Creators Meet Censors

The Standoff between Creators and Censorship in Post-2011 Egyptian Drama

By Joseph Fahim

The summer of 2017 unmasked a turning point in Egyptian cinema: it is when the Egyptian state propaganda seems to have finally succeeded in steamrolling the entertainment and film industry. In recent years, habitual reports of lawless murders, torture, and countless human rights violations have caused the local police's popularity to significantly drop. Despite that, Egyptian cinema was churning out some of the biggest pro-police narratives in recent years, including the highly popular TV series *Kalabsh* (Handcuffs) and the box-office smash *El-Khaleya* (The Cell), to name a few, alongside a multitude of forthcoming projects.

In its recent history, Egyptian entertainment has shown a considerable engagement with reality, tackling some of the hot-button issues of the day within the boundaries set by former regimes. Issues such as state corruption to the institutionalization of religion were on the table. Not since the heyday of the monarchy (the early days of Egyptian cinema in the 1930s and 1940s) has mainstream cinema become so detached from reality as it is today. Aside from the rare stab at some of the state-affiliated institutions like in the 2016 film *Mawlana* (The Preacher) with its censure of government-sponsored preachers, cinema in particular has become increasingly domesticated, comprised primarily of disposable entertainment free of the sociopolitical subtext that distinguished previous-era films and serials.

The chilling state of the Egyptian entertainment industry today is worlds apart from the euphoric stint following the January 25 uprising in 2011. That was a time when the role of censorship was diminished; when many political boundaries were broken. Open denunciation of the Hosni Mubarak regime became the norm and heated confrontation with the subsequent Muslim Brotherhood (MB) rulers could not be prevented. Even the army was tactfully and briefly attacked in a few works. But the

▷ Poster of Tamer El Said's film "In the Last Days of the City," 2016. *Zawya Distribution/ Everett Collection*

66 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
Forum
آخر أيام المدينة
IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY
A Film by Tamer El Said
ZERO PRODUCTION in co-production with SUNNYLAND FILMS, MENGAMUK FILMS & AUTONOMOUS PRESENT 'IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY'
KHALID ABDALLA, LAILA SAMY, HANAN YOUSSEF, MARYAM SALEH, HAYDER HELO, BASIM HAJAR, BASSEM FAYAD, ALY SOBHY, ISLAM KAMAL, MOHAMED GABER with ZEINAB MOSTAFA, ETIMAD ALI HASSAN & ABLA FADILA editor MOHAMED A. GAWAD, VARTAN AVAKIAN & BARBARA BOSSUET music by AMÉLIE LEGRAND & VICTOR MOÏSE costumes ZEINA KIWAN art director YASSER EL HUSSEINY

veneer of optimism that imbued the nation's cinema in 2011 and 2012 swiftly morphed into cynicism and suspicion. Political instability, the rise and fall of the MB, and the collapse of the opposition had thrown the country into disarray before the military reassumed full power. In consequence, censorship quickly took root in a manner unseen since the reign of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

At its core, this is a story of the power struggle between the Egyptian state and a billion-dollar industry that has gained enormous social and political leverage over the past few years. To date, the entertainment industry, television or film alike, has continued to prosper on a staggering scale, breaking viewership records with each passing year. The billions pouring into cinema and television have transformed the industry into a gigantic enterprise—too big, too powerful for the current regime to fully control.

This power struggle translated into a standoff between the creators and storytellers, and the authority, manifested both directly in the censorship body, and indirectly via various new supervision bodies (the Higher Council for Organizing Media and the General Council for Drama Organization), not to mention the covert influence of the Ministry of Interior and other state institutions. This resulted in severe compromises, confusion, and great stubbornness from both camps. For example, a number of drama makers were forced to scrap their projects altogether. Some were compelled to offer apologies for the remotest send-up of the current regime while others refused to bend to the regime's pressure. While it would appear that the regime has gained the upper hand, in reality, it is one battle won in a grand war with no end in sight.

The 2011 Buildup

In the final years of the Mubarak era, the film industry was hit by several fluctuations. The two largest conglomerates monopolizing cinema—Oscar–Al-Nasr–Al-Massa and Al-Arabia—were hindering the progress of the Arab World's biggest, and only, film industry. Box-office grosses were shrinking and the stocks of the country's biggest action and comedy stars were gradually falling. Meanwhile, the labor movement, several counter-culture movements, as well as continuous civil unrest, were brewing—the popular hunger for realism became irrepressible.

The unabashed star director of this period was Khaled Youssef, iconic Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's protégé and self-appointed spokesperson of the poor and the marginalized. Throughout a number of pictures beginning with *Kheyana Mashroua* (Legitimized Infidelity) in 2006 and ending with *Dokkan Shehata* (Shehata's Store) in 2009, Youssef created a misshapen body of work exploring the lower class' disgruntlement with poverty, corruption, and police brutality. The most prophetic manifestation of Youssef's vision came with *Heya Fawda* (Chaos, This Is), a sensationalist melodrama

co-directed with Youssef Chahine that depicts the residents of a middle-class neighborhood rising up against the lawless police officers ruling their district.

It was the independent film wave, however, that acted as a precursor to the uprising. Films by Ahmad Abdalla (*Heliopolis*, 2009 and *Microphone*, 2011) and Ibrahim El-Batout (*Ein Shams*, 2008 and *Hawi*, 2010) captured the sense of overriding despair and stagnancy that defined the second half of the 2000s in Egypt and upturned Youssef's or the mainstream cinema's sensationalism. Characters in these films were largely the angry middle class trying to find their place in a country living on borrowed time. Composed of washed-out colors, the digital photography employed in these films injected an apocalyptic feel into their narratives. Even in *Microphone*—the most upbeat of these films—there is a pervading sense of helplessness.

Microphone was released in Egyptian theaters on January 25, 2011, the day Egypt's largest uprising began. A month later, the Egyptian entertainment landscape would change for good.

Revolution Mania

For one brief year, an unprecedented window of freedom opened up for artists. A wave of shoddily made, celebratory works would surface in the wake of Mubarak's overthrow—reactionary, short-sighted films presenting watered-down chronicles of the eighteen days of the uprising. Among the various films of this group were Tamer Ezzat, Ayten Amin, and Amr Salama's three-part documentary *Al Tayeb, Wal Shares, Wal Seyasi* (The Good, the Bad, and the Politician); the anthology film *18 Yom*, which translates as 18 days (now blocked from screening by the censorship board); and Ahmed Rashwan's *Mawloud Fi 25 Yanayer* (Born on the 25th of January). These films—along with older productions such as *Sarkhet Namla (*The Scream of an Ant) and *El-Fagoumy* whose endings were embarrassingly altered to incorporate the events of the uprising—offered linear, oversimplified storylines compressing the highly complex events of the revolution into easily digestible narratives permeated with transient certainty rarely detected in subsequent films. Distinct in these films were the close endings that cast no doubt over any possible political or social disruption.

A more sobering look at the uprising was illustrated in El-Batout's Venice Film Fest contender, *El Shetta Elly Fat* (Winter of Discontent, 2012). A tale of redemption centered around a traumatized ex-political prisoner who comes back to life with the 2011 protests, the film ends with a long text superimposed over a black screen detailing the abuses and violations committed by the military in the wake of Mubarak's overthrow.

The most inquisitive picture of the period though was Yousry Nasrallah's Cannes competition nominee, *Baad Al-Mawkea* (After the Battle). Set in the immediate aftermath of January 2011, the film centers on the unlikely romance between an upper

middle-class activist and a blue-collar camel rider, who was ostracized from his community after taking part in the notorious "Battle of the Camel" (a pivotal day of the uprising when men riding camels and horses attacked the Tahrir Square protesters). Interspersed with documentary footage of the impassioned activist movements, Nasrallah's largely misunderstood film aptly captures the zeitgeist of the era: the desire to break socioeconomic and sexual barriers, the growing rigidness of the left, and the rise of the deep state.

Most notably, Nasrallah challenges the legitimacy of the revolution narrative, questioning the streamlined historical chronicle of an event with interminable unanswered questions. Nasrallah casts doubt on the clear-cut heroes and villains of the post-Mubarak era. He sheds a light on the lesser-known beneficiaries of the revolution and asserts the impossibility of reaching the full truth behind what happened on those fateful eighteen days. The film concludes with the bleakest ending in all revolution films, as the rider is accidentally injured in the Maspero demonstration in the first, and only, time where the Coptic Christian massacre would be depicted on Egyptian screens . . . the last time the transgressions of the military are scrutinized.

Television dramas also capitalized on the revolution mania, offering long-form narratives exploring the decaying pre-2011 culture that led to the uprising. Examples from the 2012 slate include the Belal Fadl-penned *El-Heroob* (The Getaway), Adel Adeeb's *Bab El-Khalk*, and Mohammed Bakir's *Taraf Thaleth* (Third Party). Enjoying more time, and arguably more freedom, to develop their characters and plotlines, the first roster of the post-2011 TV dramas offered more depth and insight than their cinematic counterparts, even if the mood remained deceptively upbeat at the end of every story.

The Mood Darkens

With the start of Muslim Brotherhood rule in the second half of 2011 and the election of Mohamed Morsi the following year, the tone of the stories grew darker. The limitless buoyancy of spirit found in earlier films would soon be replaced by skepticism and anxiety; the idealism of the uprising would fade and be upended by moral uncertainty.

The MB-era films were tinged with growing weariness toward the economic instability and distrust of the conservative, political establishment. Mainstream movies such as Sameh Abdelaziz's *Tatah* and Amr Arafa's *Samir Abol Nil* tapped into this sentiment. *Tatah* took a step toward presenting scattershot criticism of the police and the self-centered opposition, while Arafa's picture criticized the duplicitous, manipulative media. The Egypt of both films is one governed by chaos and insecurity, a country of worn-out citizens in search of stability, guidance, and saving.

The same ubiquitous sense of bedlam and confusion also informs Ahmad Abdalla's near-wordless *Farsh we Ghata* (Rags and Tatters, 2013), an impressionistic snapshot of the immediate aftermath of the uprising. Dispensing with the romanticism of the

earlier revolution films, Abdalla's indie paints a stark picture of the Egyptian society, one ravaged by violence, disquiet, and fear. The Egypt Abdalla depicts bears more resemblance to today's Egypt than the one of 2011. The mistrust and paranoia Abdalla evokes so subtly would prove to be prophetic, heralding the failure of the uprising and the subsequent wave of sanctioned violence.

While films of this period primarily relied on suggestion and caricature, television forcefully engaged with the more explicit concerns of the day. Most artists began to confront the growing threat of the MB and political Islam. The two most obvious examples were Mohamed Gamal Al-Adl's *Al-Daeya* (The Preacher) about a young Islamic televangelist who falls in love with a violin player, and the Waheed Hamed-scripted *Bedoon Zekr Asmaa* (Without Mentioning Names) that charts the rise of Wahhabism in the 80s. Both serials capitalized on the sharp decline in popularity of the MB, painting a largely black and white picture of an enormous brainwashed, self-serving sect that uses religion to quench its thirst for power and money. Most dramatists chose to vilify the MB leaders by showing the contradiction between Islam and how they practiced it. They are shown to misinterpret Islamic scriptures rather than adhere to deeply held convictions that grew out of an Egyptian-specific Islamic identity. Hamed's timidly met 2017 sequel to the 2010 series, *Al-Gamaa* (The Brotherhood), which tracks the rise of the group, adopts the same strategy—a formula that would become the guiding norm in depicting the MB on screen.

Slipping through the cracks of an exceptionally lenient censorship was Mohammed Yassin's serial *Moga Hara* (Heat Wave), an immensely daring account of Egypt's dingy underworld that frankly tackled hugely risqué topics such as polyamory, homosexuality, and sex work through the story of a violent cop and his young revolutionary brother. Amid the suffocating fears from the possible Islamization of Egypt, the unabashedly liberal, surprisingly progressive *Moga Hara* emerged out of nowhere as a sudden slap on the face, openly presenting everything the MB were adamant on eliminating.

June 30 and the Diminishing Window of Freedom

The police storming of the MB's protest camp on August 14, which led to the deaths of more than a thousand Brotherhood supporters and the eventual election of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, marked a turning point for freedom of expression. New taboos for drama would emerge: the military, presidency, and judiciary could not be criticized; the Muslim Brotherhood could not be sympathetically depicted; the cinematic representation of loose moral conduct could no longer be tolerated.

Signs of new restrictions arrived in April 2014, only a couple of months before El- Sisi's election. A film production starring Lebanese sex icon Haifa Wehbe, *Halawet Roh* (Beauty of Rooh)—a remake of Giuseppe Tornatore's 2000 Oscar-nominated

Maléna—was pulled from theaters on orders of Egypt's then-prime minister, Ibrahim Mahlab. Already, the movie was topping the local box-office within ten days of its release, scoring more than 1 million Egyptian pounds, or approximately $140 thousand.

Although the film was eventually re-released after winning the court case, Mahlab had ordered the film to be sent back to the censorship authority—even though it had already passed it without substantial cuts—for review. As a result, the then newly appointed head of censorship, Ahmed Awwad, resigned in protest, propelling various intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers to herald Mahlab's decision as the start of a new dark age for Egyptian cinema.

This would also mark the beginning of many confrontations between drama creators and El-Sisi's regime, represented by the censorship body, administrative force, and various independent agents fighting to impose a new set of moral codes that do not essentially deviate from the MB's prematurely halted policies. The first two years of El-Sisi's presidency were characterized by nationalist fervor and extreme anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiment. Testing the new boundaries of censorship, film and TV makers steered away from politics, channeling their efforts into largely apolitical social dramas and diverting entertainment.

One of the last major TV productions to tackle the uprising was Mariam Abou-Ouf's *Embratoryet Meen*? (Whose Empire?), a satire chronicling the aftermath of the uprising, leading up to the end of the MB reign in 2013. Uniform in tone and consciously superficial and one-dimensional, *Embratoryet Meen?* closely follows the government-sponsored narrative of the time, refraining from discrediting the uprising, highlighting the subsequent disarray, and blaming the MB for the country's economic fallout.

Embratoryet Meen? aside, the most revealing aspect of this period was not what was being presented in dramas but rather what was not. Any reference to the military was gone; criticism of the police was kept to a minimum; the uprising became the elephant in the room, central events the dramas could revolve around but never openly discuss or dissect.

Several oppositional voices from the entertainment industry were silenced, witch-hunted, or exiled. TV satirist Bassem Youssef was the most famous example, but several film stars such as Amr Waked, Mohammed Attiya, and Khaled Abol Naga, along with writer Belal Fadl, met the same fate. Abol Naga in particular received the most heat. After criticizing the military and El-Sisi at the Cairo Film Festival in 2014, a media maelstrom erupted in the wake of his statements, transforming him into box-office poison. Since 2014, Abol Naga has not been featured in any Egyptian films or serials.

Another victim of El-Sisi's expansive crackdown was *Ahl Eskenderya* (The People of Alexandria), directed by Khairy Bishara, and written by Fadl. A multi-character series set in 2010 prior to the outbreak of the uprising, the serial touches upon police desecrations, the media's closely knit relationship with the Mubarak regime,

and corruption of the business elite. For reasons undisclosed to date, the 22 million Egyptian pound-budget series was prohibited from broadcast—a sign of the regime's intolerance toward any criticism, several commentators have interpreted.

But it wasn't until 2016 that the regime would show its true colors with a series of direct and indirect bans that cast any doubt about the new regime's agenda aside. During El-Sisi's first year, in an attempt to show itself as open and democratic, the government gave shooting permits to a limited number of controversial films. The first was Mohamed Diab's *Eshtebak* (Clash), a multi-character drama set entirely in a police van shortly after the June 30 military takeover. A shallow, reductive treatment of a severely divided Egypt of the time, the film, nonetheless, offers a rare sympathetic depiction of the Muslim Brotherhood for the first and last time since 2013. The other film was Swedish-Egyptian Tarik Saleh's, *The Nile Hilton Incident*, a noir thriller about police corruption set on the eve of the uprising. Both films met inhospitable fates the following year.

The state security, according to Saleh, forced him to suspend production and move it to Morocco, which was used as a stand-in for Cairo. The Sundance award-winning film has not been screened anywhere in Egypt thus far. In the case of *Eshtebak*, director Diab was accused in state media of tarnishing Egypt's reputation and advocating reconciliation with the Muslim Brotherhood (it was broadcast shortly after the film opened in Cannes' "Un Certain Regard" competition).

The uproar surrounding Diab and his producer, Islamic scholar Moez Masoud, did not thwart *Eshtebak*'s release in theaters, however. With the backing of mega Egyptian star Nelly Karim and the successful commercial record of the director and scriptwriter, the film proved too big for the regime to kill. However, it marked the first of the many battles between the entertainment industry's robust commercial force and the El-Sisi administration.

If the more controversial *Eshtebak* could pass censorship, observers believed, so could Tamer El Said's *Akher Ayam El-Madina* (In the Last Days of the City). El Said's nine-years-in-the-making debut feature is a loose, formless record of life under the last days of Mubarak—a panorama of young lost souls trying to make sense of their dying city. Apart from an overuse of the "Down with the military rule" chant, *Akher Ayam* remains mostly apolitical, capturing the smothering frustration and transformation of Cairo but never taking a swipe at any political institution.

But it did not pass censorship. Less than a month before it was scheduled to premiere in Egypt at the Cairo International Film Festival, the festival's management pulled it, claiming that El Said breached their agreement by participating in more festivals than agreed before Cairo. The management of the festival, which is entirely financed by the Ministry of Culture, attested that censorship had no influence in the matter and that their decision had nothing to do with the film's content.

To date, the censorship board has not given the film approval. Its cinema release in April last year was delayed and later scrapped altogether. Many suspect that El Said's role in Mosireen—the non-profit media collective founded after the uprising to document its aftermath, including military violations—could be one reason why the film failed to win the fight with censorship. Another is the vocal support of former presidential nominee and staunch critic of El-Sisi, Mohamed ElBaradei, of the movie. Without the backing of a major producer or a film star, *Akher Ayam* failed to win its fight with censorship in spite of the widely empathetic international press. Shrewdly, the censorship authority of the new regime does not issue straightforward ban decrees; instead, it refrains from delivering any verdict at all to avoid being accused of stifling artistic freedoms.

Over the past year, the conflict between the regime and the mushrooming entertainment industry has intensified. In a speech given in May last year, El-Sisi criticized Egyptian cinema's depiction of slum areas, vowing to disallow any negative representations of the country's destitute districts and their inhabitants. A few months after El-Sisi's speech, the Sobky brothers were forced to change the title of their lighthearted comedy *Ashan Khargeen* (Because We're Going Out) for its suggestive sexual innuendos. Meanwhile, the duo's heavily promoted action film *Gawab Etekal* (Arrest Letter) was held from release after the censorship board demanded multiple changes over the final cut. The Sobkys eventually prevailed: the film—which presents a complicated, three-dimensional picture of its MB protagonist, a feat that did not go down well with the censorship—was later released.

Money, again and again, would prove be the only force the regime cannot conquer. The Higher Council for Organizing Media, an organization set up by the president in 2016 to act as a supportive body of censorship, has incessantly attempted to control the content of entertainment, only for producers to throw their notes out of the window. Thus, in the last Ramadan season, more risqué subjects involving sex and sexuality, deviant behavior and dysfunctional relationships have been introduced, sidestepping both the official censorship and the council. The gigantic amount of money invested in these productions make them principally immune to censorship. Directors and producers are succeeding in pushing censorship limits without breaking the aforementioned taboos of this period such as not criticizing military, presidency, and judiciary, to name a few.

Recognizing the growing influence of the entertainment industry, the regime, this year, pushed out a number of works that glorify Egyptian police and dismantle the decades-old brutal image of the Ministry of Interior workers. These include *El- Kheroog* (The Exit), *Saba Arwah* (Seven Souls) and *Shehadet Milad* (Birth Certificate), *Zel El-Rais* (The President's Shadow), *Al-Hossan Al-Aswad* (Black Horse), and especially *Kalabsh*. Released in 2017, the show portrays policemen as self-sacrificing, law-abiding civil servants struggling to fight the corruption and aggression of post-2011 Egypt. The makers

of these dramas blame police brutality on low-ranking police officers, who are framed instead for committing the countless violations that continue to make headlines today.

Class, in other words, is the main factor separating the good cops from the few bad seeds. Class plays an even more palpable role in Tarek El-Eryan's *El-Khaleya,* an action thriller centering on a police officer pursuing the terrorist cell responsible for the death of his colleague. The policeman, dashing film star Ahmed Ezz, is portrayed as a rich playboy whose vengeful impulses are offset by his morally strict colleague, a well-off detective. The source of wealth for these men is unknown, but the conclusion drawn from these serials and films collectively is this: hunger for money, and not necessarily power, is that what corrupts, and that's why the low-ranking police officers are more liable to commit violations rather than their educated, financially stable superiors.

News reports of course, which implicate policemen of different rankings and backgrounds in the unremitting abuses, prove otherwise. For the shooting of the film, El-Eryan admitted that members of the ministry of interior's special operations unit were used as extras; the ministry also helped El-Eryan in securing the shooting permits.

The success of *El-Khaleya* and *Kalabsh* have encouraged more filmmakers to tap into the same nationalist sentiment. According to reports, a gigantic production documenting the period between January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 is in the making. The film is reported to highlight the role of the military in ridding Egypt of the MB threat. Furthermore, the military seems to be taking on some cultural production of its own. The department of Morale Affairs, part of the Egyptian Armed Forces, has announced plans of collaborating on a new film about the 1973 October War hero Ibrahim Al-Rifai. A former spokesman for the Armed Forces is allegedly involved in a newly established production company called Bright Future.

Not since the heyday of Nasser has the relationship between art and the state been so closely intertwined. Cinema is moving away from politics and social problems while television has become the greater reflector of reality. In engaging with current social reality, television has, therefore, become the more potent, more politically charged platform where the battle of influencing public opinion is fought. In the absence of opposition media, TV dramas could also acquire more importance than before. As mounting battles with censorship will ensue, millionaire producers are conjuring different ways to work around the system.

However, the vast majority of mainstream filmmakers are caving in to the demands of the regime, adhering to the representations fed by the authorities, and churning out mindless entertainment. Lacking the big bucks, small, independent cinema, with its critical, leftist leanings, is expected to continue fighting the censorship battle. Indie filmmakers will continue to tussle with censorship, as small-time producers face the possibility of pulling out of the business altogether. The battle between El-Sisi's regime and dramamakers may have been settled on the film front; in television, however, the fight wages on.