

Egyptian Cinema-Industry. A Brief Historical Overview

Egypt was the first country in Africa and the Middle East to establish a film-industry. Film screenings took place as early as 1896 when the works by the Lumière Brothers were presented in Alexandria and Cairo. Still under foreign rule, Egypt was the only colony in which the production of news-reels and short-films by the local population was possible; first reports about productions date back to 1909.

Gaining control over culture, education and economy is a core element of any anti-colonial struggle. After the country's formal independence in 1922 an Egyptian, thus national, infrastructure was set up gradually. As early as 1925 nationalist entrepreneur Talaat Harb, founder of *Misr (Egypt) Bank*, set up *Misr Company for Acting and Cinema (Studio Misr)* as one of many investment sectors of his bank. Against this backdrop it becomes evident that Egyptian cinema has been extremely commercial from its very beginning.

In 1952 *The Free Officers Movement* made a military coup d'état and started what is known as the 23rd of July Revolution, which abolished the monarchy and established a republic. Step by step the industry was nationalized and with it, in the 1960s, the cinema sector. Scarce financing as well as the spread of TV caused a dramatic decline of the once flourishing Egyptian cinema in the following years.

In the 1960s the Egyptian film organization produced, like equivalent bodies in other socialist states, realist films in order to confront the problems within society and to educate the people.

After Nasser's death Anwar el Sadat implemented economic reforms that encouraged domestic and foreign investment in private entrepreneurship. As far as film-production is concerned, the cinema sector was de facto privatized again while TV remained state-owned. Hence public production in the 1980s and 90s was limited to TV-Movies, which were also distributed in cinemas, while private companies produced commercial films mainly for the markets in the Gulf.

Private producers faced (until this current revolution) the same bureaucratic hurdles as in the period of the nationalized cinema sector. Despite approval from the censor, film-makers need a permit from the film-makers syndicate in order to receive a shooting permit from the police. The permit by the film-makers syndicate can cost between 10.000 and 25.000 USD, transparent rules do not exist. To maintain a permit one has, officially, to be a member of the syndicate, which is only possible for those who studied cinema. Other applicants have to pay higher fees, yet not everybody is given the much needed paper. The procedure of applications and payments for permits is in addition necessary for every member of cast and crew of a film - also here the rules are not clear. For theatrical release of the movie only the approval of the censorship is needed.

Over the past five years a growing number of film-makers began to ignore these rules and produces outside the official structure. Some ignore part of the regulations to ease up their lives, others declare their dissent publicly. This emancipation is called independent film-making in Egypt and refers to a rejection of, or sometimes revolt against, the control of the state. Independent film-making in Egypt does not necessarily mean that the narrative or the form of the film challenges commercial or escapist way of telling a story.

The fact that four independent feature length fiction films were released in Egyptian cinemas since 2009 shows that taking an alternative route is possible. It also leads to question if it is only the formal control that makes diversity in film-making impossible or if it is a general atmosphere that restricts creativity to a degree that the idea of working outside the official system does not even come to ones mind.

The following articles from Arab newspapers give two examples of independent film-making, they talk about the directors' approaches to their way of working and give insight to the debate in Egypt.

(Irit Neidhardt. In: Traces of Change in Egypt. A moderated program of short-films, trailers and video-letters by independent filmmakers from Egypt. Friday, February 18th, 4-6pm, Arsenal 2, Potsdamer Platz. Presskit, mec film, Berlin 2011)

Cairo Premiere Ends Two-Year Battle

The National - May 07, 2009

Article By Nadia abou el Magd, Foreign Correspondent

The award-winning movie Ain Shams (Eye of the Sun) played to an Egyptian audience for the first time on Tuesday, ending a two-year battle for it to be shown.

"Showing the movie in Egypt is a miracle," said Ibrahim al Batout, the co-script writer and director. "It's a great victory, not only for us but for independent, low-budget filmmakers in Egypt."

The 90-minute movie focuses on an 11-year-old girl, Shams, and her life in one of Cairo's poorest neighbourhoods, also called Shams.

The girl's dream is to visit downtown, which she pictures to be as beautiful as the photos in her English textbook. Her father, who works long hours as a private driver to a wealthy businessman, takes her on her dream trip just before she dies of leukaemia.

Her brother, who is born after her death, is also named Shams.

The film, which has scenes of the US-led invasion of Iraq, looks into the Egyptian political system and the relationships among Middle East countries.

The problems getting the film shown were not about content, but about lacking the needed script approval and interior ministry permissions to film the movie, according to Ali Abu Shadi, Egypt's director of censorship.

"They came to us after they filmed the movie, ignoring all the rules," Mr Abu Shadi said. "They should have got approval from us on the script first, then from interior ministry to film in the streets, and then show it to us after being filmed."

But al Batout said that still amounted to censorship.

"I don't believe in censorship. I don't believe that I have to give my script, which are my ideas, to anyone to tell me that he approves of my way of thinking and it's OK to go ahead," al Batout said while at a mall on Tuesday where his film was being shown to an invited audience.

"I believe in a different system of filmmaking, which I followed – I took my own digital camera, and filmed in Iraq and here, and the result is the first such made film in Egyptian history that finally the ordinary Egyptian audience will be able to see."

The final scene of Ain Shams depicts the arrest of the crew for filming without permission.

Al Batout worked in Ain Shams as a news cameraman documenting riots against the police there in the 1980s. He was shot in his right arm in Aug 1988. The scar of the injury was visible under the black T-shirt he was wearing at the premiere.

Al Batout, 45, went on to become a documentary filmmaker, covering 12 wars and conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Europe. He was shot again in Bosnia in 1993. In 2004 he "returned to Cairo feeling disenchanted by the world and my work".

Ain Shams is al Batout's second film. His first, Ithaki, about a war cameraman, produced in 2005, was shown only in cultural centres here. "The world of fictional film reinstated my love for the camera," he said.

Produced by Film House, an Egyptian production company, it cost 300,000 Egyptian pounds (Dh196,219) to make.

Ain Shams started showing in four cinemas in Cairo and three in Alexandria in late shows on Wednesday after another snag with the censorship, which did not give the cinemas its clearance label that has to be shown at the beginning of the movie.

"The censor's office wanted to see the film again before issuing its final licence to be shown in cinemas, but they were also giving us a hard time till the last minute," said Sherif Mandour, the film's producer.

He said he had sent employees from his company racing to the cinemas with the permission certificates from the censor to try and make it before the 10pm show on Wednesday. Four shows earlier in the day were cancelled because certificates of approval had not been issued in time.

Mr Abu Shadi, the censor, confirmed that the licence was issued late on Wednesday. Filmed in 2006, *Ain Shams* last year won the Golden Tauro Best film Award at the Taormina Film Festival, the Best First Film Award at the Rotterdam Arab Film Festival and received Special Jury Mention at the Carthage Film Festival.

"*Al Batout's* movie opens new horizons for new independent filmmakers in Egypt," Ibrahim al Aris, a Lebanese film critic, wrote in the London-based Arabic daily *al-Hayat*.

"The film launches a new cinematic language, atmosphere and subject, in a country where getting a new film released is almost mission impossible, especially when a film wants to be poetic, pioneering and at the same time popular."

The Lonely Life of Helipolis

Al-Masry Al-Youm - 19.11.2009

by Amira el-Noshokaty

A middle class couple is swamped with financial obligations. A loner, whose family awaits his migration to Canada, maintains a hopeless affair with a neighbor. A receptionist dreams of living in France. A soldier is exiled inside his wooden kiosk. A heartbroken young researcher seeks to retrieve the social history of Heliopolis and ends up on his own journey of self discovery. Each character suffers from his or her own malaise in *Heliopolis*.

Heliopolis, which premiered 12 November as part of the Cairo International Film Festival, is the first feature film by Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla. *Heliopolis* is set in the Cairo neighborhood of the same name and portrays the lives of eight people in the neighborhood whose lives seldom intersect.

Events move slowly, as the film takes place within a single day. This helps convey a sense of monotony and despair, which is the theme that binds the film's eight characters together despite their differences in class. They move through the film like secluded islands, sometimes even appearing in the same scene. Yet they remain strangers.

"This film is about what's not happening," explained Ahmad Abdalla at the press conference. *Heliopolis*, he said, is a reflection of reality, where people who could make a difference in each other's lives cross paths yet never meet.

The film's characters reflect depth but they barely develop. "Like our reality, I've noticed that despite the passing of time, I haven't developed much," explained Abdalla, also saying that such people represent the Egyptian status quo.

"This film is about those trivial details that define, in one way or another, our lives and tie us to our own past," Abdalla said. "The characters are unsatisfied with their present, so they delve into a parallel life with different dreams and alternatives."

This is exemplified by the researcher who is obsessed with the Egypt of the 1950s and falls under the charms of the district's cosmopolitan legacy; the money and lies that the receptionist sends to her parents every month, telling her family about her time in Paris while all she has is a poster of the Eiffel Tower in her humble rented room in Cairo; the indecision of a Coptic doctor as he tries to sell his apartment and watches a girl chant in church; the soldier who guards the church yet hides in his wooden kiosk, listening to old songs and playing with a stray dog. When the day comes to an end, the alienated characters peacefully return to their homes.

Heliopolis is Abdalla's first film. He previously worked as a film editor and studied music in the 1990s. In 2007 he won best first script from the Sawiris Foundation. This year the film is being screened as an official selection of the Toronto Film Festival, the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, and Vancouver International Film Festival.

As a director, Abdalla has employed some unconventional techniques in the film. The actors became co-producers, improvising the dialogue. Abdalla also incorporated documentary-style footage into the storyline. Abdalla insists that it is not a new trend in Egyptian cinema

"Khairi Beshara's film *Ice Cream In Gleam* included documentary footage, Mohammed Khan's film *Al-hareef*, and many others really documented the socio- economic status of Egypt in the eighties," he said, adding that he was meticulous in choosing actors who he thought would be able to improvise their own script within the context he created.

"Unlike the common belief of the divine director who has ultimate freedom, I believe the director's role is to direct the actors who are not mere tools in his hand."