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Hijacking Absence: On Queer Viewing Practices of Arab Films

By Iskandar Abdalla

Fathia is cast by an evil spell. Cairo becomes a siren that calls and pulls her away from the embrace of the vast rural meadows, off to a world of glitz, glamor and dazzling lures. Once there, the city becomes a risky maze where she is subjected to recurring violence. But Fathia embraces her destiny, willingly following the mighty call that turns her being on its head, indifferent to the sea of losses she leaves behind.

Poster of al-Nadaha or For Whom the Wind Calls by Hussein Kamal (1975)

Fathia (Magda al-Sabahi) is the main protagonist in *al-Naddaha* or *For Whom the Wind Calls* (1975) by Egyptian director Hussein Kamal. The film is an adaptation of a famous novel by Youssef Idris. When I invited a group of queer Arab friends to my place in Berlin for a movie night, the choice of *al-Naddaha* was not necessarily deliberate. However, a desire to re-ignite intimate attachments to past homes was what we all determinedly wanted, and an iconic Egyptian melodrama seemed like a good way to fulfill that desire for intimacy and satisfy our yearning for a kind of catharsis. Fathia's dreams, her fears, her bafflement and fascination with a lustrous modern city seemed to correspond in paradoxical ways to our relationship with Berlin as migrant queer Arabs. Indeed, after watching (or rather rewatching) the film, we reached the conclusion that "we are all Fathia; we all have been sceptered in one way or another

[by Berlin],” as has been noted by one of my friends. We then started to discuss the film, each person elaborating on personal haunting specters with earnest passion, which left a cathartic impression on us as we shared experiences, familiar references, and our collective longing to belong.

After that night, I began organizing regular movie nights to which I invited my queer friends to watch Egyptian and Arab films. Following the screenings, we would have semi-moderated discussions. I thought about recording these discussions or coming up with a protocol for how to run them. I wanted to transform the discussions into a collaborative publication, multimedia content or compiling them into a digital archive. It was not merely the cathartic potential of collectively viewing films that motivated me, I was also curious about the methodological implications such an act of recording entails. Is it possible to come up with a queer method for engaging with films on the basis of such discussions? Can we make sense of Fathia’s story through a queer reading? Can we engage with iconic films in ways that reflect and speak to the sensibilities of queer Arabs — an audience whose feelings and desires have been largely ignored or deliberately misrepresented by Arab cinema? What modes, formats and practices of reception are required for a queer viewing of Arab cinema? This essay is an initial attempt to engage with such questions by presenting some of the theoretical assumptions that underpin them. By doing so, I hope to lay foundational grounds that would guide subsequent processes of data gathering and analysis.

Imagination Instead of Representation

Much ink has been spilled on how queer and non-normative sexualities in Arab cinema have been represented (Menicucci 1998; Habib 2007; Hayon 2018; Shadeedi 2018). Entering keywords like "homosexuality" and "Arab Cinema" in any search engine will take you to dozens of articles and film reviews that analyze how homosexual and gender non-conforming characters appear in Arab films across time. Yet, in all the contributions I came across, Hussien Kamal's oeuvre is entirely absent. The reason for this is not difficult to guess. Kamal's films might have featured numerous agonized female characters like Fathia, who are weighed down by gendered social norms, or belittled by toxic and selfish men, but they never feature homosexuality. But *Al-Naddaha* is actually an exception, as it features the stock character of *sabi al-ʿalmah*, named Khukha (played by Sayyf Allah Mukhtar), an effeminized entertainer who accompanies female belly dancers.

If we follow the rationale of representation prevalent in many writings about homosexuality in Arab cinema, Khukha's character, not Fathia's, would be the main focus of our attention as queer viewers, regardless of his marginality to the plot. One queer viewer might then celebrate Khukha's daring queer attire and vocabulary, seeing it as an intended provocation against prevalent gender norms. Another viewer might condemn how the filmmaker ridicules queerness through Khukha's stereotypical figuration and a third queer viewer might even identify with such stereotypes or reproduce them as essential characterizations of effeminate Arab queerness. Can we call these modes of engaging with Khukha queer reading or viewing practices? Maybe. But in focusing on queer viewing practices, I am suggesting a model that is neither centered on picking and choosing queer characters for analysis, nor on dwelling on what films say or display at face value.

Tracking and listing (mis) representations of queer sexualities in Arab cinema can doubtlessly shed a critical light on the normative structures that underpin many films, images, aesthetics and patterns of production. It can unravel the value systems Arab cinema perpetuates and promotes and do justice to the few, but significant, attempts made by Arab filmmakers to subvert heteronormative presumptions and unsettle the firm grip of gendered norms. But this work will never change the empirical fact that the number of Arab films explicitly featuring queer characters is quite limited, and it remains undeniable that the majority of these characters are marginal, stereotypical, or treated in hostile ways.

Even when the task is to critique, to start and end with queer representations in Arab cinema is to testify to queerness as marginal, exceptional and outlandish. Such characterizations might reflect the social realities of many queer Arabs, but they eventually fail to provide them with cultural forms through which their personal realities can take shape as film viewers. It leaves no possibility other than alienating queer Arabs from a film history that alienates them, ruling out a whole archive of images and stories as dissonant, if not hostile, to queer feelings. Are there alternative ways to reclaim this archive through queer viewing practices instead of banishing it?

Alexander Doty's handling of American mass culture might be instructive here. Instead of proceeding from queerness as something demonstratively represented within cultural texts or a property waiting to be discovered, he considers it a product of certain acts of reception or reading practices. In this view, queering mass culture is not just to infer queerness from what is displayed, but to challenge "the politics of denotation and connotation […] traditionally deployed in discussing texts and representation" (Doty 1997, xii). By extension, a queer politics cannot be solely based on demanding recognition within the dominant realms of representation, but it also involves dismantling and repurposing their logics. Representation is neither the sign nor the agent of queer liberation — it is the use and reuse of mass culture that reveals and translates queerness. Queerness becomes implicit within any cultural text as soon as queer practices of reading

and modes of engagement that dwell on mutating their meaning are activated. Doty would even go so far as to disapprove of deeming such modes and practices "alternative." He rather "alternativizes" heterosexual models of engagement:

> I've got news for straight culture: your reading of texts are usually "alternative" ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture (Doty 1997, xii).

But how do we relate to a text in ways that are at odds with its logic of representation? How can we name what the text represses and render visible what it conceals or dismisses? Imagination here would be the method. Imagination is a queer refuge. It is a means to creatively counterbalance alienation, to shift the world's forms and vocabulary in ways that render them more bearable, cordial enough to accommodate wayward desires and banished difference. The imagination to be practiced here is not conceived of in the Cartesian sense as a purely cognitive process that takes place formlessly within the inner realms of a thinking self, but as a practice that performatively unfolds in relation to concrete references (films), and collectively unfolds with other queer viewers who have interrelated feelings and experiences and share the same history of absence and repression.

Imagination forms a substantial component in the process of producing and reading images. Through and in relation to films, imagination has often been mobilized as a tool for forging group identities and reifying collective sentiments. On screen, fabricated accounts about the nation and its history often become a tangible reality, and pasts we never lived are vividly evoked as if they have always been ours (Landsberg 2004; Abdalla 2023). The kind of imagination utilized in queer viewing practices inevitably feeds on and cultivates a sense of [queer] collectivity. It does so, however, not from a position of power, but from one that empowers. It is a vision for existence otherwise, not existence as it should be (cf. Hartman 2019)—a counter-imagination that recoils from hegemonic scripts of being, that envisions new forms in the very act of dismantling present ones, that revisits the past for the sake of its alteration rather than its

restoration, and that identifies only to disidentify in the same move (Muñoz 1998). When a gay man, for example, evokes Fathia's journey — not Khukha's — as a narrative vehicle to ponder his personal journey and draft his own story, he simultaneously disidentifies with both characters' deterministic scripts of gender and dislodges the character of Fathia from the heteronormative logic that brought her about and dictated her choices. For queer imagination to freely unfurl, intimate spheres of life, personal feelings and desires must be called upon to play their part in reconstituting being and shifting the realms of meaning.

Anf wa thalat ʿuyun or A Nose and Three Eyes by Hussein Kamal 1972

Shifting the Realms of Meaning

It goes without saying that viewers always engage their personal experiences and intimate feelings while watching a film. Nothing is per se queer about this. The work of British film critic Robin Wood, who was one of the pioneers in conceptualizing what can be called, in hindsight, "queer film analysis," is however worth recalling in this regard. Wood notably alluded to the close connection between any film critic's interpretive practices — and by proxy, any film viewer's — and their personal life (Wood 1978). Keeping this in mind, a queer engagement with Arab cinema would then not shy away from the intimate and personal and would not assume that filmic texts bear predetermined meanings that can be accessed objectively. On the contrary, contemplating the intimate and personal would become the main vehicle towards accessing meaning, or, in better wording, towards creating meaning in the first place. Even more, if we conceive of collective film viewing in an intimate queer setting, not just as an interpretive endeavor, but as a collective ritualized activity, then not only would the meanings of films shift in relation to the experiences of (queer) viewers, but also in relation to the position of the viewing subjects vis-a-vis the films. In ritualizing the act of viewing, films function at once as *texts* that can be decoded in a variety of ways and as *pretexts* by which alternative horizons of belonging and freer possibilities of being can be forged (Abdalla 2020). Let's put it another way. When viewing is understood as a ritualized collective act, the hermeneutical model that presumes a viewing subject vis-à-vis a separate viewed object that is pre-charged with meanings that each viewer alone tries to understand is transcended. Viewers' relationships with each other become part of the hermeneutic space of viewing and the ritual gives way to a form of *hermeneutic of the self*. With and against the grain of the filmic fiction, and through modes of (dis) identification with its narrative, characters and aesthetic, viewers engage in fabulations of meaning and a recreation of being. At this point, however, it is useful to ask first: what does the notion of ritualization imply here, and how far can it be analytically useful?

Film Viewing As a Queer Ritual

Theories about rituals have been the subject of long heated debates among anthropologists. A primary idea that underpins conceptions of rituals, from Durkheim to Geertz, is that rituals are communicative acts. These acts symbolize a transcendental meaning in contrast to mundane acts that are meaningful in themselves because they serve reasonable or practical ends (Mitchell 2017). The problem with such understanding, however, is that it presumes a quintessential separation between ritual acts on one hand, and meaning on the other. I am trying to problematize precisely such a separation by claiming the centrality of the ritual of queer collective film viewing to the process of creating meaning.

Talal Asad, inspired by the work of Marcel Mauss, allows us to think of rituals not in terms of the symbolic meanings they mediate but the embodied practices (including language) they involve, which are meaningful in themselves as techniques to experience oneself and learn about social norms (Asad 1993). Following this line of thought, actions thus become “analytically ‘prior’ and in no way subordinate to the conceptual process of meaning-making” (Mitchell 2017, 380). Emphasizing actions and embodiments would lead us to think about acts — any acts — as prone to ritualization, rather than identifying abstract distinctive features of what constitutes a ritual. Ritualization can be understood as a social practice that centers the body as a site within which norms are negotiated and through which meaning is sensed and re-created via a set of performative strategies (cf. Mitchell 2017). To ritualize the act of viewing and discussing an Arab film in an intimate queer crowd is to center bodily desires, sensations and expressions and to capitalize on Arab queer experiences, vocabularies and affective registers in order to engage with popular cinema.

Queer Viewing Is a Queer Act

Queering popular cinema is not just a specific mode of interpreting films but a way of acting *upon* or *in relation* to film narratives. Cultural and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz theorized "queer acts" as an epistemological stance that grounds a whole project of "queer worldmaking" (Muñoz 1996, 6). Muñoz proposes to understand queerness as "a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality," instead of adhering to rigorous identitarian notions (ibid). He hopes, with such understanding, to empower queer subjects as agents in remaking a world that pushes them out to its margins. In doing so, they enact "counter-publics through alternative modes of culture-making […] surpassing the play of interpretation […] by focusing on what acts do in a social matrix" (ibid. 12). Watching a film together can be a social occasion in which one jointly acts and feels. It remains so even when we watch in silence and before delving into discussion. Silence does not imply an absence of collectivity, but can rather be regarded as a sign of a joint intention to share a certain experience while temporarily bringing our individual verbal expressions to a halt (Hanich 2014). A subsequent discussion of the film that allows personal memories, intimate sentiments and bodily expressions to unfold, that grants imagination authorization to re-create meaning and re-enact being, can constitute a queer tool to act upon filmic representations.

To do this is not to entirely discharge popular films from the specificities of their contexts or from the intentions of their authors and producers, but rather to acknowledge these popular films' potential as templates for enacting alternative modes of being — a potential primarily activated through acts of reception. It lies in the creativity of (queer) viewers to invest cultural texts with new lives and endow them with signs and references that are not their own. To act upon films queerly is to travel with them across distant futures, to let their characters and stories inhabit foreign lands and bodies, to render them into visual palimpsests on which queer absences can be

overwritten, thus hijacking the heterosexual logic of dominant modes of representation.
If the mastery of a ritual invests the person with the power to order and reorder the world, to “generate culture deftly […] in peculiar tension with other forms of cultural production” (Bell 1990, 306), then the mastery of a queer viewing ritual invests the subject with the power to put a spell on silence, to conjure up the ghosts of absent queer desires. It is to “listen to the unsaid”(Hartman 2008, 3) and narrate the impossible.

Dammy wa dum‘uy wa ’ibtisamati or My Blood, My Tears and My Smile by Hussein Kamal, 1973.

The Queer "Conversational Theater": A Prospective Epilogue

American poet Vachel Lindsay published one of the first books on film theory in 1915. In *The Art of the Moving Pictures*, Lindsay puts down an optimistic vision for the future of film. He hopes for the art of cinema to counteract "the capitalist and industrialized society that produced it," and replace recreational and religious rituals with civic ones (Decherney 2005, 21). Entrusting cinema with such a mission, however, required a revolution not only in the content of films but also in the venues available for their exhibition. Accordingly, Lindsay introduced an exhibition venue that would be suitable for the role he envisaged for cinema in the future, calling it "the conversational theater." At the theater's door and before the screening starts, each viewer is handed a card with the following information:

> You are encouraged to discuss the picture with the friend who accompanies you to this place. Conversation, of course, must be sufficiently subdued not to disturb the stranger who did not come with you to the theater (Lindsay 1916, 197).

In this theater of films, viewers are encouraged to watch while discussing or discuss while watching. Lindsay wrote his book when films were silent, so this would not have been a source of trouble. Exhibition and reception become intimately interwoven, and conveying meaning coincides with re-creating it in a collective civic ritual. Lindsay had a precise idea about the kind of questions the viewers are supposed

to discuss, but what interests me is the form he suggests for the conversations, not their thematics. We cannot conceive of queer viewing practices without queering the settings and conditions of exhibition, without venturing to introduce forms of film display and dissemination that render films hijackable or malleable enough to be acted upon in the ways I suggest above. The model Lindsay suggests seems to offer inspiration for what can yet be done, anchoring some of the main ideas introduced in this essay in the history of film theory as possibilities for collective viewing practices, even if they remain insufficiently explored so far. At the same time, many ideas remain open for future scrutiny, from the technical and spatial arrangements of exhibition sites, to the structure of discussions and the formats, virtual or physical, needed to turn these discussions into platforms for performing and articulating the process of queering Arab cinema.

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العدد الخامس من شخصيات
شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ ربيع ٢٠٢٣
البنى التحتية للسينما

نشر قائمة نشر «عصمت» و شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس"
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يصدر «البنى التحتية للسينما» عن برنامج الزمالة المقام في ٢٠٢٢ من خلال شراكة بين شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس" وقائمة نشر «عصمت».
للمزيد من المعلومات يرجى زيارة الرابط بالأسفل:
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ملفات
MALAFFAT

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- آرائكم/ن حول المبادرات التي سعت إلى خلق مساحات بديلة لعرض وتوزيع الأفلام في المنطقة العربية وتقييمكم/ن لها
- دور العروض السينمائية في المنطقه العربية وخاصة تلك التي هُدمت أو هُجرت
- السينيفيلية كحالة فردية او جماعية
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شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة «ناس» هي شبكة تضم شاشات ونوادي سينما عربية غير حكومية ذات رؤى برمجية تعتمد على التفاعل المباشر مع الجمهور. تسعى «ناس» من خلال عملها إلى توسيع نطاق الأفلام المتاحة للجمهور العربي وخلق حوار حول السينما وتشجيع وجود أنماط متعددة لتجربة المشاهدة الجماعية للأفلام. يلتزم مشتركي/ات «ناس» بتقديم برامج أفلام منتظمة، ويلتزمون/ن باتجاه الشبكة لتغيير ديناميات عرض ومشاهدة الأفلام في المنطقة. تضمَ الشبكة مبادرات تسعى من خلال برمجتها وفعالياتها ومساحاتها واستراتيجيات التواصل مع جمهورها لدعم ثقافة سينمائية حيوية ومستدامة بهدف تطوير تفاعل الجمهور مع الأفلام. تنظَم «ناس» سلسلة لقاءات وبرامج أفلام متداولة وورش إقليميَة لكوكبتها النامية من الفضاءات السينمائية الغير حكوميَة. و هي جمعية مسجلة في برلين تمارس عملها اقليمياً بالتعاون مع مشتركي/ات الشبكة في البلدان العربية المختلفة.

عصمت

قائمة نشر «عصمت» (٢٠٢٠) محرر وناشر ومجموعة مطبوعات وشخصيات. نتخصص في النشر الفني وإنتاج الكتب والمطبوعات التي تشتبك مع المجال الفني والإنتاج الثقافي. ننشر ونعمل تحت اسم «عصمت» وهي شخصية قامت بدورها سناء يونس فى فيلم «جنون الشباب» (خليل شوقي، ١٩٧٢)، عصمت هي بوصلتنا ومصدر إلهامنا والقاهرة هي مدينتنا.
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شخصيات

شخصيات نشرة فصلية ورقية (وأحيانا رقمية) تصدرها عصمت في الربيع والشتاء وتفسح من خلالها المجال للمقال النقدي الطويل، مع إعارة اهتمام خاص للمقالات في مجال النقد السينمائي. صدر أول عدد لشخصيات في ربيع ٢٠٢١ وقد صدر في شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ربيع ٢٠٢٣ العدد الخامس بالتعاون مع شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة (ناس) أونلاين على ملفات ناس.