L’Egitto di Nasser


La sconfitta del 1948, che segnò l’inizio della diaspora palestinese, è definita con il termine Nakba (Catastrofe) ed è il primo spartiacque della storia contemporanea del mondo arabo.

La tragedia subita dall’esercito egiziano ad al-Falūja inasprì i sentimenti anti-monarchici e anti-britannici diffusi in Egitto, dove le proteste popolari si erano intensificate sin dalla fine della II Guerra Mondiale, e spinse Nasser a creare con altri giovani iscritti all’Accademia Militare, nel 1938, un movimento clandestino denominato Liberi Ufficiali (1949), del cui Comitato Esecutivo egli sarà eletto presidente; poi chiederà al Generale Muhammad Naguib (1901-1994) di essere formalmente il capo del gruppo intenzionato a rovesciare il governo.

1951: a ottobre, il governo Wafāl annunciò l’abrogazione unilaterale del Trattato Anglo-Egiziano del 1936; poi si ebbero manifestazioni antibritanniche al Cairo e altrove; e si attivò la resistenza armata popolare contro le forze d’occupazione inglesi ritrattesi nella zona del Canale di Suez.

1952: 25 gennaio, truppe inglesi attaccarono una stazione della polizia a Ismailia (città sul Canale), uccidendo numerosi poliziotti egiziani e provocando i domandi proteste popolari sfociate nell’Incendio del Cairo; 23 luglio, gli Ufficiali Liberi diretti da Nasser attuavano il colpo di Stato volto ad abrogare la monarchia e a raggiungere l’effettiva indipendenza dell’Egitto https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_fZG6_SDUs; re Fāriq (ultimo reggente della dinastia turco-albanese fondata da Muhammad Ali) dovette abdicare e andare in esilio; fu creato il Comitato di Comando Rivoluzionario come governo provvisorio del Paese che praticamente veniva, costi, guidato da egiziani per la prima volta dopo quasi duemila anni di dominazioni straniere consecutive (a partire dalla conquista di Alessandro Magno nel 332 a.C., che sanciva la fine dell’era faraonica); a settembre, fu approvata la riforma agraria; a dicembre, fu sospesa la Costituzione.

1953: a gennaio, furono banditi i partiti politici; a giugno, fu proclamata la Repubblica e Naguib ne diventò il Presidente.

1954: furono chiusi i giornali legati a gruppi politici prerivoluzionari e arrestati molti giornalisti; fu siglato l’accordo anglo-egiziano che prevedeva il ritiro delle truppe britanniche dalla zona del Canale entro venti mesi; Nasser subì un attentato attribuito ai Fratelli Musulmani la cui originizzazione – fondata nel 1928 – fu sciolta; Naguib fu destituito e l’Egitto rimase provvisoriamente senza Presidente; Nasser divenne primo ministro.

1955: Nasser pronunciò un discorso memorabile alla Conferenza di Bandung, primo grande incontro del periodo postcoloniale tra Stati asiatici e africani, in cui si stesero le basi per la formazione del movimento dei Paesi non-Allineati.

1956: 23 giugno referendum tramite il quale fu adottata la nuova Costituzione (che garantiva il diritto di voto alle donne e le parti di provenienza e divenne Presidente Nasser che il 26 luglio annunciò la nazionalizzazione del Canale di Suez, con l’intenzione di usare i relativi proventi per finanziare la costruzione della Grande Diga di Aswan https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lsvpy-nMQwc, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtXah1qR14; a ottobre, Israele attaccò Gaza e il Sinai, con il pretesto di contrastare la resistenza dei fedayin, cioè i ‘partigiani’ palestinesi, e puntò verso il Canale; anche Gran Bretagna e Francia entrarono nel conflitto. La ‘Aggressione Tripartita’ contro l’Egitto, ovvero seconda guerra arabo-israeliana, terminò nel gennaio del 1957 grazie alle pressioni di Onu, Usa e Urss che riuscirono a imporre la fine delle ostilità, facendo di Nasser il più prestigioso leader del mondo arabo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYXy6UbQBl. Dopo questa vittoria politica si iniziarono a vedere i risultati delle riforme sociali previste dal programma nasseriano: distribuzione di terreni ai contadini più poveri, assistenza sanitaria nelle aree rurali, abbassamento degli affitti, istruzione gratuita a ogni livello, sostegno all’emancipazione femminile.

1958: l’Egitto e la Siria formarono la Repubblica Araba Unita, con Nasser come Presidente.

1959: il regime lanciò un’ondata di arresti contro i dissidenti di sinistra e bandi la Federazione Generale dei Sindacati di cui facevano parte anche alcuni comunisti; il sistema della rappresentanza sindacale fu poi riorganizzato e controllato dal governo.


1964: scarcerazione di prigionieri politici di sinistra grazie ad un’amnistia.

1966(?): Nasser risponde ai Fratelli Musulmani sul socialismo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExonavilQs e sul velo islamico https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fswb4a9jcU
1967: Guerra dei Sei Giorni lanciata il 5 giugno dagli israeliani che occuperanno il Sinai egiziano, le alture siriane del Golan e i territori palestinesi di Cisgiordania, Gaza e Gerusaleme Est; gli Arabi usano il termine Naksa (ricaduta) per indicare questa loro seconda sconfitta nel conflitto contro Israele che è anche il secondo spaitacque della loro storia contemporanea. Assumendo in pieno la responsabilità della disfatta militare, il 9 giugno Nasser annunciarlo alla radio di volere rassegnare le dimissioni, ma gli egiziani manifestarono subito in massa per pregarlo di restare in carica [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcrSH1Mf4mU 1968; proteste popolari in cui riapparvero timidamente anche alcuni Fratelli Musulmani; parziale svolta democratica di Nasser. 1970: 27 settembre Nasser convocò urgentemente al Cairo un summit arabo per trovare una soluzione al conflitto tra l’esercito giordano e i fedai, noto come Settembre Nero; riuscì dopo un negoziato estuante a portare il re Hussein di Giordania e il presidente dell’Olp Yasser Arafat a firmare un accordo; e il 28 settembre morì d’infarto; circa sei milioni di egiziani scenderanno in strada per dare l’ultimo saluto al loro leader carismatico, formando il più imponente corteo funebre del XX secolo.

Film su Nasser:

Film “La porta aperta” (al-Bāb al-maftūḥ, 1963)

Long hailed as one of the first feminist Arab novels, Latifa al-Zayat’s Al-Bab al-Maftuh (The Open Door, 1960) remains a surprising read more than five decades after it was published. Zayat’s debut novel is re-issued this month in English — with Marilyn Booth’s translation from 2000 — under AUC Press’s Hoopee imprint.

Running from 1946 to the Tripartite Aggression of 1956, one of Egypt’s most pivotal decades, The Open Door reflects its author’s biography. Due to its psychological insight, imaginative suppleness and keen awareness of its characters’ fallibility, but also because it binds the struggle of ambitious women to the fight for national independence, and equates British occupation with oppressive patriarchal norms, a potentially run-of-the-mill coming-of-age story about a frustrated young woman becomes a literary triumph.

The book opens on February 21, 1946, a day when Mahmùd (Laila’s brother) gets a British bullet to the leg in Ismailiya Square, and a few days before 11-year-old Laila gets her first period. Living in Cairo’s Sayyida Zaynab neighbourhood, Laila’s father is a pious middle-class civil servant, her mother is a housewife and her brother Mahmùd — the family’s pride and joy — is a politically active medical student.

Laila is not exceptionally beautiful, and in giving her a harsh voice and a rash personality, Zayat highlights her shortcomings. But Laila has an inquisitive mind and an independent personality. From the outset, she questions everything and cannot fathom why men treat her the way they do, or why she is unable to be like them. From the simple questioning of an 11-year-old to the lofty ambitions of a 16-year-old, Laila is taught that the most a woman can aspire to is to preserve the honor of her father and then her future husband, bear children and keep a home. When Laila gets her period, her father responds by wailing and bitterly calling her “walyya,” Egyptian slang to indicate the burden and shame of having to be a woman’s guardian. It’s an extremely painful scene.

Zayat never explicitly uses the word patriarchy, but she makes its claustrophobia and injustice jump from every one of the novel’s 360 pages.

Some passages from The Open Door feel as if they are of the here and now. Reflecting Zayat’s Marxist ideological affiliation, the characters’ internal and personal lives are paired with crucial historical events, raising questions that still resonate. What kind of society do we envision living in? What is the price of colonialism? Why do people embrace a corrupt political authority, even when it only manages to sustain a mere modicum of stability? As Laila’s father’s political affiliations are at odds with anything remotely progressive or emancipatory, the novel relentlessly critiques the complicity and regressive apathy of the petty bourgeoisie and the older generation.

But even more relevant are the many debates her characters have on the possibility of politics in the absence of any popular support, specifically during times of resistance. We read of people becoming tired of politics and of the savagery of different governments’ oppression. The protagonists lose hope and withdraw into themselves, losing interest not just in politics but in anything related to a public sphere. The personal is tied to the political, and even though historical details are often glossed over — and Zayat remains silent about injustices under then-president Gamal Abdel Nasser — we can trace the rise and fall of the nationalist movement through the ebb and flow of the characters’ sense of being in the world. As Laila’s lover tells her:

You were trapped in the circle where most members of our class are trapped, the circle of the ego. The circle of caution and stagnation. The circle of norms, the same norms that made Essam cheat on you, and made Mahmùd feel isolated in the Battle of the Canal. The norms that made our class stand for a long time, facing the nationalist movement, as a spectator. The same norms that you and I hate, and that everyone that aspires to a better future to our people and our nation hates.

No Egyptian novelist had captured this personal-public connection with such sensitivity: Naguib Mahfouz — although he always had a panoramic view, God looking on to his mortal subjects, and always in a style that is less personal, more transcendental or mystical — and Ihsan Abdel Qudous, in La Tutfi al-Shams (Don’t Turn off the Sun, 1960) despite his usual sensationalist thrillers, come close, but of course neither give a woman’s perspective on women’s roles in the world.

But The Open Door is not just about creating an empowered, questioning female protagonist: Zayat goes as far as re-imagining gender dynamics in modern Egyptian society and the kind of relationships men and women should have. She creates a male protagonist whose gentleness and generosity are almost impossible to replicate. Hussein is a thoughtful man who loves Laila for who she is. In a passage that has often been quoted, he writes a letter to Laila that sums up Zayat’s vision of that ideal dynamic: “Go forth my love, open the door wide and leave it open, and on the open road you will find me my love, waiting for you, because I trust you and trust your ability to soar, and because there is nothing I can do but wait … wait for you.”

In 1960, Zayat’s feat was to create a literary universe where we can imagine the kind of progressive relationship a woman can have with a man that guarantees her emancipation. She did this with openness and grace, making us believe that it can be created, and that such generosity of character and emotion can exist. But Laila does not reach this stage without trials, or without two suitable future husbands for a well-bred, middle-class girl being catalogued. Laila confronts the double standards of her cousin (Essam) and her college professor as both try to morally and psychologically crush her and make her doubt herself and her desires. Hussein’s confident gentleness, in contrast, allows Laila the space and emotional serenity to be who she wants.

Zayat’s style is eclectic. It reflects the 19th-century realism of the Russian masters and their almost transparent quality in conveying a story as it is imagined, but this is interrupted with stream-of-consciousness inner monologues, echoing feminist precursors from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf, to show the psychological anguish women go through in a society at odds with their agency and sexuality. Although not as deliberately shocking as the slightly younger Nawal Saadawi,(born 1931) Zayat also throws a wrench into bourgeois respectability by exposing Egyptian middle-class hypocrisy around female sexuality, pointing out the devastating effects it has on relationships, whether through the exploitation of women of lesser socio-economic backgrounds, or denying women of higher social standing from sexual expression.

Zayat embraced the mid-century trend of incorporating vernacular Arabic (which still endures today) and makes bold use of it, a feature that has to do with democratizing culture and breaking the binary of classical vs. colloquial. Consisting of about 30 to 40 percent vernacular, the novel has a sense of immediacy and is naturally divided into scenes. This made it easy to adapt for cinema, which it duly was, in 1963, by Henry Barakat. Faten Hamama was miscast as Laila, her elegant, refined media personality and do-gooder persona could never do justice to the brash, not very pretty character, and it is not very faithful to the book — the part where Laila joins the armed resistance is cut, for example. But that cinematic quality made the transition to film nearly inevitable.
Marxist thinking and political activism are reflected throughout the novel, and it is clear that Zayat’s loyalty lies with the people, but The Open Door is a literary experiment that is not framed by the struggle of proletarians against bourgeoisie. A girl starts by wondering why her brother is celebrated for his activism when she maligned, and ends by taking up arms. Even by today’s standards, Zayat’s novel is radical, and it has an optimism that Zayat later in life acknowledged was no longer possible. The book was not a hit, but it was appreciated by certain circles and appreciation grew over time.

Film “La porta aperta”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBlxRUAaFrU

Prima sequenza (00:01:40-00:03:18): prologo-commento in cui la voce narrante enuncia che, durante il periodo precedente la Rivoluzione del 1952, il governo egiziano fu costretto dalle pressioni popolari a interrompere le trattative con la Gran Bretagna in merito all’occupazione dell’Egitto, e numerosi giovani di ambo i sessi si addestravano per condurre la lotta armata contro le truppe inglesi nella zona del Canale, mentre al Cairo l’intera popolazione partecipava alle proteste antibritanniche; poi si ha la scena iniziale della storia di Layla che avviene una mattina dell’autunno del 1951; la protagonista è nel cortile della scuola secondaria che frequenta; dice alle amiche che vuole partecipare alla manifestazione organizzata per quel giorno; la preside dichiara (in arabo standard) a tutte le alunne che la funzione della donna è la maternità e il suo ambito è la casa, mentre la lotta politica e armata spettano agli uomini; Layla la smentisce dicendo (sempre in standard): “Il colonialismo e la tirannia non fanno distinzione tra uomini e donne, i proiettili che ci sparano non fanno distinzione tra uomini e donne, quindi lasciateci esprimere i nostri sentimenti, lasciateci percorrere il nostro cammino, apriteci le porte!”. (00:03:19-00:03:35) La compagna di classe e cugina di Layla va ad avvertire i suoi genitori che è andata alla manifestazione, il padre si arrabbia con la moglie, dicendole che non ha saputo educare bene la loro figlia; (00:03:36-00:03:59) Layla guida le alunne nel corto della manifestazione, gridando lo slogan “Viva l’Egitto libero!” (00:04:00-00:04:30) quando torna a casa, il padre la picchia.

Poi la madre di Layla la sgrida per essersi comportata in modo “scandaloso” e perfino suo fratello Mahmùd la rimprovera per aver preso parte alla manifestazione, rivelando le sue contraddizioni riguardo all’emancipazione femminile che lui stesso afferma di difendere. Mahmùd parteciperà alla resistenza armata nella zona del Canale, dove verrà catturato e sarà in prigione, quando avviene il colpo di Stato del ’52.

Ultima sequenza (01:29:00-01:42:00): inizia l’Aggressione Tripartita contro l’Egitto; alcune persone ascoltano la radio, l’annunciatore dice che, in un momento così decisivo per il Paese, ogni cittadino può contribuire alla difesa della patria anche se non impugna le armi; Layla è per strada, vede aerei militari e carri armati; dona il sangue, ripensando alle parole patriotiche di Hussein che sta lavorando in Germania; lui torna in Egitto, Mahmùd va a prenderlo all’aeroporto, gli dice che partirà la sera stessa per Porto Said, per partecipare alla resistenza popolare, e gli parla del triste fidanzamento di Layla; Mahmùd chiude la valigia ed esce di casa; Layla lo saluta sul pianerottolo; nella scena seguente il professore severo con cui la protagonista è fidanzata parla con i suoi genitori a proposito delle nozze, la conversazione viene interrotta dall’allarme antiaereo, scatta il coprifucile, tutti vanno a rifugiarsi nel sotterraneo; all’entrata del condominio Layla incontra Hussein il quale cerca di dissuaderla dallo sposare un uomo che non ama e di convincerla a partire l’indomani insieme a lui per raggiungere Mahmùd a Porto Said, dove lui entrerà nella resistenza e lei potrà aiutare la gente e sentersi libera dalle restrizioni della tradizione patriarcale, agendo per realizzare le idee in cui crede, ma lei si rifiuta di farlo, perché è troppo spaventata dai genitori e delusa dagli uomini; nella scena seguente, Layla è nella stazione centrale del Cairo con i genitori e il fidanzato, deve andare a sposarsi con lui nel suo paesino dell’Alto Egitto, sentono annunciare che la partenza dei treni per il sud è ritardata per dare la precedenza ai convogli da e per Porto Said; Layla vede uomini, donne e bambini feriti scendere da un treno arrivato dalla città portuale, al che decide di dare una svolta alla sua vita piccolo borghese; restituisce l’anello di fidanzamento al fidanzato, lascia i genitori in stazione, sale sul treno in corsa per Porto Said su cui c’è Hussein e, alla fine, i due si abbracciano. Il tempo storico del film è più breve di quello del romanzo.


In his profoundly insightful article on Faten Hamama and “Egyptian difference” in film, Paul Sedra points out something astonishingly true and little celebrated when it comes to Egyptian cinema: the fact that, unlike its American and even European counterparts, Egyptian cinema came into its own in the mid-1960s with films that were probably more sensitive to the times than those produced nearly anywhere else, with the exception of Indian cinema, particularly the films of Satyajit Ray. The mid-1960s were ripe with political change across the globe. Let’s take 1963 as an example. In the United States, it was a seminal year for the civil rights movement: the March on Washington took place, Medgar Evers was assassinated and Malcolm X delivered his historic “Message to the Grassroots” speech in Detroit. It was also a big year for feminism: the US witnessed the publication of Betty Friedan’s the Feminine Mystique, and also the release of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women report, in Iran women were granted the right to vote, while the Russian Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman to venture into space. Yet, looking back at the cinematic works made during that year, one cannot sense the urgency nor the political foment of the time. The highest grossing and most acclaimed films of 1963 (including The Birds by Alfred Hitchcock, Lord of the Flies by Peter Brook, The Haunting by Robert Wise and The Silence by Ingmar Bergman, to name a few) instead manifest a sense of deep anxiety, even fear, as a result of the seething unrest.
On the other hand, 1963 was a big year for Egyptian film: it marked the release of Youssef Chahine’s *Al-Nasser Salah al-Din* (Saladin the Victorious), Hassan al-Imam’s *Zaqq al-Midāq* (Midaq Alley), Hassam al-Din Mustafā’s *Al-Nathara al-Sawdāa* (Black Shades) and Mahmoud Thulfiqar’s *Al-Ayde al-Naema* (Soft Hands). Almost all of these films had women in central roles, and showed them contending with the new reality of the post-independence state riding high on the dream of unity, progress and prosperity. But postcolonial politics and propaganda aside, in a rare moment of radical reimagining of what roles women should lead and how that ultimately is part of the change taking place in society at large, Egyptian cinema allowed itself a margin of social critique that was bold even by today’s standards.

Henry Barakat’s 1963 rendition of Latifa al-Zayat’s *Al-Bāb al-Mafāḥī* (The Open Door, published in 1960) prunes many of what the public then viewed as the novel’s “radical excesses.” He aligns the narrative to suit the politics and aesthetics of the early 1960s, specifically in the throes of the dissolution of the United Arab Republic and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s second wave of policies to further consolidate his power (via more nationalizations and more socialist propaganda). Zayat’s exploration of her generation’s coming-of-age under British occupation and then independence thus acquires a more propagandistic bent in the film, where Leila, the female lead (played by Hamama in her 78th film since her 1940 debut as a child actress in Mohammed Karayem’s *Youn Said* [Happy Day]), tries to assert herself, despite the conservative, traditional background of her family and society at large.

Zayat attempted to write a feminist interpretation of an emancipated female protagonist, completely rooted in the struggles and aspirations of her society as a fully actualized individual, meanwhile uncovering the hypocrisy and oppression of that society and the psychological devastation that patriarchy and misogyny inflict. Barakat, meanwhile, aided by Andre Rider’s score, creates a melodrama of Zayat’s bildungsroman while retaining her impetus and scathing critique of Egyptian society post-World War II. He uses the same historical backdrop employed by Zayat to frame the story: pre-independence events such as the 1946 student protests and the Cairo fire in 1952, and post-independence conflicts such as the Tripartite Aggression in 1956. But while Zayat links her protagonist’s emancipation to being completely involved in the resistance, pre- and post-independence, Barakat gives more attention to Leila’s love life. Through a couple of failed romances (with her jealous violent cousin Essam who betrays her and then with her severe pragmatic professor Ramzi who wants to dominate her), Leila comes to realize that her emancipation lies in consciously choosing to be with someone she loves, not because she’s expected to or because it is the proper thing to do. Despite toning down some of the more radical elements of Zayat’s novel, Barakat’s film still managed to ruffle a few feathers. His approach, however, comes across as naïve when compared to hers in places. For example, a discussion between Leila and her friends at her cousin’s wedding on the proper forms of romance expected and accepted in Egyptian society is cursory, poorly scripted and required more space to accomplish its required effect. Similarly, her cousin’s dramatic monologue later in the film, justifying why she’s cheating on her husband, is intended as a comment on marital fidelity and marriages of convenience. However, it feels more like a moral lecture than a meaningful examination of the barriers women face in terms of financial security that lead them to settle for arranged marriages in the first place, or the limits on their freedom to make personal choices. Although unconvincing in a high school girl’s uniform, the 32-year-old Hamama banks on her chemistry with Barakat and more or less reprises her role in Salah Abu Seif’s *La Waqt Lil Hob* (*No Time for Love*) earlier the same year. She manages to convey the aspirations and frustrations of a young woman trying to make her way into the world while consistently being physically and morally crushed by the men around her. Leila seems to bounce from the control of one man in her life to another without much reprieve, from her abusive father (skillfully portrayed by Yacoub Mikhail) and playboy cousin (Hassan Youssef in his signature role), to her harsh, strict professor and potential suitor, Fouad (the exceptional Mahmoud Morsi).

Perhaps the most outstanding performance in the film is given by Morsi, who imbues Fouad’s gaslighting and psychological manipulation of Leila with a gripping menace. She is caught between his attempts at control and those of her regressive, overbearing father, and there seems to be little that she can look forward to. Within this claustrophobic miasma of misogyny, and true to the novel, she contemplates suicide at one point, and at another, completely withdraws from the world and into herself. Enter the hero, Hussein, a male protagonist that could only have been imagined by a woman. Played by a stilted Saleh Salim in his third and final role as a leading man (rumor has it that he quit acting after his performance in *The Open Door* was negatively received), Hussein is sensitive, generous and perceptive. Throughout both the film and the novel, contrasts are drawn between him and the other abusive, manipulative male characters in Leila’s life. He understands Leila’s ambitions, her independent character and her desire to be free of the shackles of social tradition and patriarchy. He encourages her to be herself, to think of herself as part of a larger society that has a space and a role for her just as anyone else.

In one iconic scene, we see Leila read a letter from him, as Salim’s tranquil voiceover tells her to “open the door to life and meet him there,” fully autonomous and free, and completely immersed in a larger struggle that is hers as much as it’s his. In all their encounters and conversations, Hussein represents a masculine perspective shaped and informed by a deep sense of justice and equality, making him perhaps the only feminist male protagonist in mainstream Egyptian cinema. Yet if it weren’t for Barakat’s masterful use of black and white photography (with the aid of his long-time director of photography Wahid Farid) and intimate staging, Salim’s frigid performance would have probably frozen the entire set. Moreover, the editing (by Fathy Kassem) is at many points incomprensible; it cuts right in the middle of some scenes and completely ignores any sense of narrative resolution or transition. It doesn’t help that Barakat also uses banal visual motifs that the editing only makes much worse, the typical spilling of coffee as a metaphor for having sex, for example, lending more of a theatrical mise-en-scène than a filmic setting for the story, and therefore making bits of the script feel more like soliloquies, addressed didactically to an imagined audience (without any postmodern irony, of course).

But flawed editing and stiff acting aside, Barakat’s film in 1963 was as radically political and relevant as could possibly be. It spoke to the urgency of its time, and while he did not hold the door entirely open as Zayat might have envisioned, he did create a universe where, for once, a woman said “no,” and walked to live happily ever after.
The veteran Egyptian film-maker Henri Barakat left a legacy of 112 feature films made over an extraordinary 55-year-long career. He belonged to a group of film-makers including the late Salah Abu-Seif, Youssef Wahbi, Ahmed Kamel Mursy and Kamal el-Sheikh who, in the late 1930s and 1940s, injected a wave of realism into the Egyptian film industry that had been lacking since the first Egyptian film was screened in Alexandria in 1896.

The films of these French-educated directors presented lively slices from the daily life of Egyptian society, encompassing a wide diversity of the social classes, geographical and ethnical groupings that made up the rich mosaic of Egypt. Vanguard film-makers like Salah Abu Seif relied on selecting politically and socially controversial subjects, siding with the underdog long before the phrase "political correctness" was coined.

Barakat's realism, however, was inseparable from his films' format, regardless of the content, even in light-hearted pieces dismissed as "an unworthy triviality" by certain critics. They included all types of films, ranging from musicals to crime thrillers, some in the style of the pioneering French films of the 1960s, Hammer-Horror-like movies or Indian melodrama, as well as epic stories, political thrillers and dramatisation of big historic events. He always respected his wide range of audience and their awareness. His cinematography was impressive, even in light comedy. One critic compared his use of cinema to a "quill in a poet's hand".

His best-known film, and his masterpiece, was Doaa el-Karawan ("The Nightingale Prayer"), his 1959 adaptation of the novel by the Egyptian philosopher and author Taha Hussein. Set in the 1920s, it is about the oppression of poor peasant women in the hands of upper-class men. It was a landmark film, and broke away from the norm in Egyptian cinema, providing inspiration to many aspiring young film-makers in Egypt and Arab nations in being shot both in studios and on location - in the desert, the countryside and the mountains. It was also well received by critics, and was nominated for an Academy award as Best Foreign Film in 1959.

Its star was Fatin Hammama, who shared many of Barakat's views on cinema and was known as the Queen of Egyptian cinema. Their partnership, which spanned 30 years and some 40 films, is arguably the best joint contribution to the progress of the Egyptian film industry, influencing the whole of the Middle East. They got together for a final time in 1984 - when Hammama was living in self-imposed exile in Paris after the break-up of her 1955 marriage to Omar Sharif - to make "The Night Fatima Was Arrested", which was a hit in all Arab-speaking nations and later remade for television. Barakat was a star-maker: he discovered many young talents who went on to become box-office stars.

Henri Barakat was born in 1914 in Shubra, the popular Coptic Christian-dominated area of north Cairo. He loved going to the cinema and theatre as well as reading classical 19th-century novels during his law studies at King Fuad I University in Cairo. He graduated in 1935. Barakat always paid fierce attention to details. In 1935, by pointing out many technical errors, the young graduate made himself unpopular with the crew and star cast in his first job, assisting his older brother as he edited the film Antar Effendi; it was a fiasco both at the box office and with critics. The experience induced him to go to Paris to study cinema. Here he learnt his trade by attending the shooting of many French films and going to the cinema - sometimes four times a day - in order to write a critical study of what he saw. He returned to Cairo when the Second World War broke out, and soon started on his first film, Ashareed ("The Vagabond", 1942), based on a story by Chekhov. It was a box-office success. His next two films were screened in the same year - and alongside "The Vagabond" - in Cairo and Alexandria. (Eight times again in his career did this happen: the years 1952 and 1954 each saw the production of five of his films.)

Barakat kept a close eye on the box office, as he believed that the audience are always right. In one of his rare interviews, however, after receiving the prestigious Egyptian State Award for Arts in 1996, he admitted his disappointment in the decline both of audience taste and of standard of films. Like many critics he pointed the finger at the large video market in the oil-rich Gulf which encouraged directors to produce low-standard films in record time - and to subject themselves to censorship - in order to enter that market; the larger than usual output of films of Henri Barakat, however, maintained a high professional standard.

Barakat argued that the surplus income from his popular films enabled him to introduce new young talent - something the film financiers dislike - and to make films with a serious social message like Al-Harram ("The Sin"), based on the novel by Youssef Idris, which was well received in Cannes in 1963; or his last film, Mwatin Tahtal Tahquik ("A Citizen under Investigation", 1993), seen as a protest against the violation of civil rights.

In the last half of his career, Barakat was dubbed Sheikh el-Mukhergine ("The Patriarch of Film-makers"), "The Nightingale of Egyptian Cinema", "the Father of Romantic Cinema", "The Poet of the Silver Screen". An Egyptian journalist called him "The Master of Poetic Realism". He excelled in screen adaptations of novels by Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Dumas, and was the winner of several awards - three from the Catholic Film Institute in 1958, 1959 and 1961, and others from the New Delhi and Berlin film Festivals.

Because of his "poetic realism", Barakat's films had a strong influence not only on film-makers in Arab countries, but also on the social trends, fashion and life-style of hundreds of thousands of middle-class Arabs.

His funeral at Our Virgin Lady of Peace Catholic church on the Nile Bank in Central Cairo was, in the words of an Egyptian columnist, "a poetic march across half a century in the history of Egyptian cinema".
Film “Mio padre è sull’albero” (Abī fawq al-shajara, 1969) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKx4d9W9pmM


Adel (Abdel Halim Hafez) è uno studente del Cairo che va a trascorrere le vacanze estive ad Alessandria con i compagni di facoltà. Scena sulla spiaggia (estratta dal film) con sottotitoli in inglese: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvJiPZ7Mr7II

Adel lascerà la sua ragazza Amàl (Mervat Amin), perché, essendo troppo tradizionalista, non esprime i propri sentimenti e rifiuta di stare da sola con lui. Trascinato da cattive compagnie, il giovane frequenta un night club, dove viene sedotto da Fardùs (Nadia Lutfi), una danzatrice del ventre e prostituta; i suoi amici lo escluderanno dalla loro compagnia a causa della sua relazione con questa donna malfamata ma effettivamente innamorata di lui. Lo fa vivere a casa sua, lo mantiene e lo porterà con sé a Beirut, dove lei si esibirà in un night. Il protagonista soffrirà di gelosia, non sopportando che la donna di cui è innamorato sia una prostituta; quindi, deciderà di lasciarla. Quando tornano ad Alessandria, Fardùs chiede a un’altra danzatrice di sedurre il padre di Adel che sta cercando il figlio per riportarlo a casa. Così, l’uomo abbandona la ricerca, trascorre tutte le sere al night, spandendo molti soldi, per bere in compagnia della prostituta che ordina sempre gli alcolici più costosi. Grazie a un amico Adel scoprirà la trappola in cui è caduto il padre; alla fine, lo salverà e riuscirà anche a riavvicinarsi ad Amàl che, a seguito di quanto successo, è diventata più moderna e disposta a esprimere il suo amore per lui.

Cinque scene del film sembrano dei veri e propri video musicali, ognuno dedicato a una canzone di Abdel Halìm Hàfez e di alcune patriotiche, Abī fawq al-shajara (1969). The actor of the film, Abdel Halim Hafez, was asked to play the lead role in the film My Father Is Up the Tree, and the director wanted to cast him partly because of his style right away, but after a period of time, it was embraced by everyone.

Faten Al Shaibi, “‘My father is up the tree’: Abdel Halim Hafez and Egyptian Cinema”, StMU History Media, Oct. 7, 2018, https://www.stmuhistorymedia.org/my-father-is-up-the-tree/

My father is up the tree. This is not a saying or a proverbs or something like that. It is the name of an old Egyptian film from 1969. The actor of the film, Abdel Halim Hafez, is still very famous in the Arab world. He is a beloved icon of Arab art, an artist who died years too soon. During his artistic career as a singer an actor from the 1950s to the 1970s, Abdel Halim recorded 230 different songs, both romantic and patriotic, and participated in sixteen films. Today he may not be well-known outside the Arab world; he was a simple person with great dreams. He suffered a lot in his life, starting with the loss of his parents. He was raised in his uncle’s house. And as he grew up in his village, he often played in a canal, where he contracted schistosomiasis, which is caused by parasitic worms.

The disease, for which there was no cure at the time, led to many health complications throughout his life, particularly cirrhosis of the liver and bleeding of the stomach. It was challenging for Abdel Halim to make it big in the world of Arabic music, among musical giants like Umm Kulthum, Abdel Wahhab, and others. In the early days of his career, Abdel Halim was rejected because of his new style of singing. He innovated with a faster tempo than was typical. But with braver and more romantic tunes, he gained accolades and enormous success. For Egyptians, and especially for those of a certain age, his songs and films epitomized Egypt’s cultural renaissance in the 1950s and 1960s. Abdel Halim’s work has clearly contributed to the development of Arab cinema. People didn’t appreciate the freshness of his style right away, but after a period of time, it was embraced by everyone.

In 1969, Abdel Halim was asked to play the lead role in the film My Father Is Up The Tree. Although his health condition was worsening, he accepted the role. The film was one of the most important cinematic works of the era. He took the role partly because he wanted to change some of the concepts of the old generation, and give to a new generation a sense of freedom. The film deals with the concerns and issues that emphasize the generational conflicts between traditional parents and their more modern children. It was quite controversial for its time.

My Father is up the Tree was filmed on the shores of Alexandria, in Egypt. It was a summer film, and the director wanted to shoot one of the scenes with Abdel Halim wearing a swimming suit, which was a big challenge for the director and the photographer. They had to find the appropriate angles to hide the traces of necessary surgical operations that were covering his sick body.

The story of the film revolves around a group of university friends who spend their summer holiday in Alexandria, (Egypt). Adel (Abdel Halim) is one of them. He is there, accompanied by his girlfriend. They have some problems, which make him betray her with a dancer in a bar, which would lead to even more problems. Adel does not know the right path between commitments and
vice. The goal of the film was to define the features of the new national dream after the breakdown of dreams following the 1967 war. The movie shows the abundance of the new generation’s desire to be free from the constraints and customs of the old generation. The film was an immediate success. It was shown for 58 consecutive weeks in Egyptian cinemas, and it was ranked in the list of the top 100 films in the memory of Egyptian cinema, according to the critics’ poll.

In 1977, Abdel Halim left Egypt to start an external treatment for his health condition. He traveled to London just to check for reassurance about the progression of his disease which was worsening. On the evening of March 30, Abdel Halim Hafez’s voice went silent forever. His funeral took place in Cairo, it was one of the biggest in Egypt and the Arab world, after the funerals of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and singer Umm Kulthum.