REVIEW ESSAY AND INTERVIEW

ART AND POLITICS IN THE CINEMA OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

JOSEPH MASSAD

This review of the works of the influential Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine brings to light his role as a daring and versatile artist, social critic, and cultural archivist, whose films and documentaries, in addition to being entertaining, provide an insight into the Arab world. The accompanying interview adds background and dimension to Chahine's life and oeuvre.

Youssef Chahine is one of the more prolific film directors in the world. His career, spanning almost five decades, is punctuated by over thirty films in widely diverse cinematic styles and tackling myriad social and political issues. Although celebrated throughout the Arab world and well known in Africa, Asia, and Europe, until recently he was almost unknown in the United States except to the cognoscenti, his films having been largely confined to the festival circuit. Thanks to the efforts of the program director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Richard Peña, who is also the chairman of the selection committee of the New York Film Festival, a retrospective of Chahine's work was presented at the thirty-sixth annual New York Film Festival in September-October 1998. Though only fourteen of his films were shown, the retrospective did succeed in giving a sense of the scope and tremendous variety of his work. The New York event follows the full Chahine retrospective shown at the Locarno Film Festival, in Italy, in 1996. Chahine has received wide international acclaim and a large number of international awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award for his entire oeuvre at the 1997 Cannes film festival.

Chahine, now in his early seventies, was born in Alexandria. In his work, he explores Egypt's and his own history and identity through an array of historical and personal narratives in genres ranging from musicals, comedies, and political thrillers to rural dramas, historical epics, social protest films, documentaries, and Bergmanesque psychological dramas. Indeed, Chahine is unique not only for his mastery of diverse styles but for his intermixing of genres within the same film. Himself an accomplished actor (he was trained as a method actor in the 1940s at the Pasadena Playhouse in California), he has starred in a number of his own films and continues to introduce new actors to the big screen, who, thanks to his directing, have

JOSEPH MASSAD is assistant editor of JPS.

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become major Arab and international stars. These include Omar Sharif, whom he introduced to Arab audiences back in 1954. He has worked with all the major actors and actresses of the Arab world, particularly from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria.

But it is especially as a fiercely independent, principled director that Chahine stands out. From his first film, *Baba Amin* (Papa Amin, 1950), which he directed at the age of twenty-four, to his most recent, *al-Masir* (Destiny, 1997), he has shown himself to be a committed artist with strong political convictions. His epic drama, *al-Ard* (The Land, 1969), treats the oppression of peasants under a feudal system (a theme he had originally explored in *Sira'fi al-Wadi*—Struggle in The Valley or Sky of Hell, 1954), while another of his great films, *Jamila al-Jaza'iriyya* (Jamila the Algerian, 1958), deals with the Algerian revolution. For his mastery of cinematic style, the diversity of his range, and his wide appeal both to the intelligentsia and the masses, he can veritably be called the doyen of Egyptian and Arab cinema and a teacher to new generations of directors.

**THE TRILOGY**

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. Though not great popular successes, the three films—*Iskindiriyya . . . Leh?* (Alexandria . . . Why?, 1978), *Hadduta Masriyya* (An Egyptian Tale, 1982), and *Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman* (Alexandria, Again and Again, 1989)—have been hailed as among his greatest and perhaps give the most insight into the man and his work.

In *Iskindiriyya . . . Leh?*, the first film of the trilogy, Chahine tells the story of his teenage years in Alexandria beginning in 1942 and the impending Nazi invasion that was to be rebuffed by the Allies at al-'Alamayn. At the center of the film is the love affair of young Yahya (the name given to the Youssef Chahine character) with art and literature—Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, theater, dancing, and, most importantly, film. But the film also presents a kaleidoscope of stories intermingled in simple and complex ways and which the film’s narrative attempts to unravel and weave together. Most important of these are two seemingly marginal love stories that ultimately prove central. The first is between a young upper-class communist Ashkenazi Egyptian Jew named Sarah (played by Nagla’ Fathi) and a young dark-completed Egyptian communist college student of humble origins called Ibrahim (played by Ahmad Zaki); note the correspondence of their names with the biblical Abraham and Sarah. The relationship produces a boy child born out of wedlock—Sarah discovered that she was pregnant as her family was preparing to flee to South Africa in anticipation of the Nazis’ imminent invasion. When
Sarah returns after the war, she finds that Ibrahim had been imprisoned as a communist agitator. The other affair is between an anticolonial nationalist Egyptian aristocrat (the maternal uncle of Chahine's best friend) and a young British soldier from Dover. This love affair is also interrupted by the war, and the British soldier dies in battle. As both affairs are tabooed, neither is ultimately consummated socially. By straddling the central theme of the film (Chahine's ultimately successful quest to become an actor and director), these two love stories show the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of realizing other goals, namely, revolution and transgressive love.

Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine.

Chahine is at his best in conveying the circumstances, the feelings, and the neuroses of a middle-class Egyptian Christian family in time of war. Alexandria's multiethnic and multireligious society (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Arabs; Greeks; Italians; European Jews) is presented, as are the various political trends—Islamism, communism, secular anticolonial nationalism, and Zionism (David, Sarah's brother, moves to Palestine to fight with the Zionists and is then sent to a U.S. military school). Although Chahine's representation of Egyptian Jews is generally positive, it also proves problematic. Despite his sympathy for his Jewish characters, he ends up depicting them as alien. When the unmarried Sarah informs her father that she is pregnant by a Muslim, her father responds by calmly asking her if she had informed the man, implying that she should not. His cool reaction, as well as her nonchalance at being pregnant out of wedlock, could not have been more alien even to the most cosmopolitan Egyptians of the time. (The representation of Egyptian Jews as the same yet different is not exclusive to Chahine: the Egyptian novelist Waguih Ghali dealt with his Egyptian Jewish female char-
acter similarly in his beautifully written and posthumously published novel *Beer in the Snooker Club*.)

The second film of the trilogy, *Hadduta Masriyya*, depicts Chahine as an already successful director in his late thirties or early forties. In a surreal back-and-forth of scenes reminiscent of *All That Jazz* taking place inside Chahine’s rib cage (he was suffering from a serious heart condition requiring surgery), he explores his problems of health, family, and filmmaking. Yahya’s commitment to the pleasure of smoking even though it was killing him brings to mind Oscar Wilde’s aphorism about a cigarette being “the perfect type of the perfect pleasure; it is exquisite and leaves one unsatisfied.” He also touches on international attention and neglect, as the Chahine character Yahya (played by Nur al-Sharif), exasperated by what he sees as the Zionist-inspired bias of Hollywood against Arab directors, rails against Jews, only to be reminded by another character that he had always taught the importance of distinguishing between Jews and Zionists; Yahya responds in resignation that he might have been wrong. One of the important scenes of the film is of Umm Kulthum singing *Inta ‘Umri* (the first song composed for her by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahab and first performed in 1964 after President Nasir insisted that the two giants collaborate). This is the only color footage of Umm Kulthum ever recorded, giving Chahine the role of cultural archivist as well as creative artist.

The last film of the trilogy, *Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman* is one of his most courageous films; it depicts Chahine’s life at the time the film was shot, with its difficulties and with his vulnerabilities and triumphs. It should be mentioned here that Muhsin Muhyi al-Din, the actor who played the young Chahine in *Iskindiriyya . . . Leh?* and a number of other Chahine films, had in real life stopped working with the director. The film opens with a scene registering this separation. In an Alexandrian hotel room overlooking the Mediterranean, the Muhsin Muhyi al-Din character (named Amir in the film and played by ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Gilil) tells Chahine (played by himself) that he is going to leave him and proceeds to do so in pursuit of petrodollar-financed films. Subsequently, and to the utter consternation of Chahine, Muhsin Muhyi al-Din became a committed Islamist in real life.

The film is a surreal presentation of Chahine’s life between filmmaking and living; between the staging of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, an Egyptian actors’ union strike, and state-sponsored antiriot teams; between ancient dictators (Alexander the Great) and present ones; and between artists committed to art and artists committed to money. It is interesting to note that the current rising comedy star of Egyptian cinema, Muhammad Hinaydi, whose popular film *Isma’iliyya Rayih Gayy* (Isma’iliyya Back and Forth) and current big hit *Si’idi fi al-Gami’a al-Amrikiyya* (An Upper Egyptian at the American University), was introduced to audiences by Chahine in this film. It was recently reported that Chahine has been contemplating using Hinaydi in a new film dealing with the immediate time of his return from the United States in the late 1940s and his working on his first film *Baba Amin*. 
**Salah al-Din, al-Muhagir, and al-Masir**

Historical epics are not simply used by Chahine to illustrate historical events, but as a lens on the present. In this sense, his epics emerge more as national allegories.

*Al-Nasir Salah al-Din* (1963) is perhaps the most important epic film in Arab cinema (the only other epic Arab histories attempted are the 1970s Hollywood films of the Syrian-American director Mustafa al-'Aqqad, namely *The Message* and *Lion of the Desert*). The parallels between Nasir's Arab nationalism and its conflict with a crusading colonial Zionism is juxtaposed to the battle of Salah al-Din (called “al-Nasir” by Chahine, reinforcing the parallel with President Nasir) against the crusading Christian invaders and his triumph over them. The Arab Muslim-Christian alliance against the crusading Christian hordes symbolized by one of Salah al-Din’s right-hand men, the Arab Christian ‘Issa al-‘Awwam, is engineered to evoke the similar alliance in the 1960s between Arab Muslims and Christians against Zionism. Despite its lecturing didacticism and excessive length, the film is superb cinematically, with brilliant montage effects revealing a strong Eisensteinian influence.

The more recent *al-Muhagir* (The Emigrant, 1994) is a more personal film. Although ostensibly about the Prophet Joseph (Chahine’s namesake), the film seems to be equally about Chahine. Ram (the name given to the Joseph character in the film) wants to leave his family and travel to explore the world in search of knowledge and “enlightenment.” He even acquires agricultural knowledge, which makes the desert bloom. The allegory of Joseph is here being staged by Chahine as an example of the openness to the world that he extols.

But *al-Muhagir* soon ran into controversy, forcing Chahine to fight a legal case against the banning of the film (which had already been showing in Egyptian theaters for a number of weeks) for religious reasons. Not only is the representation of a prophet in image form prohibited in Islam, but the film depicts the story of the Prophet Joseph in a way that veers off the Qur'anic narrative. Some audiences were moreover offended by the parallel of Joseph’s project with the Zionist colonial enterprise of “making the desert bloom,” though such an allusion was not intended by Chahine, who is fiercely anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian.

The experience of *al-Muhagir* undoubtedly influenced Chahine’s 1997 *al-Masir* (Destiny), where Islamists are represented as dark forces preying on the weak and using terror against every kind of enlightenment and pleasure; along with *Al-Nasir Salah al-Din, al-Masir* shows Chahine at his most didactic. The ostensible story is a semifictional account of the conflict of Ibn Rushd (Averroës) with the orthodoxy of his time. In the film, the caliph (representing the state) is shown to be so inept and corrupt as to fall under the sway of Islamist operators, who simultaneously prey on one of the caliph’s sons, neglected by his father and seeking attention and love. The Islamists of the film provide him with both, including a homoerotic moment in an Andalusian
bathhouse, despite the fact that they are represented as opponents of all pleasure.

The real meaning of the film, of course, is to attack today's Islamist challengers in the Muslim world, especially Egypt. The parallels are obvious. The Islamists of the film seek to silence their opponents. Evoking the Islamist attack on Egyptian author Naguib Mahfuz, a gypsy singer in the film played by Muhammad Munir (curiously, Jews are nowhere to be found in Chahine's Andalusia) has his throat slashed—he is thus literally silenced. Ibn Rushd's books and personal library are burned, just as the Islamists attempted to ban Chahine's film *al-Muhagir*. The conflict in *al-Masir* is between an enlightened philosopher siding with knowledge, good-natured pleasure, and life on the one hand and the dark forces of Islamist obscurantism abetted by an inept and stupid state on the other. At the end, the Islamists are shown to be collaborators with the Spanish Reconquista against both the incompetent state and the nation, leading to the collapse of the last Arab Muslim presence in Spain. One senses that the film's caricature of the Islamists betrays Chahine's own personal anger at them, not only for *al-Muhagir*, but also for Muhsin Muhyi al-Din's desertion and joining the Islamists.

*Al-Masir*, which despite its subject matter is also a musical comedy, is punctuated by belly dancing and pseudoflamenco as well as by songs whose entertainment value derives from their purely kitsch character. This combination of the epic and low-comedic forms not only questions the conventional reverence paid to historical representation and conveys the real-life intermingling of these elements, it also entertains. But like *al-Muhagir*, and unlike Chahine's earlier films, one discerns in *al-Masir* a commitment to Hollywood production values. In addition, grand shots of the Pyrenees more generally betray a bourgeois Romantic representation of a prelapsarian idyllic nature untouched by human contamination—an uncharacteristic perspective from the more critical Chahine.

*Al-Masir* was filmed in Syria and Lebanon rather than in Morocco or Spain; according to Chahine, the latter two sites are full of tourists and their locale resembles less how Andalusian Spain must have looked than do the sites in present day Lebanon and Syria. Muhammad Munir's major song in the film "'Alli Sutaq bil Ghuna Lissa al-Aghani Mumkina," meaning "Raise your voice in song as songs are still allowed," continues the film's assault against alleged Islamist asceticism. Given Chahine's depiction of the Islamists as a fantastical mix of Protestant puritans, ruthless assassins, evil mafiosi, and obscurantist cultists—an image that does not fit even the most extreme among them, much less the majority—it seems hardly coincidental that this is the only film of Chahine's that has ever been picked up by a U.S. distributor.
DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Chahine has also directed quasi documentaries, including *Al-Nil wa al-Hayah* (The Nile and Life or Once Upon a Time, the Nile, 1968) and *Al-Qahira Munawwara bi Ahlaha* (Cairo Lit Up by Its People or Cairo as Seen by Youssef Chahine, 1991). *Al-Nil wa al-Hayah* was filmed soon after the construction of the Aswan High Dam, a fete of colossal proportions in the Egypt of the early 1960s. In another instance of Chahine’s role as an archivist, the film includes real footage of the majestic opening of the dam.

The Aswan Dam, which had been Nasir’s dream, was built with Soviet help after the Americans turned him down. *Al-Nil wa al-Hayah* has an Egyptian and a Soviet cast and was filmed in Egypt and in the Soviet Union, specifically Leningrad. More interesting as a historical document than for its cinematic style, the film shows the lives of the Soviet and Egyptian engineers engaged on the dam as well as the dam’s impact on the lives of Egyptian Nubians whose homes were drowned and who were relocated by the government to converted military barracks. The film also tackles the issue of women’s dependency on men in the context of Egypt. Although Soviet women are ironically shown to be liberated as they follow their husbands to Egypt, once they arrive they are unable to work as engineers on the dam because “women are not allowed” to engage in this type of work in Egypt. Egyptian women, on the other hand, are represented by a dreamy young woman who wants to explore life and ends up rejecting a millionaire communist with a Ph.D. who has already explored life and wants to settle down with her.

The film was banned both by Nasir’s government and by the Soviets. Chahine claims that the Soviets were upset because he did not show the nice modern boulevards of Leningrad, while the Egyptians were upset because the Soviet Russian engineer always walked in front of the Egyptian engineer. The film was shelved, and Chahine embarked on making a more acceptable version of it, using much of the footage from the first film. But the second film flopped, and the first survived only because a copy of it had been preserved at the *Cinémathèque française*. The recently restored original was shown for the first time in thirty years at this year’s New York Film Festival.

*Al-Qahira Munawwara bi Ahlaha* is a short quasi documentary about Cairo at the time of the Gulf crisis. Chahine, who is teaching a film class, asks his students what the West expects to see in a documentary about Cairo. The responses range from belly dancing to the Pyramids and other stereotypical images. In a series of dazzling shots, Chahine delivers momentary satisfaction to such a Western audience, but then quickly moves on to show Cairo through his own eyes. This Cairo (Chahine’s adoptive city) is full of college students demonstrating against the U.S. and Allied (including Egyptian) aggression against Iraq and the repressive police response to the demonstrations. It is a Cairo full of ambitious youth whose opportunities are blocked at every turn, of Islamists providing alternative solutions to despairing young
men and women, of mothers looking after their children, of people going about their daily living in a Cairo that is indeed, as the film's Arabic title announces, lit up by its people.

Musicals

Chahine's musicals have enjoyed immense popularity across the Arab world. Among many other stars, he worked with the great Syrian singer-actor-composer-producer Farid al-Atrash and the then-emerging actress-singing star Shadia in *Inta Habibi* (You are my beloved, 1957); with Layla Murad, the unrivaled “queen of musicals” of the 1930s–50s, in *Sayyidat al-Qitar* (The Lady of the Train, 1952); and with the legendary Lebanese singer Fayruz in *Bayya' al-Khawatim* (The Vendor of Rings, 1965). In addition to straight musicals, he also introduced a musical element to other films, ranging from dramas and comedies to historical epics. For example, he introduced the now-famous Lebanese singer Majida al-Rumi in his drama *'Awdat al-Jbn al-Dal* (The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1976) when she was still a teenager hardly known outside Lebanon. He also cast the Nubian Egyptian singer Muhammad Munir in his autobiographical *Hadduta Masriyya* and in the historical epic, *al-Masir*. He even featured the voice of the legendary Shaykh Imam in *al-'Usfur* (The Sparrow, 1973), which dealt with the sense of shock experienced by the Egyptian people following the 1967 defeat. Chahine himself sings in *Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman*.

There is an amusing anecdote about one of his earlier musicals with Farid al-Atrash, *Inta Habibi*. One day during the 1956 Suez Canal crisis and the tripartite invasion of Egypt, Chahine, sitting at home while Cairo was under curfew, received a phone call from the great star. Atrash asked if he would direct a musical for him and said that if he had any ideas, he should come over right away. Chahine reminded him of the curfew but Atrash insisted, saying he would give Chahine an advance. In dire need of money, Chahine rushed to Atrash's house where a party was in full swing.

“So, what will this film be about?” asks Atrash.

Thinking fast, Chahine responds: “About a man . . . who is running away and who is being chased by a mob!”

Atrash: “Running away from what?”

Chahine (improvising): “From being forced to get married!”

Atrash: “So . . . it’s a comedy!” Everyone laughs, and Chahine, bewildered at first, decides to join in.

The musical that grew out of this episode opens with Atrash in a tuxedo running down the street with his father, the police, and a mob in hot pursuit. He is finally caught. His bride to be was none other than the immortal Shadia. The marvelous Hind Rustum played the role of the belly dancer mistress. When the film was finished, Atrash asked Chahine how much the reels weighed. When Chahine informed him that they weighed 22 kgs., Atrash insisted that no film of his should weigh under 23 kgs. Chahine had to go back
and film a noncontextual song “Zayna” sung by Atrash along with a new short segment on Egyptian bedouin. With these additions, the film weighed 24 kgs.

**Transgressor of Conventions**

Chahine is a daring director dealing with topics that few others would touch. In addition to his representation of Egyptian Jews, he has also ventured into uncharted Arab cinematic territory by dealing with the human psyche and sexual desire in ways until recently taboo. The psychological thriller *Bab al-Hadid* (Cairo Station, 1958), certainly one of his masterpieces, deals with the sexual fantasies of a physically disabled man (he had use of only one leg) named Qinawi who is treated by society with a combination of sympathy and ridicule. Working in Cairo’s main railroad station, Qinawi lives in a squalid abode where every nook and cranny is adorned with suggestive magazine pictures of women. When the woman he strongly desires (played by Hind Rustum) refuses his marriage proposal, he decides to kill her so as to possess her forever. But, mistaking her friend for her, he stabs the friend instead. The woman survives, but he is caught and institutionalized in a mental hospital. *Bab al-Hadid* explores the psyche of a man with an injured soul resulting from people’s responses to his physical injury. His metaphoric physical castration leads him to resist his psychological castration. He insists on desiring and competing on an equal footing with his able-bodied competitor (played by Farid Shawqi)—they both, after all, are men. Qinawi does not succumb to sexual repression; rather, he figures out a way for sexual expression, albeit one that is concocted for him by his internal as well as the external world—both worlds blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality. The part of the disturbed man was brilliantly played by Youssef Chahine himself.

Chahine’s films are sprinkled with scenes not only of the heteroerotic but also of the homoerotic variety. In *al-'Usfur* (The Sparrow), Sayf al-Din, who plays the title role of a policeman, is enamored of himself. He stares at himself in the mirror constantly, especially when he is half-naked. He plays with his mirror image by drawing a gun and killing his virtual image. In one such scene, once he is done with admiring his body, he lies down on his cot, caressing his chest with his hands moving south, at which point the camera switches scenes. Other homoerotic motifs appear more explicitly in *Iskindiriyya . . . Leh?* with the inclusion of a love affair between an Egyptian aristocratic nationalist, ‘Adil, and a British soldier named Tommy. ‘Adil enjoys killing Western soldiers in revenge for colonialism, but when Tommy, young, vulnerable, and very drunk, is brought to him by a procurer, ‘Adil is moved to sympathy and desire. The relationship that ensues, however, is *never* devoid of the colonial-anticolonial dichotomy. When Tommy refers to
rich Egyptians as “Wogs,” ‘Adil responds by saying: “Us Wogs! At the time my ancestors were building pyramids, your great-grandmother gnawed your grandfather’s arm for breakfast.” The love affair lasts a short period as the soldier goes back to the war and is killed in battle. ‘Adil is left kneeling by his grave-side at the al-‘Alamayn cemetery, sobbing and mourning his loss.

_Hadduta Masriyya_ also registers a homoerotic tension between the Chahine character (played by Nur al-Sharif) and a British cab driver when their eyes meet suggestively in the rearview mirror. In the autobiographical _Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman_, the Chahine character (played by Chahine) and the Muhsin Muhyi al-Din character (played by ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Gilil) do a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers number after winning an international award that is brilliant for its excessively kitsch character. Even Western gay tourism.

‘Umar ‘Abd al-Gilil (front) and Youssef Chahine (back) in _Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman_ (1989).

in Egypt is subtly explored by Chahine in his _al-Qahira Munawwara bi Ahhaha_, where we see an elderly white European or American man trying to pick up a young unemployed Egyptian man on the streets of Cairo. In _al-Masir_, the theme is revisited when the caliph’s son, as a new recruit to the Islamist cult, wrestles half-naked in an Andalusian bathhouse with his Islamist friend, playing with the water like adolescent lovers. Similar moments are registered in _al-Muhagir_ and in _al-Wada’ Ya Bonaparte_ (Farewell Bonaparte, 1984). What is interesting about this theme is not only the mode of representation within which it is framed in Chahine’s films, but that it is represented at all. Other film directors have dealt with homosexual motifs, but never as tastefully or as subtly. The only exception is the wonderful young Egyptian director, Yusri Nasrallah, himself a student of Chahine, whose _Sariqat Sayfiyya_ (Summer Thefts) and _Mercedes_ are ingenious, intellectually challenging, and aesthetically original films. Nasrallah’s excellent documen-
tary Subyan wi Banat (Boys and Girls) on the question of the hijab in contemporary Egypt is the best treatment of the subject in any medium. Indeed, Chahine has been a school unto himself, graduating a number of new first-rate directors.

In the tradition of Luis Buñuel and François Truffaut, Chahine's creativity appears inexhaustible. He is currently finishing a new film, al-Akhar (The Other), a love story in the context of globalization, starring Mahmud Himeida and Nabila 'Ubeid, with a cameo appearance by Palestinian intellectual Edward Said playing himself. This film already has some controversy surrounding its allegedly negative representation of businessmen. It has been reported that actors 'Izzat al-'Alayli and Nur al-Sharif, who have worked with Chahine in previous films, turned him down this time for political reasons, as they both have businessmen friends!

When Chahine travels internationally to present his films, he speaks passionately, not only about his work, but also about his political causes, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, the Arab world, Islam, democracy, Western racism, Western imperialism, and freedom of art and of thought. In New York for the opening of his New York Film Festival retrospective, he agreed to an interview. I sat with him in his room at the Mayflower Hotel overlooking Central Park in the early afternoon of 25 September 1998. He sat perched precariously on the edge of his bed, chain-smoking the whole time I was there.

**JM:** Let me begin by asking about the new international attention to your work. You've been receiving many awards and prizes and now there are these retrospectives. Why do you think your work is receiving this attention today?

**YC:** Actually, my work has received quite a bit of attention for a number of years, but not in the English-speaking world. People think that if you are not well known in the Anglo-Saxon world, you are not known at all—you're not “international.” To be international, you must show your films in Wisconsin. But I don't think it's strictly essential: if Wisconsin doesn't flock to see my films, well, that's their problem, not particularly my problem.

Generally speaking, the Anglo-Saxons have trouble accepting that the Arabs have a very great civilization and that they have a very interesting past. Let's say that the people who do not want to show the Arabs in a good light were too strong for us. It's been a long struggle. If people don't know, how do you make them know?

**JM:** But there has been a change. Why do you think that recently the Anglo-Saxon world... .

**YC:** True, they used to ask us every now and then, but as a kind of folklore. This time, it's a whole retrospective. Suddenly they realize that one cannot forget the other fellow totally, that the other must count for you. If you really
want to know what to do, even politically, you must look at the other, get to know him. What are his desires, his intentions, his needs?

JM: I want to ask about the audience of your last film, al-Masir. Al-Masir was more popular than other films which you have made. . . .

YC: No, it's not true. Al-Masir is, like the rest of my work, basically entertaining, because I believe in entertainment. I don't want to bore people with an academic thesis. A thesis you read. If you go see a film, you have to be entertained visually. I believe in that. Art should be entertaining. Iskindiriyya . . . Leh? is one of the most entertaining films, and it presents problems that are pretty universal and that should be of interest to the Anglo-Saxon world also.

It took a long time for them to realize that there were these kinds of films. Every now and then, to be fashionable, they choose to discover an Iranian director, an Indian director, and bring him way up high, often without even having seen the films. But they have to take credit for it—they have to say they've nurtured a new director, discovered a new director. So my turn came. Fine.

JM: This brings up a question, an old question, concerning aesthetics and politics, art and politics. How do you manage, in your own work, to interrelate your own aesthetic sense and the political message you are interested in communicating? Invariably, your films always have a political message, or at least reflect a political situation.

YC: I think that politics are inevitable. Politics control our lives the way world economics influences our local economy and how that influences our social life. We are managed by everything that is happening in the world—it's globalization. They say it's an open market, but who are they kidding? Why were we not able to penetrate America? Because they've had all the monopolies, in films and other areas. You have to know what is happening in the world, because it influences your character, your country—it even influences your sex life; what happens in bed depends on what is happening in politics.

But the point is, in film, you can't bring politics out as a slogan. You have a drama first, a drama of people being influenced by a certain type of political situation, but the drama comes first.

JM: In this vein, since the 1950s you've dealt with a number of political issues affecting the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular. What do you think is the most important challenge facing the Arab world today, and how do you see yourself dealing with these problems in future projects?
YC: Inevitably, I have to deal with some of these problems, to show to my people, to the Arab world, the kind of hypocrisy that’s going on. The intentions, the economic intentions of what you’d call the Great Powers, or the Western world, have to be clarified. How come they create Saddam Hussein, and then Saddam Hussein becomes Satan incarnate, the suffering of his people forgotten? Or the Taliban, who they trained and armed and supported during the Afghanistan war, created them, and now suddenly they’re evil. And then they play footsy again with Iran because the shortest possible pipeline is from the Caspian Sea. What it means is that our vital interests are not particularly their vital interests.

This is what they did in the whole Arab world. All over the Arab world, you have nothing but autocrats—and I am using the lightest possible word. Who helps them stay there? Who gives them arms? Who helps them economically? The Americans put the wrong people there, and then they talk about democracy.

JM: I’d like to speak more about your relationship to your art. Since the 1950s, you’ve lived under different regimes yet you’ve always been able to produce great works. Has the relationship changed between you and your art since you began working?

YC: No. I know more tricks, that’s all. When you say my art, I translate it immediately into my right of free speech, and I won’t let anybody touch that. So I have to keep on fighting all the time. And by keeping on fighting, I have to know who is fighting me back, who is my enemy. My enemy is sometimes my government—most of the time it is my government—and people who are behind my government.

JM: What about your audience? Do you feel it has remained the same over the years?

YC: It’s more educated now. You have to educate your audience—that’s why I asked UNESCO to start giving cinema appreciation classes, even in primary schools. If you have seen Buñuel and the great filmmakers—Americans and foreigners of the past—you’re not going to automatically accept the banality of a Bruce Willis film.

JM: When you began your work in the 1950s, Egyptian cinema was a major industry. Today, like many film industries in the third world, it’s in retreat. Do you think this is a result of the onslaught of Hollywood?

YC: No, it’s not Hollywood—it’s our regimes. Our regimes want to have the monopoly over the word. In order to push [state] television, they think they ought to kill the film industry, which they are doing by overtaxing it, for one thing, making scandals about it and trivializing it.
JM: In one of your films—I am referring to Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman—you seemed to be critical of the increased financing of Egyptian films coming from the Gulf. Do you think that's another reason that has contributed to the transformation of Egyptian cinema in the last few years?

YC: The money can come from Hell if it wants to. It's the mentality of the creators themselves that has been influenced. Some of our best directors are doing video clips [music videos] because there's more money in them. You wonder what their ideal was, why they went into cinema in the first place—to do video clips or to participate in the progress of their country? It's also important the extent to which one cares about government approval or disapproval. Because if you approve of the government, you can become very rich very quickly.

JM: Do you think this is the result of an intellectual malaise or . . .

YC: I think it's the result of cowardice and greed. They want to chase after money. This is being helped by the tremendous force of American thought—where you equate money with happiness. I equate work with happiness.

JM: In your lifetime, have you seen this affect the intellectual milieu in Egypt or the Arab world?

YC: Yes, of course. I saw that influence on many, many of our actors, who have turned into commodities, stars, instead of remaining real artists with a real purpose. This is again equating money with happiness instead of doing some kind of oeuvre that can take part in the development of a country.

The West still thinks that all our pictures are dancing pictures, bad musicals translated from the American or the French. That may have been the overall industry, but there was also a very strong movement for much better films, which now you discover coming out of countries you don't expect—from Lebanon, from Syria, Iraq, Tunisia. And from Algeria, particularly until things turned bad. But even now, the Algerian directors have . . . they still have guts, you see, and that counts. The first people to tackle strong, real subjects while at the same time being entertaining. Where are the Egyptians? A lot of them are falling into the lure of money.

JM: Why aren't the Syrians? We've seen a major achievement among Syrian directors in the last ten years, people like Muhammad Malas, for example. Why do you think that Syria at this moment is able to produce such good directors who don't seem to be falling into the money trap?

YC: I don't know. It must have something to do with political issues, though I cannot say that I appreciate the political situation in Syria either. Where there is a lack of democracy, you do not move forward, though maybe you can move forward in some areas.
JM: How has your work changed? We see, for example, by the 1980s a more autobiographical bent—you did the trilogy at that point. Was this a more introspective time for you, or simply another manifestation of the same idea?

YC: 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.

JM: Yet the trilogy was semifictional, as I understand it.

YC: No. It used fiction as little as possible and only in keeping with dramatic necessity. Most scenes were real lived scenes.

JM: But you also used different styles in the three films of your autobiography. What do you think each style was trying to communicate?

YC: “Communicate” is the key word. What is important is to communicate, whatever the style—it doesn’t matter. If you’re a professional, you can communicate in all genres—you can do farce, tragedy, drama, and you’re still communicating something. If you’re a professional director, there’s no joking about the basics. From the writing to the translation of the written word into an image... it’s a recreation, it means a script is literature and my language is visual. If this isn’t the case, I am not a director but a policeman telling people to go right and go left. But if I have a point of view, I become a director. Then I say: this story should be told in what style? My own character pushes me toward one style or another, and whatever style it is, I must be master of it.

JM: We see, for example, in Iskindiriyya... Leh? a more realist representation—although not exclusively so—of the story, whereas in Hadduta Masriyya and Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman, there was a strong element of the fantastic. Do you feel this is part of the way reality presents itself today, as Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman was more about the present than about the past?

YC: The present and the past are very often very intermingled—what you may call fantastic, if it is something in the human being, that is working inside of him. The fantastic is always there, and fiction and reality are separated by a thread. Even the erotic, arousal, comes out of imagination, out of a thought.

So, there's an interplay between everything. That's why, in the same film, you might see a scene that is totally fantastic and two seconds later, they're dancing, and six seconds after that they're doing something else. This happens to me every day. This is life.
JM: I agree. In fact, Iskindiriyya Kaman wi Kaman is my favorite, and I like the element of surrealism and fantasy in it the best.

YC: I appreciate that because I think it's my best film. I don't believe in sticking to one thing. You come to New York. There's the fabulous about it—if you don't see it, there's something wrong with you. But at the same time there's a lot of filth, a lot of dirt, a lot of poverty. It depends on what you're looking at and why you're looking at it. I am not being realistic if I look only in the garbage can—the garbage can is there, but the wonderful things are also there. If you say there's only poverty in New York, it's not true; that there's only wealth, only beauty in New York, it's not true. It's an amalgam of a lot of things. The point is, you have to have a human point of view. You must see with your heart, not only with your eyes.

JM: I have a question about al-Masir, where there's a struggle between the character of Ibn Rushd and his conservative detractors represented by some of the 'ulama' and a certain Islamist cult that seems to emerge. The state is presented as neutral, and in the end we learn that there has been a collaboration between the Islamist 'ulama' and the Spanish Reconquista! But today, in the Arab world, it is the state, not the Islamist movements, that collaborate with imperialist powers. So, why have you decided to represent the Islamists in that way?

YC: Yes, the regimes keep on collaborating with imperialism. But America is collaborating with the Islamists, as are our own regimes, who are following the big boss. During my legal case over al-Muhagir, the state did not move. They could have shown a little interest, put a bit of pressure. I believe there is a connivance with the Islamists. It's as if we give you Youssef Chahine to harass and you let us hang two or three of yours. We fight but we can make deals. The state says they're going to put their hands together and fight terrorism. But when terrorism is in your interest, what do you do? Then we go back to the Taliban, to Afghanistan, to the intentions of the United States and the West—it was in their interest for that moment, and they're paying for it now. This is what they call pragmatism: doing what is expedient for the moment and not thinking of the future.

JM: Your choice of Ibn Rushd, obviously, could not have been accidental, as Ibn Rushd is the first Arab philosopher who put forth the idea of a separation between religion and philosophy. What did you conclude about why people are susceptible to these ideas?

YC: I made another film called al-Qahira Munawwara bi Ahlaha. The question of why someone becomes a terrorist is essential in that film. No jobs! Suddenly, you can be thrown out, with globalization and big companies, immorality all over the place, corruption all over the place. . . . You want to feel clean at least, so some people come around and ask if you
want to know God. It’s as if God happens to be their neighbor, and if you come along they’ll introduce you. All you have to do is pray six times a day and do this or that six times a day. Nobody wants to feel that he’s nothing. It’s a type of consolation. He puts on a beard and suddenly he gets respect. Before that, everybody was spitting on him, telling him he was a bum and he’s not working. Like in Algeria, people were not working, not out of choice, but because there was no work to do except corrupt work, selling on the black market. Here it is, one of the richest Arab countries, with oil, and they don’t even have busses to take you across town. That’s the regime, totally corrupt. Like most Arab regimes. But how come they’re corrupt, and who is helping them remain corrupt?

JM: A last question. You have dealt with the Palestinian tragedy and with the Palestine war of 1948 in Iskindiriyya . . . Lehr? as well as with the 1967 war in al-Usfur. Why do you think that there has been no major film made in the Arab world about the Palestinian tragedy of 1948 comparable to what Hollywood produced in Exodus? Was this a political decision?

YC: Al-Usfur talks about the Palestine problem as it came into my life, about what it did to me. Because I know that aspect of it better. But, if you mean that the location should be Palestine, then it’s a Palestinian who should do it. Because he would know more.

JM: I did not mean you particularly, I mean generally, in Arab cinema . . .

YC: There were some Lebanese directors who talked about it. One of them, a newcomer, made one that is fantastic. But as for a film that is particularly brilliant, well, that is also an accident that a film is particularly brilliant. But that people cared to make films about Palestine, they did, quite a few.