scopophilic sequence that indulges foot-fetish titillation.

After Yehia asks Nadia why she is walking barefoot and she answers, "It's good for the arch," a surreal fantasy scene ensues: Yehia is directing *Anthony and Cleopatra* with Yehia and Nadia starring in the leading roles. When Anthony/Yehia protests that his official statue in Alexandria makes him look flat-footed, the sculptor suggests that he should audition forty male models in order to choose the most beautiful feet to replicate for the statue. But when Nadia slyly enters her foot into the blind competition, Anthony chooses hers as the one with the most beautiful arch. In the final shot of this surreal episode, we see Anthony swimming, disoriented, bumping into another male swimmer. Upon reaching the other man, he staggers toward him with an embrace and a kiss, calling him "Cleopatra." With his typical economy of scale, Chahine effectively transforms the legendary couple's love story into an utterly whimsical game of desire, with Anthony recast as the capricious bisexual Yehia.

The Anthony and Cleopatra sequence, in particular, has the ambiance of a celebration of the filmmaker's capacity to shift fluidly between sexual fantasies, occasionally using fetishism as a mischievous mediator between unpredictable desires. As such, the filmmaker's queer subjectivity

operates in an evolving intergeneric articulation of the eroticism of transgression. In addition to their queer allusions, these scenes also titillate Chahine's struggle to locate his own ego within the shifting embodiments of his desire. Just like in the surrealist aesthetic, Chahine's film is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations in the omnipotence of a dream and in the disinterested play of thought.

As actors and artists, Amr and Nadia function as elements in Chahine's alter ego—his Pygmalions—as, on another level, does the character of Yehia. In addition to indulging the filmmaker's queer subjectivity, this triad of alter egos allows Chahine the freedom to choose—or blend—feminine and masculine sensibilities, youth and age, the performative and the disciplined within the paradigmatic sphere that shepherds Chahine's playful transgressions. This anti-normative sense of the erotic guides the filmmaker's novel approach to expressions of sexuality in a film where sexual identities and desires resist containment. Thus, Yehia's sexuality does not reflect some natural essence but rather is rendered as an excessive and erratic construction and deconstruction of itself.

From a postcolonial perspective, however, Chahine's cinematic transgressions can also be seen as manifestations of the ambivalence that functions at sites of neocolonial dominance, where cultural processes are always most productive when they are most ambivalent. Hybrid subjectivities within these sites tend to produce their own slippages, excesses and differences, but as a consequence they are able to establish themselves as sites for the relentless struggle imbedded in the various planes of personal, social, and political resistance.

In *Alexandria, Again and Forever*, Chahine uses Yehia's personal drama to reflect upon the tensions between—and intersections of—the personal, the collective, and the political, as they interact and collide within a postcolonial setting. When Yehia/Chahine first dances with Amr in a fantasy of overwhelming joy after receiving the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for his film *Alexandria...Why?*, the sequence reflects the dynamics of their relationship, as one manifest through emptiness and entangled by the tensions

between unity and competition, love and control. Isolated on a nearly barren, snow-covered sound stage, they break into a dance routine à la Gene Kelly and Ginger Rogers.

The camera moves around a minimalist setting and under a cold, bluish lighting scheme, allowing for a dreamlike feel to the interaction between the couple, their relationship, and Yehia/Chahine's struggle with his alter ego. The choreography itself keeps Yehia and Amr at the center of the frame, but it also intermittently pulls them apart into two performative solitudes, foreshadowing their imminent parting. Furthermore, and despite his youthful vigor, Amr's dancing allows him just enough freedom to remain within the filmmaker's orbit, as he emulates a male bird flapping his wings to impress his female object of desire. The scene also incorporates a brief talk about Chahine/Yehia, the dreams of playing Hamlet in his youth years, and his dreams for his partner/alter ego.

In addition to playing on the subversive utility of sexual identity, the sequence also juxtaposes cultural references and identities to focus on the artist as a postcolonial subject: the dancing takes place in a snowy European city (Berlin) and plays to the tune of a song from a canonical American musical and its stars. Toward the end of the routine, and in yet another postcolonial moment, Yehia tells Amr of his lifelong obsession with playing Hamlet, as inspired by the final performance of the role by Sir John Gielgud in 1940s colonial Cairo.

In addition to the fact that Gielgud's performance of Hamlet is also considered among the earliest queer interpretations of this role, the scene dislocates and juxtaposes photographic shots of the presumed Gielgud performance with the photo of a teenaged Chahine playing the same role. This is intercut with a black-and-white clip of Amr playing the role of Chahine among the audience in the original Gielgud performance of Hamlet. In this complex display of time and space, as well as characters, the postcolonial present is consistently destabilized and interrogated by its contiguous relationship with its colonial past, as the present moment is consistently suspended by colonial memory.

As with other postcolonial texts of surreal nuances, the subjectivity of the body in *Alexandria, Again and Forever* stands metonymically for all visible signs of difference and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription: American cinema, the American musical, the American song, the British actor, the queer actor, the old filmmaker, the young actor, the alter ego, the staged Berlin setting and the Egyptian dancing couple, the colonized and the colonizer, the past and the present.

The drive here is to provide a sensory space and threshold within which cultural differences articulate and actually produce once-imagined constructions of cultural and national identity. In this multiple deconstruction and reconstruction of subjectivities, Chahine's own image carries the heavy legacy of colonial power as instigator of hybridization, rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of Egyptian and Arab history. The scene achieves this by taking up basic characteristics of the colonial canonical text and unveiling them, thereby subverting the text of postcolonial hegemonic discourse and exposing its underlying assumptions. What at first glance appears to be colonial servility (mimicry), on closer inspection is revealed to be a sly form of resistance. As once surrealist Pierre Reverdy once observed, "the more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality." 3

Hybrid subjectivities and textual elements and references within Chahine's filmic text are constantly dislocated and distorted. This enables a form of subversion, founded on an unpredictability that turns the discursive conditions of hegemonic dominance under postcolonial conditions into grounds that are open for political negotiation and intervention. Even implied sites of tension between the private and the political, imagined in the unconscious world of the dreamlike scenes in the film, are dramatically developed in the end into

vehicles advocating concrete social and political action.

Chahine, clearly, opts to suggest a resolution to these tensions. The reconciliation of the private and the public is explicitly marked in the final scene of the film. As Yehia/Chahine aims his camera to record a meeting of the Union of Egyptian Film Artists, it is Nadia who is captured through Chahine's camera lens as his new object of desire, her hopeful face emerging from a crowd of militant artists singing the national anthem, following a fiery meeting to protest the government's attempts to break their union. As the final film credits roll, we learn that Chahine has dedicated the film "to the struggle of Egyptian artists for democracy." Once again, rather than the grand anticolonial metanarrative, the film favors proliferations of difference, juxtapositions, dislocation, and distortions seen not as embodiments of a single truth but rather as energized political and aesthetic forms of a collective project for revamping Egyptian and Arab identity and reality.

In many ways, Chahine stands, like André Breton did, to maintain that the activity of interpreting the world must continue to be linked with the activity of changing it. As such, the role of Chahine in the film becomes that of studying the political condition in depth and reinterpreting it in all its multiple, paradoxical, and seemingly "chaotic" manifestations, the goal being to build up his ability (and consequently the ability of the viewer) to absorb the complexity and the impending value for "changing the world."

Notes

1. Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination". In *For Marx*, Verso, 1985, p. 79.
2. Pierre Reverdy, quoted in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 20.

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