

Deciphering the Binary Code “Egyptian versus Foreigner” in Egyptian Cinema*

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Abstract

In 2016, emigration is more than ever a massive phenomenon in Egypt which both strongly affects the everyday lives of Egyptians and is central in Egyptian cultural production. This article aims to explore how the Egyptian cinema contributes to forging a binary code that differentiates between “Egyptian” and “Foreigner”. It argues that Egyptians who live abroad may also be perceived as potential foreigners for those left in Egypt. After briefly describing the corpus of seven emigration films, the article sketches a cartography of the geographic imaginaries of migration, which is paradoxically more oriented toward the West, while in fact the majority of Egyptians abroad are in the Gulf. Finally, it demonstrates how movie directors have produced a very pessimistic vision of emigration, in a manner that is equally critical of the countries of arrival as of Egyptian society. Their discourse on the theme of the migrant’s identity, on the personal, familial and national levels, resonates with the social imaginary concerning migration, which is dominated by a nationalist paradigm. Are we nevertheless witnessing the emergence of a transnational cinema, that is, one that envisages the possibility of an identity that is simultaneously of here and elsewhere?

Keywords: Egypt, cinema, migration, transnational, foreigner

In 2016, with several million Egyptians living abroad, emigration is more than ever a massive phenomenon in Egypt which both strongly affects the everyday lives of Egyptians¹ and is central in Egyptian cultural production,² since emigration is a core theme for writers and filmmakers, who themselves have very often been migrants.

Curiously, considering that Egyptian cinema has been much studied,³ in particular in the social sciences,⁴ the theme of emigration in film remains little explored by researchers.⁵ It is true that Egyptian cinema is mainly famous, in the Arab world and elsewhere, for its realist and melodramatic veins, strongly imbued with local colour and stereotyped plots, characters and decors. Representations of the “other”, or rather the “elsewhere”, long remained rare, images of Western countries generally being reduced to mere backdrops for

* This text is a reworked version of an article published in French in 2013 in *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM), see PAGES-EL KAROUI 2013. Although it does not deal with films issued in 2016, it is included in the present *Living 2016* dossier because it treats a topic that has remained of high relevance for the *In 2016* project (see, e.g., below, footnote 6), – For the notion of binary “codes” (and “codes collapsed”), cf. S. GUTH’s introduction to this special dossier.

1 Migration constitutes a core concept among those “used by people to categorize and structure their experiences and to locate themselves in space and time”. Cf. GUTH, introduction to the dossier.

2 Cf. chapter “Space (Homeland as Exile)” in Elena CHITI’s contribution to the present dossier.

3 SHAFIQ 1997, 2007, 2011.

4 ARMBRUST 2011.

5 GAUTIER 1992; AL-HAMARNEH 2005.

love stories, tales of espionage, or honeymoons. However, since the end of the 1990s, a “new wave of emigration films” has emerged.⁶

The theme of economic emigration enables restatements of several central motifs in Egyptian cinema, such as gender, class and the nation,⁷ articulated around several key plots: the emancipation of women vis-à-vis patriarchal society is generally depicted through the triumph of love marriage over arranged marriage;⁸ the narrative of social mobility, omnipresent since the 1930s,⁹ is often played out through a story of impossible love between two characters from opposed social classes; finally, the question of national identity, historically formulated in a colonial and post-colonial context, is reworked from the angle of globalization. Beyond their dreams of making it in the world and their fears of cultural alienation, do migrants not also contribute to questions surrounding the national imaginary?

On the basis of a corpus of seven emigration films, I will explore how the Egyptian cinema contributes to forging a binary code¹⁰ that differentiates between “Egyptian” and “Foreigner”. I postulate that this code has not been strongly modified since 2011, and clearly these fictions which have been seen by a large audience are still shaping the migratory imaginaries of ordinary people living in 2016.¹¹ Who are the “foreigners” in this code? Not only non-nationals. Egyptians who live abroad may also be perceived as potential foreigners for those left in Egypt.

After briefly describing this corpus, an essential step for readers not familiar with this filmography, the article sketches a cartography of the geographic imaginaries of migration on the silver screen, which is paradoxically more oriented toward the West, while in fact the majority of Egyptians abroad are in the Gulf. Movie directors, like writers, have produced a very pessimistic vision of emigration, in a manner that is equally critical of the countries of arrival as of Egyptian society. Their discourse on the theme of the migrant’s identity, on the personal, familial and national levels, resonates with the social imaginary concerning migration, which is dominated by a nationalist paradigm. Are we nevertheless witnessing the emergence of a transnational cinema, that is, one that envisages the possibility of an identity that is simultaneously of here and elsewhere?

6 SHAFIQ 2011: 1027. – For two recent counterparts from Tunisia, cf. films no. #16 and #20 in Stephan GUTH’s contribution to the present dossier.

7 SHAFIQ 2007.

8 ARMBURST 2011.

9 SHAFIQ 2011.

10 See note 1, above.

11 Several films or TV series dealing with migrations were released after 2011. A TV series *Im-barāṭūriyyit mīn?* [Maryam Abū ‘Awf (Mariam Abou Ouf), 2014] demonstrates how government and media question the loyalty of bi-nationals: Amīra, an Anglo-Egyptian living in London is enthusiastic during the 25 January revolution and decides to come back to Egypt with her family. In the end, she is arrested and accused of being a spy. The comedy *il-Dunyā Maqlūba* [Hānī Ṣabrī (Hany Sabry), 2015] imagines a time when America has become less developed than Egypt and every American tries to migrate to Egypt. Depicting the difficulty of legal migration, the main character migrates to Egypt illegally. Despite this funny attempt to reverse the course of history and the route of migration, no strong break is discernible relative to typical representations of migration in Egyptian cinema. Most films dealing with emigration seem to be underpinned by a moral aimed at trying to limit emigration.

I. The New Wave of Migration Films

The corpus examined here comprises seven films in which emigration is the central theme, produced between the end of the 1990s and 2010. These years marked a turning point with respect to the technical quality of Egyptian films—which had slowly declined since the 1970s—in the context of the renewal of movie theatres, especially in shopping malls.¹²

The theme of emigration is not however a new one for Egyptian cinema. *Il-Nimr il-Iswid* [*The Black Tiger*, ‘Āṭif Sālim (Atef Salem), 1984] is among the great classics: it follows the rise of a young Egyptian who becomes a boxing champion in Germany. Directors inspired by neorealism, like Muḥammad Khān (Mohamed Khan) or Khayrī Bishāra (Kahyri Bishara) made two types of films in the genre in the 1980s and 1990s. The first type is about unsuccessful attempts to emigrate to the United States, for example *Amrīkā Shīkā Bīkā* [*Abracadabra America* – Khayri Bishara, 1993], *Arḍ al-Aḥlām* [*The Land of Dreams*, Dā’ūd ‘Abd Al-Sayyid (Daoud Abdel Sayed), 1993]. The second type are films about “returnees” from the Gulf, for example *Arḍ al-Muwāṭin* [*The Return of the Citizen* – Muḥammad Khān (Mohamed Khan), 1986] or *Sūbirmārkit* [*Supermarket* – M. Khan, 1990]. Both types of films were very critical of the society born of *infītāḥ*, and the last ones held migrants returning from the Gulf responsible for social changes in Egypt. They criticize the disintegration of society and family ties, the dangers of losing one’s identity, and the culture of consumerism and waste, all precipitated by the easy money made by emigrants.¹³ The change that has occurred since the 1990s lies less in theme (there are numerous continuities with earlier films on emigration) and more in the number of films, the increase in their budgets, and the conditions under which they are produced and distributed. The number of films made on location abroad has increased, and they increasingly evoke, not without clichés, the difficulties faced by Egyptian expatriates, while comparing them, in a game of mirrors, with the snares of Egyptian society.

A. Short synopsis of the films

- *Hāllū Amrīkā* [*Hello America* – Nādir Galāl (Nader Galal), 1998], with ‘Ādil Imām and Shīrīn

Bakhīt is not rich enough to marry his fiancée, ‘Adīla. When his cousin, an American citizen, gets him a visa to the United States, Bakhīt thinks he has gone to heaven. But once there with ‘Adīla, his disappointment is considerable: his cousin exploits him, so he leaves

12 The massive decline of movie theatres, which were mainly frequented by male spectators from the popular classes and which lost ground when VCR’s began to be introduced in the 1970s, stopped in the 1990s with the renovation of downtown cinemas and the construction of new movie theatres that made use of the latest technologies (digital sound and Dolby stereo) on the outskirts of the city, in shopping malls. A new type of “shopping mall film” began to appear at that time, specially conceived by producers to appeal to this new audience, consisting of young men and women of the middle classes (SHAFIK 2011: 1003). *Hammām fī Amstirdām* [*Hammam in Amsterdam* – Sa’īd Ḥāmid, 1999] is a classic example of this genre.

13 GAUTIER 1992.

his house and is forced to work odd jobs. Caught between the animosity of Americans toward Arabs and Muslims, and the self-interested solidarity proffered by Muslim fundamentalists, his dream becomes a nightmare. Having thought they would become millionaires, Bakhīt and ‘Adīla finally end up on the street, penniless.

- ***Hammām fī Amstīrdām*** [*Hammam in Amsterdam* – Sa‘īd Hāmīd (Saīd Hamed), 1999], with Muḥammed Hunaydī, Aḥmad al-Saqqā and Mūnā Līzā

Unemployed in Cairo, Hammām is unable to marry his fiancée. He therefore decides to go to Amsterdam, where one of his uncles succeeded in marrying a Dutch woman. With the help of other Egyptians, he progressively manages to find a stable job, falls in love with a Moroccan-Dutch woman named Ruqayya, and will even end up owning a restaurant.

- ***Al-Madīna*** [*The City* – Yusrī Naṣrallāh (Yousry Nasrallah), 1999], with Bāsim Samra, Rushdī Zam (Roschdy Zem), Inès de Medeiros

‘Alī, a young accountant who lives in Rōḍ al-Farag, a working class neighbourhood in Cairo, dreams of becoming an actor, to his father’s great disappointment. He decides to leave Egypt for Paris, where he lives for several years, struggling alongside other undocumented migrants and working as a boxer in fixed fights. Tired of hustling, he wants to return to Egypt, but is beat up by his former employers. Badly injured, he loses his memory but succeeds in returning to Egypt, where he finishes by fulfilling his dream of becoming an actor.

- ***Tāyih fī Amrīkā*** [*Lost in America* – Rāfī Girgis (Rafi Girgis), 2002], with Khālīd al-Nabawī, Ḥalā Shīḥā

Having arrived alone at the Los Angeles airport, Sharīf il-Maṣrī overhears two Egyptian-Americans, Naḥla and her daughter Nūr, confiding in one another that they do not know what ‘Ādil, the cousin they have come to meet, looks like. ‘Ādil, a rich peasant from the Delta, is supposed to come to meet Nūr in order to marry her. Sharīf decides to pass himself off as ‘Ādil and leaves with Naḥla and Nūr, who take him to their luxurious villa. The impostor is not immediately discovered since the real ‘Ādil is arrested by mistake while leaving the airport. Lost in the bad parts of Los Angeles, he is hit by stray bullets during some gang violence, and loses his memory. At the hospital he is treated by a young Lebanese-American nurse, who will take him home and help him to find Naḥla and Nūr. Meanwhile, Sharīf has fallen genuinely in love with Nūr and is unable to reveal to her his true identity. The real ‘Ādil turns up the day of the wedding between Nūr and Sharīf/‘Ādil, and unmask the impostor. But the film has a happy ending as the love marriage triumphs.

- ***Iskīndīriyya... Nyū Yūrḳ*** [*Alexandria–New York* – Yūsuf Shāhīn (Youssef Chahine), 2005], with Maḥmūd Ḥumayda, Yusrā, Aḥmad Yaḥyā

Shāhīn dramatizes his own life through the character of Yaḥyā, an Egyptian filmmaker in his seventies who travels to New York to receive a prize during a film festival. There he re-

meets Ginger, the woman he loved in his youth while he was a student in Pasadena. He learns from her that they have a son, Iskandar, conceived when they briefly crossed paths again, some twenty years earlier. But Iskandar rejects his father out of hatred toward Arabs.

- *Qaşş wa-Laşq* [*Cut and Paste* – Hāla Khalīl, 2006], with Ḥanān Turk and Sharīf Munīr
Gamīla is a young woman in her thirties, single and resourceful, who wants more than anything else to emigrate to New Zealand. To improve her chances of emigrating, she decides to marry Yūsuf, a young man she met randomly, who also wants to work abroad. They end up falling genuinely in love and stay in Egypt.

- *ʿAsal Iswid* [*Bitter Honey* – Khālīd Marʿī, 2010], with Aḥmad Ḥilmī and Idwārd
Maṣrī ʿArabī is an Egyptian who has lived in the United States for twenty years. He returns to Egypt after his father’s death to spend the holidays and see if he can live there. However he arrives in Cairo with only his Egyptian passport. The whole first part of the film shows the tribulations of an Egyptian-American who is a mere tourist and lacks all points of reference trying to navigate his way through a Kafkaesque Egypt where human beings are valued differently according to their nationality. Then, having succeeded in re-locating his old apartment, his childhood friend and his neighbours, he progressively rediscovers his Egyptian identity and the positive sides of Egypt. In the end he decides to stay for good.

B. Varied genres for simple narrative structures

This corpus includes films belonging to varied genres (dramas, melodramas, comedies, etc) and to different categories (*films d’auteur* versus popular films), as contestable as such categories are. The theme of emigration provides an entry point that cuts across the entire constellation of Egyptian cinema, both in terms of actors and directors. It includes great “stars” like the unavoidable comedy actor ʿĀdil Imām, who has been a fixture on the Egyptian scene since the 1960s, or the younger generations of the end of the 1990s, such as Muḥammad Hunaydī or Aḥmad Ḥilmī. Watched and liked by large audiences,¹⁴ these films reveal a great deal through the way they resonate in the collective imaginary, by expressing the dreams and fears of a large part of the Egyptian population. In this sense, they are of great interest to social science researchers.

Numerous factors underscore the artificiality of the distinction between popular films and *films d’auteur*, among others a certain predilection for the mixing of genres: Yūsuf Shāhīn’s *Alexandria–New York* oscillates between romantic tragedy and musical comedy, between autobiographical fiction and a pamphlet denouncing American imperialism. In a different register, Saʿīd Ḥāmid’s *Hammam in Amsterdam* also plays off the mixing of genres, combining comedic sketches with action scenes (a high speed car chase) or scenes where the characters break into song, all the while introducing a geopolitical dimension

14 When they were not seen in movie theatres, it was possible to watch them on cassette, DVD, or the internet. Several films in this corpus were evoked by Egyptian migrants living in France and the Emirates in the course of interviews.

through the character of Yūda, the Arabophone Israeli who claims the Pyramids belong to him¹⁵ and who is willing to do anything to prevent Hammām from getting a leg up in the world. In the end, what would seemingly allow for distinguishing “*films d’auteur*” from “popular films” is the presence of more complex narrative structures, a blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, a more driven aesthetic, more subtle play with cinematographic language, or also a more reflexive position relative to cinema. For example, in *Alexandria–New York* Shāhīn makes constant reference to Hollywood’s golden age, with its stars (the filmmaker’s youthful love is named Ginger, like Ginger Rogers) and musical comedies, to which he compares contemporary cinema in a manner that is unfavourable to the latter and is summed up in a compelling ellipsis between Fred Astaire and Sylvester Stallone.

The plot of the films in this corpus is always focused on a migrant, generally a man,¹⁶ potentially also a couple, like Bakhīt and ‘Adīla in *Hello America*, where Bakhīt nevertheless remains the main character. Only *Cut and Paste*, directed by a woman, Hāla Khalīl, has as its main character a young woman who wants to expatriate herself at any cost. The migrants are all originally from cities. The majority are from the middle or working classes. Whereas rural migrants are overrepresented in sociological and anthropological studies, they do not appear to interest filmmakers, who confine them to caricatural secondary roles, like the Upper Egyptian roommate in *Hamman in Amsterdam*.¹⁷ The narrative constructions across all seven films can be analyzed in terms of Greimas’s actantial model (1995).¹⁸ The hero’s departure corresponds with the quest for an object: in the majority of films, as it occurs in real life in Egypt, men migrate in order to **make enough money to marry**.¹⁹ In *Alexandria–New York*, the plot rests on a dual quest, for a **youthful love** and the **son** he has always dreamed of. In *The City* and *Cut and Paste*,²⁰ it consists rather of a **quest for autonomy**, of a will to emancipate one’s self from the **constraints imposed by family**. When

15 This seems to be an allusion to the fact that Menachem Begin, on his visit to the National Museum in Cairo in 1977, claimed that it were Jews who built the pyramids. It had been taken up in a similiary way already in Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s *al-Lagna* (1981).

16 On the silence on female migrants in social science literature on Egyptian migrations see AHMED 2011.

17 A Ramadan soap opera, *Misyū [Monsieur] Ramaḍān Mabruk Abū ‘l-‘Alamayn Ḥamūda* [Sāmīḥ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 2011], with Muḥammad Hunaydī, the famous actor from *Hamman in Amsterdam*, recounts the tribulations of a teacher from a village in the Delta, who discovers the harsh reality of the life of Egyptians in France.

18 Emerging from structural semiotics, the actantial model picks the narrative apart into a subject (the hero), the quest, and an object. The quest is initiated by a sender, for the benefit of a receiver. The characters, or other elements, which help the hero in his quest are called helpers, and those which hinder him, opponents. To obtain the object of his quest, the hero must go through a series of tests or ordeals. – For a valuable short introduction into the theory, cf. HÉBERT 2006.

19 [Editor’s note: Here and in the following, terms emphasized in **bold** indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project’s search for GUMBRECHT’ian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed, cf. Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier. The emphasis is the editors’.]

20 In *Cut & Paste*, the actantial model is inverted, since the desired object is migration itself, and marriage becomes a helper, which will aid the heroine in pursuing her quest. With its happy ending, the traditional structure is re-established: Gamīla finally falls in love with Yūsuf, and the question of emigration ceases to be central.

‘Alī, the main character in Naṣrallāh’s film, is asked by his father, who disapproves of the son’s departure for France, “You think Paris will save you?”, ‘Alī replies “No, but there I will be really on my own.”

Migration appears to be a personal choice,²¹ never something imposed by the family. This is contrary to the portrayal by novelists (*The Other Country*, by Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Magīd) or anthropologists and geographers²² who, in rural areas, often explain departures as part of a familial strategy in which the family member considered most apt to succeed is designated. The migrant is therefore not presented as a victim, as is often the case in the Egyptian press,²³ but rather as an actor responsible for his own destiny. *Hammam in Amsterdam* ends in success. The hero manages to overcome the three trials described by the actantial model: qualifying (finding work), principal (getting married to a beautiful Moroccan-Dutch woman) and glorifying (ending up as the owner of a large restaurant). However in *Hello America* and *The City*, the heroes gain nothing from their expatriation. Along their paths, strewn with pitfalls, the protagonists encounter characters who help them in their quest (the “helpers”). These are either Egyptians who migrated earlier (Adriano, Hammām’s friend²⁴) or **second generation Arabs**, generally women born of bi-national couples (the Lebanese-American nurse who helps ‘Ādil recover his memory in *Lost in America*, or Ruqayya, the young Moroccan-Dutch woman who works in the same hotel as Hammām and who he ends up marrying). Relations with citizens of the destination countries are few or are limited to the role of opponents, that is, those who hinder the quest, such as the police officers or customs agents who systematically impede the characters’ freedom of movement. The constraints resulting from the **Schengen** area or the closure of the American borders have been deeply interiorized by the filmmakers.

II. Mapping the Foreign Countries of Egyptian Migrations: West is Best?

Whereas Egyptian migrants for the most part live in the Gulf (three quarters), followed only secondarily by North America (12.5%) and Europe (12.5%), the corpus of films reflects an orientation that favours the West: four films evoke migration to the United States, two to Europe, and one to New Zealand. Why do the films generally use migration to the **West as their frame** when Arab countries are in reality the principal destination? Novels about migration, for their part, frequently evoke emigration to the Gulf. The answer can perhaps be located, first, in the conditions related to the production of films. It is quite difficult to obtain a permit to film in the Gulf countries,²⁵ all the more so to denounce the conditions under which Egyptian workers are exploited. In addition, the answer also stems

21 If we follow the actantial model, the sender and the receiver are conflated in the hero.

22 SAAD 2005; MÜLLER-MAHN 2005.

23 CANTINI & GRUNTZ 2010.

24 Adriano is a Copt and this friendship between the characters is celebrated in the film as symbolic of the national alliance between Christians and Muslims.

25 This explains why the films of the 1980s focused above all on the question of return from the Gulf countries (GAUTIER 1992). Since the 2000s, films have been made in the Gulf, but with limited political significance.

from the cinematographic genre, which has been heavily influenced by the canons of Hollywood: the Western “elsewhere” [*barra*] always seems to make for a better plot in cinema, even if it transforms itself into a nightmare.

A. The American Dream or the American Nightmare?

The portrayal of the **United States** in Egyptian films is a fairly uniformly unappealing one, even in the films that are not inculpatory, like *Lost in America*. If the American Dream is often part of migrants’ imaginary, their encounter with reality invariably reveals the darker side of the American way of life. In *Hello America*, the main character, Bakhīt, imagines that in the United States he will quickly become a millionaire, marry a tall, beautiful blond in order to get citizenship, and end up one day—why not—President of the United States, since everything is possible in this land of immigrants. His destiny reveals itself to be the exact opposite. The United States are generally depicted as a place of racism toward African-Americans and widespread Islamophobia and xenophobia toward Arabs. The characters are barely off the plane before being suspected of being drug traffickers or terrorists. In *Hello America* a strong-smelling Egyptian cheese that falls out of the baggage compartment sets off a bacteriological alarm in the plane and Bakhīt and ‘Adīla are arrested. In *Lost in America*, ‘Adīl is stopped at customs as the *mulūkhiyya*²⁶ that he is carrying in his bags is mistaken for drugs. **Urban violence** is often depicted: almost all the main characters are attacked and robbed at least once.

The director of *Hello America* endeavours to turn the advantages of personal freedom into a critique of **loose morals**. Bakhīt enthusiastically supports a street protest until he vexedly realizes it is a demonstration in favour of gay marriage. Bakhīt and ‘Adīla later happen upon a couple languorously kissing in a car; they are the ones finally picked up by the police, for voyeurism. Shocked to see his cousin, who has become an American citizen, allowing his daughter to go out with her boyfriend, Bakhīt also endures his fiancée’s liberation when ‘Adīla decides to go out to a night club without him, scantily dressed. She responds to his indignation by countering “I am a free woman in a free country.” The director also introduces a political dimension: **freedom of expression** leads to the development of fundamentalist groups. Kicked out of his cousin’s house, Bakhīt is scooped up by an Imam whose preaching is virulently anti-American. The latter manages to convince Bakhīt to marry Barbara, a poor, overweight, alcoholic, black woman, in order to get American citizenship. Toward the end of the film, Bakhīt gives a patriotic speech on television, condemning American **imperialism** and affirming that Egypt has no need for America’s **military and financial aid**.

For Yūsuf Shāhīn, who was initially hopelessly enamored with the American model, the denunciation of the myth is less moral than political. *Alexandria–New York*, which is dedicated to Edward Said, recounts 50 years of turbulent relations between the filmmaker and the United States, made of love and rage, which end in a virulent tract against American imperialism. As its title suggests, the film operates on the basis of a **rhetoric of oppo-**

26 The plant, which is made into soup in Egypt is considered an Egyptian “national” dish and has hence come to symbolise Egyptianity.

sition, contrasting the myth of **Alexandria**—symbol of **cosmopolitanism, culture**²⁷ and **tolerance**—with a vision of America as **racist, arrogant** and mired in **cultural mediocrity**. In order to avoid falling into a simple antithesis and to honour his love of America, Shāhīn plays with the characters' symbolism. Yahyà, the director and his alter ego, who refuses in the first instance to go to the festival in New York as a sign of protest against America's political support for Israel, embodies the **conscience** of the Arab world. Ginger, his youthful love, personifies a soft and luminous face of the America of long ago, the one that fed the dreams of Shāhīn the adolescent and who continues to haunt him. Their son, Iskander, who refuses to recognize his father, on the pretext that he is Arab and that as a dancer his milieu includes many **Jews** (the argument seems rather undeveloped!²⁸), represents the dark side of contemporary America, with its **xenophobia, intransigence, and vanity**, all symbols of a society in **decline**. The reductiveness of the characters' symbolism, along with the often caricatural discourse, weaken Shāhīn's argument. Thus, both commercial films and *films d'auteur* have in common a very negative image of the United States, which "reflects the deep **mistrust** of Egyptian intellectuals toward American democracy and foreign policy".²⁹ This dark and ambivalent image of the United States, which can also be found in literature,³⁰ pre-dates September 11, since the most anti-American film of the corpus, *Hello America*, was released in 1998. Paradoxically, whereas resentment toward the United States grew steadily in Egypt over the 2000s, filmmakers during that period preferred the path of **introspectiveness** toward Egyptian **identity** (*Bitter Honey*) over re-doubled nationalism.

B. A Safe-haven in Europe ?

According to Ala Al-Hamarneh, Europe is depicted in a much more welcoming light than America in Egyptian films on emigration.³¹ One finds there a greater number of generous and likable characters, prepared to help Egyptians. In *The City*, 'Alī writes to his friend saying that "Paris is exactly like Cairo." Europe represents less of a figure of radical alterity than the United States. While violence can also be found there, it is more circumscribed to **organized crime** networks (*Hamman in Amsterdam, The City*). The negative characters who dupe freshly arrived migrants are either, with the caricatural character Yūda in *Ham-*

27 SHĀHĪN evokes the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine CAVAFY (1863-1933) and the novelist Lawrence DURRELL (1912-1990), author of the famous *Alexandria Quartet*.

28 However SHĀHĪN establishes a distinction between Jews and Israelis. While Yahyà denounces the virulence of Israeli politics, he praises the merits of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, evoking his three best high school friends, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim.

29 AL-HAMARNEH 2005, <<https://en.qantara.de/content/arab-cinema-cinematic-migration-to-the-west-in-egyptian-film>>.

30 See, e.g., Ṣun'allāh IBRĀHĪM, *Amrīkānī* (2003); 'Alā' al-ASWĀNĪ, *Chicago* (2006); 'Izz al-Dīn Shukrī FISHĪR, *Ināq 'inda Jisr Brūklīn* (2011).

31 *Ibid*. In interviews with Egyptians living in France or who had returned to Egypt, several comments were made about the greater cultural proximity between Europe and Egypt, in order to distance both the United States on one hand, and the Gulf countries, on the other.

mam in Amsterdam, Israelis—the enemy par excellence in political films³²—or Arab migrants, who are depicted as scam artists or people who have lost their moral values.

While it does not represent other Arab countries, this corpus does present a very interesting image of North Africans living in Europe, one which is far from the myth of a single Arab nation or solidarity between brethren countries. In *The City*, Yusrī Naṣrallāh depicts a French person of North African origin (Rushdī Zam/Roschdy Zem), who plays the role of an **intermediary** between clandestine Arab migrants and employers in the informal economy. While the sociological description is accurate, the character’s **ambivalence** is salient: he presents himself as a **benefactor** for his Arab “brothers”, but does not hesitate to **exploit** or **betray** them. When he is chased by the police, he steals ‘Alī’s **passport** and assumes his identity in order to travel to Egypt. But he is not a wholly negative character, since he will later try to compensate ‘Alī for his wrongdoing, just as in *Hamam in Amsterdam*, the Westernized uncle who chased his nephew from his home saves him at the last minute by lending him money to buy his restaurant.

While the portrait of Europe may be less grim than that of the United States, it must be acknowledged that some representations are common to both: the omnipresence of police officers persecuting illegal migrants, racism against Arabs, or the impossibility of belonging to two cultures at once. In *Hamam in Amsterdam*, like in *Hello America*, we encounter the character of the cousin or the uncle, who left Egypt long ago, has become rich, and has married a Westerner. They each have a nice big house, two children who don’t speak Arabic, one of whom is an adolescent daughter who is the right age to have a boyfriend—so as to denounce lax morals—and the other a young son who knows nothing about his country or religion of origin. In both cases, the newly arrived migrants are quickly kicked out of their relative’s home. With respect to the older generations, integration is thus presented as assimilation: Bakhīt strikes out at his cousin saying “You’re no longer Egyptian” after a violent altercation resulting from his discovery that his niece is having sexual relations with her boyfriend. The **boyfriend** complex appears to constitute the lynchpin of Egyptian identity, as the filmmakers define it.

Paradoxically, bi-national characters are presented in a more positive light, with the character of the migrant’s girlfriend, who speaks Arabic perfectly (the Lebanese-American nurse in *Lost in America* or Ruqayya, the Moroccan-Dutch woman in *Hamam in Amsterdam*), but they are never of Egyptian origin, as though the “**graft**” between Egypt and the West were not viable.

III. Migration and Identities Rhetorics: The Persistence of the National Paradigm

If these films are very critical of the countries of arrival, they also harshly critique, in parallel, contemporary Egyptian society, while exalting traditional Egyptian values. But one hardly finds the subversive tone that may exist in satiric literature, described by Richard JACQUEMOND in the present dossier, since the social critique is usually guided by moral aims.

32 ARMBRUST 2011.

A. Emigration, or the Perils of Losing One's Identity

Research on Egyptian migrations can be divided into two categories. An optimistic approach, of neoliberal inspiration, affirms that in the long term the people and money that circulate between Egypt and the Gulf countries will **rebalance** wealth and salary inequalities.³³ A pessimistic approach, of Marxist inspiration, deplors the increase in **imports** caused by migrants' return and their negative influence on Egyptian society, where **pan-Arab** ideals have been replaced by the pursuit of **individual happiness**, through the development of **consumer society**.³⁴ Films and novels tend to be more in the second vein. Like novelists,³⁵ filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s often deployed the theme of a dual feeling of *ghurba*, that is, the feeling of **nostalgia** and **exile** felt by Egyptians who live far from their birth country and are confronted with a strong feeling of **alterity**, but also the feeling of **strangeness (alienation)** that they experience on their return, insofar as they feel **outside** their society of origin. In *Hello America*, *ghurba* is evoked in a burlesque fashion: in order to feel closer to their country, Bakhīt and 'Adīla start smoking **sheesha** in their room, setting off a fire alarm.

The films place greater emphasis on the **loss of identity**. On their arrival, the characters generally find themselves in a *terra incognita*, without any points of reference.³⁶ In *Hammām in Amsterdam*, Hammām progressively loses all his money, his uncle's address, and his passport. The title *Lost in America* already says a great deal, and 'Ādil loses the address of his cousin and finds himself in Los Angeles' bad neighbourhoods. Injured, he loses his **memory**, just like 'Alī in *The City*, who also suffers from **amnesia**. Emigration thus directly threatens migrants' bodies and memories. In a similar register, identity theft is a frequent dramatic device (Sharīf pretends to be 'Ādil in *Lost in America*, and Rushdī steals 'Alī's passport in *The City*). The only points of reference they possess—**relatives** who expatriated themselves long ago—turn out to be **unreliable**: as we have seen, in becoming **Westernized**, they lose their sense of **familial solidarity**, which is replaced solely by ties of money. In *Hello America* Bakhīt's cousin refuses to lend him money, but offers to hire him as a handyman for a mediocre salary.

The centrality of questions of **identity** is manifest right down to the choice of the characters' names. Several of them have highly symbolic names, like Maṣrī, which literally means Egyptian. The full name of the hero of *Bitter Honey*, of whose past we know absolutely nothing, is Maṣrī 'Arabī, meaning literally Egyptian Arab, and that is also the family name of Sharīf, the hero of *Lost in America*. Thus, it is the **national imaginary** that is threatened by emigration.

33 BIRKS & SINCLAIR 1980.

34 GRUNTZ & PAGÈS-EL KAROUI 2013.

35 See, for instance, al-Ghīṭānī's *Risālat al-baṣā'ir fī 'l-maṣā'ir* (1989). About migration literature and cinema in Egypt, see PAGÈS-EL KAROUI 2013.

36 This constitutes a *topos* for emigration films, which can also be found in Indian or Iranian cinematography, for example.

B. Nationalist Credos: Discouraging Emigration

For filmmakers, as for researchers in the social sciences,³⁷ expatriation is generally envisaged as a temporary experience, due to migrants’ supposed strong attachment to Egypt. The question of **return** is therefore almost always evoked: generally, the hero returns to his country after having lived through a painful experience abroad. At the end of *Hello America*, Bakhīt and ‘Adīla are back at their point of departure: still broke and unmarried. This moral clearly aims to emphasize to future migrants that emigration success stories are rare and that many emigrants experience very difficult conditions without succeeding in improving their lot. Even in *Hamam in Amsterdam*, one of the rare films to depict social mobility through emigration, the narrative ends with a brief homecoming scene at the Cairo **airport**. And it is important to underscore that the hero’s success is associated with his “attachment to Egyptian identity, due to his belonging to the popular classes of the Egyptian street, but also his moral convictions that place him in (friendly) opposition to the film’s secondary, and heavily Westernized character, Adriano”.³⁸ Apart from the film *Lost in America*, the underlying thesis seems to be that the migrant gains nothing by emigrating, and indeed in *The City*, he ends up realizing his dreams back in Cairo, where he becomes an actor. The dominant cinematographic discourse therefore gives the impression that it is seeking to discourage emigration, all the while fiercely criticizing current living conditions in Egypt, which are the principal cause of the massive expatriation of Egyptians.

This patriotic vision is not expressed in the same manner by all the filmmakers. A chauvinistic nationalism comes through in *Hello America* and *Hamam in Amsterdam*. The sentiment of identity expressed by Shāhīn is more complex, consisting of a threefold **belonging**: Arab (reference to Israel is recurrent), Egyptian, and of course also Alexandrian, as the titles of his three-part autobiography suggest.³⁹ The myth of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism,⁴⁰ as bygone as it may be, is frequently invoked by the filmmaker and owes a great deal to his autobiography: he was born in the 1920s to a Christian family of Lebanese origin.

Naṣrallāh’s vision can be differentiated from one of nationalism, since according to him “there is no elsewhere. Wherever you go, you will find the same thing”.⁴¹ This approaches a negatively defined transnationalism. He discovered this phrase in the 1970s while working in Lebanon, when he read a poem by Cavafy entitled *The City*, which provided the inspiration for the title and the theme of his film. The scale of belonging here is no longer the nation, but the city. Around the world, all cities resemble one another in their **exploitation** and **rejection** of the **poor** and **marginal**. That is what ‘Alī, his main character, learns during his time in France. He decides to flee to Paris after the Rōḍ al-Farag bulk market where he works is moved to Cairo’s distant periphery, in the middle of the desert, and he

37 ZOHRY & HARRELL-BOND 2003.

38 SHAFIK 2011: 1029.

39 *Iskindiriyya... lēh* (Alexandria... Why?, 1978), *Haddūta maṣriyya* (An Egyptian Tale, 1982), *Iskindiriyya kamān wi-kamān* (Alexandria Again and Forever, 1990), *Iskindiriyya–Nyū Yūrk* (Alexandria–New York, 2004).

40 ABÉCASSIS 2003.

41 Interview of Yusrī Naṣrallāh by Pascale GHAZALEH, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 1999, n° 441.

refuses to move along with it. But his experience in France is a failure. At the end of the film, 'Alī's dream, to become an actor, comes true in Egypt, due less to the country's intrinsic qualities than the magic of cinema. A scene shows him poor, crammed into a packed Cairo bus [*zaḥma*], then through a camera movement the shot widens and we see a director shouting "Cut", after which we see 'Alī climb into a beautiful convertible driven by the famous actress Yusrā. Here again, the director invites the viewer to see returning to the home country as the only solution, notwithstanding his vigorous critique of Egypt's social situation.

C. 'Asal Iswid, or The false blurring of the Egyptian/Foreigner binary code

'*Asal Iswid*⁴² is a very popular comedy by Khālid Mar'ī,⁴³ with the famous star Aḥmad Ḥilmī. It has been seen and is appreciated by many Egyptians. It was released in 2010, just before the revolution and the film denounces all of the problems and frustrations Egyptians experience in their daily lives (**unemployment, corruption, housing shortages**, etc.) and which led people to revolt against the regime. It is the story of Maṣrī, an Egyptian returning after twenty years in the United States, where he became a citizen. The story is about how he will be reintegrated into Egyptian society, despite all its defects and shortcomings.

1. Narratives of how to be reborn as an Egyptian

Bitter Honey (2010) is a particularly interesting film for analyzing how the question of return is coupled with social critique, since it presents a view that is opposite to the one in films from the 1980s. Whereas the earlier films emphasized the responsibility of the émigré for social changes in Egypt and depicted his progressive marginalization relative to his family and Egyptian society, this is a narrative of **reintegration**. Maṣrī, who went to the United States as a child, returns to Egypt twenty years later. He has become a perfect stranger in his country of origin: he speaks **Egyptian Arabic** with an American accent; because of his **dress** he is taken for a **tourist** and is swindled accordingly; an émigré in a city that he no longer recognizes, he can no longer find his apartment; he no longer masters the etiquette of Egyptian society since when his neighbours propose to lodge him, he offers to pay for their **hospitality**. In sum, he finds he lacks all points of reference, precisely like migrants arriving abroad. Like those migrants, he is initially subject to a series of ordeals, which in this case are a testimony to the difficulties Egyptians endure on a daily basis (**bu-reaucracy**, corruption, problems of housing and unemployment, **mediocrity** in the education system). The first part of the film looks like a tourist horror comedy.

In the second part, he finally discovers the positive sides of Egypt: the spirit of **resourcefulness**⁴⁴ and mutual assistance, the warm **family** atmosphere of neighbours during

42 The title conveys the idea of something that should be nice, but is in reality bitter or harsh. Literally, it refers to molasses.

43 He is the editor of *Cut and Paste* and a director of TV series (*El Ahd, El Saba Wassaya, Neeran Sadiqa*) and films (*18 Days, Bolbol Hayran 2010, Aasefala el-'izag, Taymour & Shafiq*).

44 Cf. chapter on "Everyday Life (Ordinary Citizen as Hero)" in Elena CHITI's contribution to the present dossier.

Ramadan. In the end he decides to stay and settle in Egypt (he even loses his American accent). The film thus presents a more optimistic vision of the second generations, for whom reintegration is possible, but at the cost of affirming Egyptian identity, symbolized by a speech pronounced by the patriarch of his **neighbours**’ family, who in substance says: “granted, in America you have **freedom** and financial **comfort**, but here, in Egypt, even if we are drowning in problems, we remain **patient** and are in **solidarity** with one another, because we know how to relinquish ourselves into the **hands of God**”.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that Maṣrī’s reintegration into Egyptian identity takes place through his neighbours, an extension of, or here a substitute for the family, which constitutes the foundation that cements Egypt as a nation.

2. The *khawāga* complex

The first part of the film is made possible by a plot device by which Maṣrī enters Egypt on an Egyptian passport, having left his American passport at home. Following on from this, a series of sketches reveal to Maṣrī how much more the life of an American is worth compared to that of an Egyptian. For example, the receptionist at his hotel refuses to give him the room he reserved from the United States on the pretext that he now has an Egyptian passport, and he encounters the same problem at other hotels. *ʿAsal Iswid* is a perfect illustration of the ambivalence of the “*khawāga*”⁴⁶ complex”. This expression is often used to refer to Egyptians who have an inferiority complex in regard to their Egyptian identity and who adopt and valorize Western culture. This may be interpreted as “a kind of post-colonial trauma” and “a side-effect of globalism”,⁴⁷ and is used as a means of social distinction by elites to preserve very strong social distance with lower classes. “Egypt is the only country in the world where foreigners are treated much better than the local citizens” is a common belief among Egyptians.⁴⁸ In this sense, the complex may be seen as the reverse of patriotism. But in fact, the *khawāga* complex seems rather like a feeling which stems from both a sense of **superiority** and **inferiority**. The former is manifested in condescension and resentment towards foreigners, the latter in envy and thoughtless emulation. The two emotions are paradoxically often expressed at the same time, as shown in the film. The film ends in strong praise of Egyptian **resilience**. Like most of the other emigration films, *ʿAsal Iswid* shares the same end and the same moral: however harsh life is in Egypt, it is better to live in the country than abroad.

45 The film’s central argument is summed up in the song that plays during the closing credits: *What makes Egypt so special?*

46 *Khawāga* “sir, Mr. (title and form of address, esp., for Christians and Westerners, used with or without the name of the person so addressed” (WEHR/COWAN 1979), “European or western foreigner” (BADAWI/HINDS 1986). – Etymologically, the word goes back to Persian *khwāga* “master”.

47 GOLIA 2004: 127.

48 In Mexico, the concept of *malinchism* expresses disdain for those who are attracted by foreign values, thinking them superior, of better quality and worthy of imitation. See HANCOCK 2010.

IV. Conclusion: No Transnational Turn for the Egyptian Cinema?

Although filmmakers espouse a critical vision of migration, in condemning both host countries and Egyptian society, they usually link migration with rhetorics of identity, depicting experiences in host countries as ones of loss of memory, alienation, nostalgia... But directors usually seem less interested in the encounter with the Other, than in the risks for Egyptians of losing their national identity when living abroad. Emigration films are directed by filmmakers who have often themselves experienced expatriation (the United States for Shāhīn, Lebanon for Naṣrallāh, and the director of *Lost in America*, Rāfī Girgis, is an Egyptian-American). These filmmakers often share a nationalist posture, which tends to overestimate the external causes of social change, manipulating the rhetoric of imported versus authentic local Egyptian values. Egyptian identity is considered to be coherent, stable and fixed, and usually evolves around the ideas of moral values and preservation and control over women's bodies, but also (though to a lesser extent) clothing and food. So, contrary to European societies that link immigration with national identity, in Egypt, it is more that emigration threatens the national imaginary.

These national values seem to be embedded in the **Egyptian soil**, since Egyptians abroad risk losing their national identity outside Egypt. This idea of identity as produced by a **place**, as something which risks being lost if one leaves this space, is also very present in Egyptian literature, since Maḥfūz's novels.⁴⁹ Whereas the transnational paradigm is dominant in research on Egyptian migrations,⁵⁰ and is fairly widespread in the cinematography of neighbouring countries—North African, Lebanese or Turkish⁵¹—it is very much in the minority in Egyptian cinema, which remains embedded in a strong methodological nationalism.⁵² Egyptian films can thus be said to belong more to the category of “exilic film”,⁵³ centred on the country of origin and the desire to return to it, and saturated with narratives of retrospection, loss, absence, solitude and alienation.⁵⁴

What theoretical insights can be drawn? As fascinating as Appadurai's analyses (1996) inviting us to illuminate transnational practices through the imaginary are, his concept of “ethnoscape” requires some refinement. He postulates, in a framework of globalization, that the acceleration of movements and the use of new modes of communication and forms of information necessarily produce multiple and hybrid forms of identification, in sum, a cosmopolitan outlook. Egyptian cinema shows, on the contrary, the omnipresence of the question of return and a strong attachment to and identification with the homeland, with a

49 Cf. in this context also the importance of the “house” or “alley” metaphors, see S. GUTH 2011.

50 AHMED 2011; MÜLLER-MAHN 2005; SAAD 2005.

51 MENNEL 2010.

52 WIMMER & GLICK SCHILLER 2002. In the end, only Naṣrallāh's *The City* comes close, and then only in part, to being a transnational film, both through the circumstances under which it was filmed (as a France-Egypt co-production, with French actors) and its theme.

53 NAFICY 2001.

54 He establishes two other categories: the “diasporic film” (multi-situated between the home country and the different poles of the diaspora and dominated by narratives of plurality and hybridity) and the “post-colonial ethnic film”, centered on the host country and the politics of the hyphen (divided identity and double absence).

binary codification of Egyptian and Foreigner. No contemporary Egyptian filmmaker seems ready to celebrate the “pleasures of hybridity”⁵⁵ born of emigration.

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55 GÖKTÜRK 1999: 7.

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