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Egyptian Earth Between the Pen and the Camera: Youssef Chahine’s Adaptation of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi’s al-Ard

Susannah Downs

George Bluestone has argued that a film can never be an exact replica of a novel and that “mutations are probable the moment one goes from a given set of fluid, but relatively homogenous, conventions to another; that changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium.” A filmmaker who undertakes the adaptation of a novel does not convert the novel at all but views the novel as raw material taking characters and incidents which have “somehow detached themselves from language.”¹ The non-textual media supplementing the original means a film adaptation can never be a direct visual reproduction of a literary work.²

Films lose the linguistic specificity of the novel but gain a wealth of visual description.³ While discussing the representation of literary characters on the screen, Bluestone observes that “Because language has laws of its own, and literary characters are inseparable from the language which forms them, the externalization of such characters often seems dissatisfying.”⁴ By contrast Seymour Chatman argued that cinematic representation of character was possible, relying on the premise that it is the “essence” of a character which is remembered, the characteristics themselves rather than the language used to describe the characteristics: “Too often do we recall fictional characters vividly, yet not a single word of the text in which they come alive.”⁵ It is this manipulation of sound and the visual image which makes Youssef Chahine’s adaptation of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi’s al-Ard distinctive.

Al-Sharqawi’s al-Ard

‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi’s al-Ard was published in serial form in 1953. It is an epic chronicle describing a village’s struggle
against the arbitrary injustice imposed on them by a repressive hierarchy of authority. It attempted a realistic portrayal of village life from the perspective of the villagers themselves and in doing so departed from earlier novels depicting an idealized vision of rural life.

Al-Sharqawi uses a series of episodes to reveal not only a way of life but also the continuing and escalating impact the intrusion of authority makes on that way of life. The novel is framed by the reminiscences of a first person narrator, who comes from Cairo to spend the summer in the village. The narrator disappears after the early section of the novel and reappears at the conclusion. His account of his childhood games with the village sweetheart, Wasifah, provides a background to the social milieu of the village and the social restrictions imposed after adolescence. He highlights the villagers’ rivalries and jealousies which are centered on the possession of land and competition for Wasifah’s affections.

The villagers are informed by the authorities that they will only be permitted to water their land for a few days a month and it is decided that they will send a petition to Cairo in protest. The villagers fight over their individual water rights and as a result they open all the water channels. A large group of men from the village are arrested for “illegal” irrigation of land and the severity of their treatment in prison seems to bear no relation to their supposed crime. The villagers’ concerns for the watering of their fields are then superceded by a greater concern when they are informed that the Bey will be building a road which will cut through their land. When iron is brought to build the road the men make what seems the only possible form of resistance and throw it into the canal. However their attempts are futile against the power of the authorities and the camel corps are sent in to suppress any further disturbance to the work on the road. As the narrator leaves the village, Wasifah’s father, Abu Suwaylam, has lost his land and crops to the road.

The focus of each episode shifts from one group of villagers to another although each new episode does not entirely exclude the characters developed in earlier episodes. One episode gives way to another and each episode has an escalating impact on the lives of the villagers. Al-Sharqawi showed a predominant interest in portraying a way of life in the village rather than recounting a tightly connected series of events leading to a unifying conclusion.

The author writes from the perspective of the villagers themselves. This technique gives the reader what Ali Jad calls “an
inside view of the village’s milieu.” Characterization is often presented by the characters themselves rather than by the omniscient narrator. ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr also remarks that the village does not wait for an outsider to come and speak in its name, as in earlier novels depicting rural society. Critics praised the use of lively dialogue in Egyptian colloquial while recognizing certain inconsistencies and structural flaws in the narrative.

Socialist realism as a literary trend in Egypt grew in the Fifties and al-Sharqawi was at the forefront of this movement which was committed to a realistic portrayal of Egyptian life, with all its faults, in order to point the way forward to reform. Socialist realism often had an underlying Marxist motivation and became virtually synonymous with social commitment. After the Nationalist Revolution of 1952, writers of this trend felt freer to express their commitment to the cause of the poor and oppressed and al-Sharqawi expressed this by showing the injustice of the old regime.

Sabry Hafez writes that the emergence of socialist realism in Arabic literature was a reaction to the earlier prevalence of middle-class ideals, a set of values which al-Sharqawi attacks by implicitly criticizing the earlier novels on rural life. The narrator draws a deliberate comparison between his village and the villages in Zaynab and al-Ayam, criticizing their romantic vision of rural life. Life was just as hard in his village and the children had flies in their eyes. ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr argues that with al-Ard, al-Sharqawi led the way in the realistic portrayal of the Egyptian village.

Al-Sharqawi relies predominantly on the portrayal of the village characters and their dialogue for the realism in his novel. Kilpatrick observes that by writing dialogue in the colloquial of the delta al-Sharqawi broke away from the practice of previous generations. She argues that this use of language is the single most important factor in the novel contributing to the illusion of reality. He portrays the humour of the villagers’ jokes and the richness of their language and songs. Ali Jad also comments on the humour of the dialogue and the rough language. He quotes ‘Abd al-Hadi: “I do care about you, may God break your neck.” He also reveals the villagers superstitions as a part of everyday life. This concern does not extend, however, to the characterisation of figures of authority which is polemical and stylized, although in keeping with his condemnation of their position.

In his concern for realism, al-Sharqawi does not balk at describing all aspects of village life, including the sexual frustration of
young men leading to bestiality, women forced into prostitution in order to eat, routine imprisonment, and torture where men are forced to drink horses’ urine. In his enthusiasm to protest the cause of social reform, however, he loses some of the realism he took such pains to portray. He uses the technique of ascribing thoughts to the villagers as a whole to put across his own ideas. This authorial intrusion slows the pace of the novel and seems little more than thinly disguised propaganda:

The villagers knew that....despite having boycotted the elections they received a representative, the Basha....and that despite the fact that the whole country boycotted the elections and the only party to enter them was the party of the government and its supporters, still the government said that it represented Egypt and that its party represented the people.17

The reader is thus transported from submersion in an imaginative narrative to actual reality. Jad accuses al-Sharqawi of artistic naivety which “makes him unable to balance the requirements of his art and those of his socio-political commitment.”18

The action of the novel is almost dramatic in its formulation and follows the physical location of characters. Characters remain in the reader’s “vision.” As one character leaves the scene he announces that another character is coming and then that character arrives. This “following” of characters gives a naturalistic presentation of time which was a deliberate attempt to augment the illusion of reality. This can sometimes, however, cause the pace of the novel to drag.

It is the events of daily village life that are presented in naturalistic time; other events outside the village are fore shortened or presented in analepsis.19

Muhammad Affandi’s journey to the railway station on the donkey, with Diyab running behind him barefoot on the burning ground, is related in the time it would have taken for them to complete their journey, that is, about ten to fifteen minutes. Muhammad Affandi’s stay in Cairo, a period of days, however, is foreshortened, and only the bare outline of the events of his stay are reported. No space is given to his impressions of the city or the pace of life there.
Chahine’s adaptation of the novel *al-Ard* has been praised as one of the best literary adaptations to reach the screen and commended for combining the many episodes of the novel into a compact and cohesive film. Both al-Sharqawi’s novel and the film adaptation of *al-Ard* were produced at crisis points in Egyptian history. The novel was serialised in 1953 a year after the Nationalist revolution and Chahine’s film was released two years after the defeat of 1967. Chahine’s adaptation of the novel reflects the different historical, and consequently, ideological context within which it was produced.

Many critics have written about the relationship between novel and society. For example, Kilpatrick comments that the influence of political events on literature usually occurs indirectly through modification of social facts and intellectual climate. Sabry Hafez warns against the “naïve error of using novels as documentary sources for illustrating the contemporary scene” although he goes on to argue that “even the devotees of pure aesthetic criticism could not completely avoid the question of social influence in the work of fiction; however much they would like to disregard it.” Roy Armes argues that Chahine’s work too, “demands a chronological treatment that relates the film to the social and political changes Egypt has undergone since the Fifties.”

Youssef Chahine’s adaptation of al-Sharqawi’s novel, produced sixteen years after the novel appeared, moved away from the collective struggle of the village against authority toward the responsibility of the individual in his struggle to maintain his existence and his livelihood. A common theme to both novel and film is the attachment of man to the land he works. Love of the land appears as one of the many aspects of village life al-Sharqawi portrays while he concentrates on the struggle with authority. Chahine, however, magnifies the struggle for land as the fundamental basis of his film, giving the film a direct relevance to its historical context.

Chahine, like al-Sharqawi, aimed at a realistic, rather than romantic, portrayal of the Egyptian village. Mahmud al-Maligi, the actor interpreting the role of Abu Suwaylam, proposed that in playing Abu Suwaylam he wanted to destroy the derogatory image of the fellah in Egyptian cinema “tantôt ridicule...tantôt sornois...” and to convey the dignity of his existence in his relationship to the land.
Chahine also used locations that would provide an authenticity of setting, and he used local extras in the film to heighten the realism of the village characters.27

Realism in Egyptian cinema28 grew as a reaction to the earlier history of melodramatic films which appeared to have no relation to the lives of the majority of the population.29 Just as al-Ard the novel was committed literature, so too Chahine’s al-Ard was a serious attempt to politicise the Egyptian film and give it an importance and influence over the people, rather than simply entertaining them with music and comedy. According to Roy Armes, Chahine’s work holds a great lesson, that it is possible for the Third World film maker to deal with social and political issues intelligently....30

Chahine manipulates the visual and auditory dimensions of his narrative to augment the impression of reality given by al-Sharqawi’s characterisation and dialogue.31 He uses techniques of cinematic realism in an effort to make the spectator less aware of the film as film but as an extension of life.32 Characters cross the screen at a tangent and not from right to left or vice versa. Chahine also avoids use of voices or sounds emanating from outside the frame.33

The director of al-Ard shows a concern for the natural sounds of life: background noise can be heard; such as the cacophony of the market place, the din of the railway station where Mahmud Bey and Muhammad Affandi have to raise their voices to be heard, the sounds of nature in the countryside as the narrator arrives and the sounds of crickets as the men sit on Abu Suwaylam’s doorstep at night. He avoids use of montage sequences and keeps to natural time within sequences.

The mis-en-scène of group scenes shows figures crowding the foreground and so the actors sometimes have to lean forward to be seen by the camera. Use of deep focus puts characters in their social context. Shots are seen conjointly with or through the character. This is particularly noticeable in the scene where Muhammad Affandi, Diyab, Shaykh Hassuna and Abu Suwaylam sit together. Three hundred and sixty degree tracking shots focus on each of them in turn looking over the shoulders of the other figures. The camera is set at their eye-line, as though it were another participant in the scene.

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Teshame Gabriel notes that “Films that hide the marks of production are associated with the ideology of presenting ‘film as reality.’ The camera does not avoid or go around obstacles. When ‘Abd al-Hadi slaps ‘Abd al-‘Ati, the camera observes them through the two barred windows of Ramadan’s tomb. The actors can barely be seen through the gaps in the bars. This gives a realistic impression of an observer who, in order not to interrupt the scene, would have to watch it with an obstructed vision.

Reverberating Themes

Al-Sharqawi’s novel reveals a number of social and political themes. Chahine condenses the themes of al-Sharqawi’s novel into clearly opposed, dialectical themes: land and water, man and land, individual and group, city and country. The constant use of visual images enrich these themes. It is this reverberation of themes throughout the film, which binds the film and gives it unity. Malkmus and Armes remark on the “thematic density” of Chahine’s later films, regarding them as unique in Arab cinema.

The social themes of al-Sharqawi’s novel include a deep brotherly affection underlying the villagers’ rivalry, the villagers’ deep affection for the land, and the ownership of land as a basis for honour and respect. Diyab says, “No one...no one could pluck him from this earth in which his feet were planted.” The transience of governments is contrasted to the longevity of the land and those who have lived on it generation after generation. “They knew by experience that every government that tried to build the agricultural road through their fields did not live long enough to complete the project.” There is the need for a girl after adolescence to protect her reputation in order to maintain her social position and the awareness of the social differences between villagers and Cairenes which is usually characterised by language.

A predominant political theme is the cruelty and arbitrary injustice of governments. Al-Sharqawi’s condemnation of those in authority is resolute and damming, continually referred to in the novel. Landlords rape girls on a whim, Mahmud Bey is indolent and corrupt, the police brutally torture men innocent of any crime, forcing them to fight overseas and to cheer for visiting party members. The village ‘Umda is little more than an extension of the power of the police.

Authority is ever present in al-Shaqawi’s novel and enters the very heart of the village. Shaykh Sha’ban spreads rumours among the villagers; the Police Commissioner and Mahmud Bey attend the ‘Umda’s funeral in the heart of the village. Shaykh al-Shinnawi and Shaykh al-Balad are portrayed as little more than satellites of established authority. The villagers’ attitude to authority in the novel is confrontational and cynical. The ‘Umda’s guards laugh at him. ‘Abd al-Hadi tells Shaykh al-Shinnawi to shut up when they are writing the petition.

Where the chain of authority in the novel is explicit and imposing—the ‘Umda, Mahmud Bey, the Basha, the Wazir, the government and the English—the film’s narrative renders authority implicit and distant. Chahine uses the telephone to symbolise the chain of authority. During indoor shots, the ‘Umda is positioned so that a telephone, linked to the chain of outside authority, is always in the foreground. In Chahine’s film, authority is distant and separate, linked to the world beyond the village rather than to the life within it. As Pudovkin remarked, “The performance of an actor linked with an object and built upon it will always be one of the most powerful methods of filmic construction.”39

In Chahine’s film, land is the fundamental support of man and the themes of the film are all tied into this relationship with the land. The villagers’ moods are reflected in the state of the land: when the land is dry the villagers are lost; when they open the water channels they take joy in giving the land water. The film cuts immediately after the opening of the water channels to a shot of Abu Suwaylam drinking too; his state, in fact, his very existence, is linked to that of the land. Abu Suwaylam takes refuge in the land, after returning from prison and a wide shot shows him in the corner of the frame, the rest of the frame is filled by the land. Man is shown in the context of land rather than land in the context of man.40

Land and water are interdependent and the lives of the villagers are built on this interdependency. The film is saturated with images of water to show its central and fundamental importance in the life of the village. When Wasifah is first seen, she is reflected in water; when Muhammad Affandi leaves for Cairo, he is reflected in water; when the men go to the fields, before fighting, they are reflected in water; when the men are taken to prison they are reflected in water (the men are also tortured in water); when Khadrah goes to consult Shaykh Sha’ban, he is reflected in water; when Khadrah is killed, she and her
murderer are reflected in water; when the villagers gather in front of Abu Suwaylam’s house, there is water in the foreground; when Sergeant ‘Abd-Allah joins Abu Suwaylam outside his house, they approach each other tentatively and water is between them. Individually these shots barely register in the spectator’s mind but as there is an escalation in the number of related images they provide a collective, dramatic image.

In the town, reflections are not in water but in mirrors. When Muhammad Affandi is first seen in his Cairo hotel, it is reflected in a mirror; the soldier entering from the street is reflected first in the mirror; in the cafe with Mahmud Bey, multiple mirror reflections show the reactions to their conversation. When Mahmud Bey tells Muhammad Affandi about his “wonderful new project,” he sits beside multiple reflections of himself. When the shot reverses to Muhammad Affandi to see his reaction, he is then standing beside multiple reflections of himself, magnifying his reaction to the news that will destroy the village.

In contrast to the continual images of water are those of aridity. The dry dust of the soil is scorched by the sun while Muhammad Affandi is away, the burning ground as Diyab runs behind Muhammad Affandi, the empty qulla (pitcher) beside Ramadan’s tomb which the foreman of the road builders kicks to dust because it is empty. When Abu Suwaylam comes to drink, he finds it is not only empty but destroyed. It takes away the sudden joy of the harvesting of the cotton and seems to imply that tragedy is still inevitable.

Khaled Osman remarks on the dialectical theme of “here and elsewhere” as a theme in Chahine’s films.41 At the opening of the film, the city is a place to hope for, a goal. Wasifah says that her father wants to marry her to someone who lives in the town. Abu Suwaylam later echoes this. When the narrator arrives and sees Wasifah for the first time, the cab driver says, “Oh, Wasifah, even people from the city admire you.”

Parallel to this, a note of criticism is introduced. ‘Abd al-Hadi says to ‘Ulwani, “do we come from the town that we can’t sit on the ground, or do we smoke ready-made cigarettes?” (A later conversation parallels this when the two sit down again on the ground and ‘Ulwani rolls himself a hand-made cigarette.) This criticism is compounded after Muhammad Affandi’s visit to Cairo. His visit shows how alien the city is and how removed from the life and interests of the village. The hotel owner speaks Arabic as though she

were a foreigner. The girl he spies in the hotel wears a short modern dress totally different from the dress of the village girls.

The city and authority are in opposition to the village, and the opposition clarifies the imposition of authority as an external force linked to the world beyond the village. The telephone becomes the symbol for this chain of external authority. The ‘Umda is first shown talking on the telephone to the police commissioner. Muhammad Affandi can only reach Mahmud Bey in Cairo by telephone. The surveyor talking to Shaykh Hassuna is also shown on the telephone.

Another theme is the impotence of the individual without the support of the group. Abu Suwaylam tells ‘Abd al-Hadi that if all the villagers stuck together no one would be able to stop them, not the government nor even the English. This conversation is paralleled by Shaykh Hassuna’s conversation with Muhammad Affandi where he says that he can do nothing by himself and emphasises that the villagers must all work together. The irony of this only becomes apparent after he himself deserts the village.

In a group meeting after the men return from prison, Abu Suwaylam criticises, firstly, the men of the village and, secondly, the person whom he had hoped would rouse them from their inaction. He accuses the group of sitting around like women and bemoaning their situation. He implicitly criticises Shaykh Hassuna for raising the hope that the men could be motivated to resist. Instead all they do is talk; the men sleep and stay silent. They react like women and behind a screen the silent figures of two women mirror his remarks. His words are a rallying call for unity and action. When ‘Ulwani later asks ‘Abd al-Hadi why Shaykh Hassuna deserted the village he says “you couldn’t understand, you do not own land.” The film indicates that it was self-interest which caused the individuals to desert the group.

Realigning character

The novel does not provide a single “hero” or a central character. M. Badawi describes al-Ard as “a novel in which the protagonist is the Egyptian village itself.” Characters do not function in isolation, but in contrast to, and comparison with, the other members of their community. Chahine simplifies and clarifies the
network of relationships portrayed in the novel and by consolidating relationships is able to give a stronger juxtaposition of elements. Characters’ relationships focus attention on similarities and oppositions. Prominence is given in his adaptation to characters who support the development of the action.

Chahine provides a single protagonist around whom the action of the film centres and from whose perspective events are viewed. It was Abu Suwaylam, in the novel, who questioned the life around him, and Chahine chose him as the main protagonist of his film. In the novel, Abu Suwaylam is a plain man with pride and dignity. When facing his torturer, “without saying a word, he collected all his saliva, his contempt and his burning pride and spat it in the face of the commissioner.”44 He has a capacity for analysing his external reality, and he questions continually the villager’s willingness to sign the petition without knowing what was written in it. Shaykh Youssef remarks that Abu Suwaylam is “a man of experience who understands—even though he couldn’t read—more than those who could read.”45

The opening shot of the film establishes the character of Abu Suwaylam as the main perspective of the narrative and throughout the film his position in the frame is arranged to heighten identification with him.46 The opening sequence of the film focuses on the hands of Abu Suwaylam holding a young green plant and extra-diegetic nay (flute) music can be heard in the background.47 The shot is taken from the perspective of Abu Suwaylam, a low-level, subjective shot. The spectator’s eye-line is that of the figure holding the plant, involving the spectator in the scene, sharing in its meaning. From the outset a strong connection is made between the central character and the land. When the government men start to drive stakes into Abu Suwaylam’s land, he reacts as though they were driving stakes into his own body. In a final dramatic scene, Abu Suwaylam is dragged over the bare earth still clutching the cotton plants that were his life and livelihood. The film is framed by the two contrasting images of the opening and closing shots which bind Abu Suwaylam’s fate to that of the land.

Chahine makes Abu Suwaylam the central pivot of the villagers’ discussions and actions; when the villagers meet as a whole they meet outside his house. In these group meetings, attention is drawn to him by his position in the frame and the light colour of his clothes in contrast to the dark clothes of those around him, further emphasised by top lighting.48 Abu Suwaylam is shown as the focus of

discussion, thus reinforcing his position as motivator and mediator. Similarly, when the troops come to his fields at the end of the film, he stands still as though outside himself, an observer of the inevitable tragedy of his situation.

Abu Suwaylam is the only villager to have his moustache shaved off in prison. This is emphasised by an extreme close shot of the razor slowly scraping the moustache off his face and all his humiliation contained in this moment. The light from an unseen lamp swings across the picture with sinister implications of interrogation and torture. When Abu Suwaylam rubs his shaven scar it immediately brings back to both character and spectator the humiliation he has suffered. Balazs, writing on the emotional impact of the close-up shot, describes the effect of this technique:

The close up can show us a quality in a gesture of a hand that we had never noticed before...The close up shows your shadow on the wall with which you have lived all your life and which you scarcely knew. 49

By mediating events through the perspective of Abu Suwaylam, Chahine transforms him from participant to commentator and observer. Chahine says in an interview with Yusry Nasrallah, “c’est un film plus combatif qu’il ne semble” and describes al-Ard as his response to the defeat of 1967 and to Nasser’s lack of faith in the Egyptian people, “une métaphore pour parler d’un malaise face au pouvoir.”50 Onto Abu Suwaylam is projected then, not merely the struggle of the individual, but the struggle of a people—the protagonist becomes the collective ideal. Abu Suwaylam is not an Egyptian but “The Egyptian.”

Wasifah, Abu Suwaylam’s daughter, adds further dimensions to her father’s character. Her role is more prominent in the film than the novel and she is the main female protagonist and the female focus of the film. She is portrayed as a girl with a dignity and will of her own. Her mother calls her “bint muradi” (the daughter of my wish) and she says with insistence and pride “Ana bint Muhammad Abu Suwaylam” (I am the daughter of Muhammad Abu Suwaylam). Abu Suwaylam echoes this when he is being taken to prison and he pushes her away and tells her that she is his daughter and thus, should act with pride and dignity.

Her dignity grows throughout the film. She marches to the
‘Umda’s house and this event marks her change from the flowered dress of her youth to the black dress of the other village women, signifying that she has joined the ranks of the adults. In the novel she is ostensibly the passive focus of rivalry but in Chahine’s film she actively chooses ‘Abd al-Hadi.

In her partnership with ‘Abd al-Hadi she attains the status of honorary man. ‘Abd al-Hadi calls all the men to the fields to harvest Abu Suwaylam’s cotton before the road-builders destroy it and then he calls Wasifah. Match cuts identify the perspectives of ‘Abd al-Hadi and Wasifah on the events that follow—opening the water channels and harvesting the cotton, the events filled with optimism. Thus their relationship is imbued with an underlying hope for the future.

Just as Chahine concentrates his “hero” in Abu Suwaylam, so too he concentrates the hierarchy of authority portrayed in the novel in Mahmud Bey and the ‘Umda. This puts them in direct opposition to the villagers and emphasises their oppositional role and the destructive impact they have on the unity of the villagers.

Al-Sharqawi’s portrayal of Mahmud Bey is polemic and slightly exaggerated. He is only just able to wake up at ten o’clock in the morning when the farmers have been up since dawn. He smokes American cigarettes which is one facet of his irredeemable corruption, the other being his predilection for young girls. Mahmud Bey in Chahine’s adaptation is a composite of the Basha, the Mahmud Bey of the novel and a generalized personification of hierarchy. In the novel, Mahmud Bey has no voice. In the film, however, he does have a voice, and his characterisation is balanced between actions and language. His language is notably different from that of the villagers: it is that of the aristocratic “elite,” with all the expressions of this class.

A series of cuts between short shots shows him admiring a marble statue,\(^5\) posing for a portrait, drinking coffee in a bathrobe and then descending from a horse and washing his hands in a basin which a waiting servant is holding ready.\(^6\) He wears western-style clothes, a cravat and a bow tie. This shows, not only Mahmud Bey’s decadence but also his isolation, in terms of understanding, from the villagers.

The villagers’ organic relationship to the land contrasts to the relationship of Mahmud Bey to the land. His presence on the land is temporary and passing. The sounds that follow him are man-made sounds. At his house the sounds of nature are blocked out by music coming from a radio and in Cairo by the sound of rolling dice from a backgammon game. He is not of the land as the peasants are and his

\(^{Alif\ 15\ (1995)}\)
relationship to the land is external and exploitative. He sees land in
the context of man rather than man in the context of the land. He says
"we are not destroying the land, on the contrary, we are building, we
are building houses, we will bring fresh water and electricity... indus-
trialisation, try to understand." He does not live with the land
but imposes himself on it.

Mahmud Bey’s predominant concerns are for his personal
comfort and well-being. He serves his own interests and not those of
the community. He separates the individual from the community and
tells both Muhammad Affandi and Shaykh Hassuna that they need not
worry about their own land. He appeals to the individual’s self-interest
and the only villagers shown at his residence—Muhammad Affandi,
Shaykh Hassuna and Shaykh Youssef—are those who abandon the
villagers’ struggle to protect their collective interests.

In the portrayal of Mahmud Bey, Chahine is able to encapsulate
the isolation of those in power from those they represent and the
transient attachment of the ruling elite to the land (as opposed to the
longevity of the presence of the villagers and their forefathers). The
characterisation of the Bey in Chahine’s narrative is stylized but
within the bounds of credibility.

Shaykh Hassuna is transformed, in the film, from a hero to an
anti-hero. In the novel, Shaykh Hassuna is a figure of respect in the
village and a man of principle. The film translates Shaykh Hassuna
into the villagers’ mentor with a power over the villagers larger than
himself. His return to the village promises the resolution of their
dilemma. His departure is an unsuspected betrayal. He appears first in
the film, surrounded in awe and majesty, to the sound of the muezzin
and the soaring architecture of Sultan Hassan but he leaves the film
alone and without telling anyone.

In the novel, Shaykh Hassuna’s relationships are centered on
the men of the village. Chahine, however, introduces the two scenes
where Shaykh Hassan visits Mahmud Bey and the police
commissioner, showing a shift in loyalty from his relationship to the
villagers to those in authority. He leaves silently, knowing that his
own land has been safeguarded.

The characterization of Shaykh al-Shinnawi, as a figure of
authority, is more confrontational in the novel than in the film. Abu
Suwaylam is a silent commentator and judge of Shaykh al-Shinnawi in
Chahine’s adaptation. Chahine’s film shows the futility of

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al-Shinnawi’s responses to crisis. His inappropriate and universal reaction to all situations is prayer. When the men sit down to write the petition, Shaykh al-Shinnawi persuades them all to recite the “Fatiha.” Abu Suwaylam hesitates visibly and then reluctantly joins in. When his buffalo falls into the well, Shaykh al-Shinnawi elicits a chorus calling for the help of the Lord. This time Abu Suwaylam does not react at all. When the men begin to fight, Shaykh al-Shinnawi enters the frame and startled at the scene starts to pray by the tomb of Saint Ramadan.

Muhammad Affandi is the self-proclaimed intellectual of the village in the novel—although the narrator mocks the superficiality of his position. “He opened his European shirt and tucked the note into the pocket of his “baladi” waistcoat.”57 Chahine concentrates on Muhammad Affandi’s intellectual pretension as the source of his alienation from the villagers and the target of their mockery.

Muhammad Affandi is characterised in the film in relation to his brother to a greater extent than in al-Sharqawi’s novel. He is first shown sitting beside Diyab; he wears a pristine gallabeya (native Egyptian dress) while Diyab is covered with mud and working to build a wall. While Muhammad Affandi rides his pristine white donkey, Diyab runs behind with his bare feet scorched by the burning ground. The comparison also draws a distinction between their relationships to the land. Diyab’s close relationship to the land contrasts to that of Muhammad Affandi. In the film, it is not the legal possession of land which is the basis of honour but the physical relationship to it.

In his relationship to Wasifah, Muhammad Affandi is turned from an object of aspiration to a figure of disconsolation. Her dignity and her relationship to the land make her inaccessible to him. He takes off his spotless gallabeya and sits by Ramadan’s tomb with the incongruous symbols of his effendi status; his fly swat and his glasses.58 He dons the guise of the peasant farmer but his superficial participation only serves to emphasise his profound isolation. When the government troops arrive at Abu Suwaylam’s cotton field, he is shown running.

Shaykh Youssef is a contradictory character in the novel: his greed as village shop-keeper is mediated by the compassion he feels for the villagers in times of crisis. In Chahine’s adaptation, however, Shaykh Youssef is simply greedy and his greed alienates him from the villagers. When he insists on a higher price, an old woman spits on the ground and curses the greed of the world.
Chahine’s film proceeds rapidly to its tragic conclusion and does not linger to consider all the facets of al-Sharqawi’s characters. Chahine only portrays the characteristics which contribute to the occurrence of this tragedy. Thus Shaykh Youssef is greedy and self-interested and his self-interest alienates him from the concerns of the villagers as a whole. Muhammad Affandi is intellectually arrogant but ineffectual. So, too, are Shaykh al-Shinnawi and ultimately Shaykh Hassuna, although the rhetoric of his speech initially made him seem to be otherwise.

**Transformation of Plot**

Chahine took the “kernel” events of al-Sharqawi’s narrative and re-aligned them. He moved away from the episodic nature of al-Sharqawi’s narrative to give events a greater degree of linear development and continuity. He expanded events portrayed in the novel which emphasised the focus of his film, while themes and characterisation were tied in to create an organic whole. He pays most attention to events which identify the villagers with the land.

Chahine expands the villagers’ fight over the irrigation of the land, showing them disunited and serving as a summary of the villagers’ rivalries. Crane shots interspersed with crowded foreground shots take in the whole scene from all perspectives. This village disunity is resolved, however, when ‘Abd al-Hadi and Diyab rescue the buffalo which has fallen into the well. The unity of the scene, concentrated on two characters and supported by the whole group of villagers, contrasts to the preceding fragmented shots of the fighting multitude.

Chahine also expands the scene where the villagers act together in opening the water channels to irrigate their land. It becomes a triumphant scene, given greater impact by the patriotic foreground music, “Our land is thirsty!” Low-level, close-up shots focus on hoes destroying canal banks, flowing water and verdant, green plants. Such scenes make a fundamental identification between the villagers and nature. The scenes where the villagers act in unity are expanded in the film, and the harvest of Abu Suwaylam’s cotton, for example, is backgrounded by the triumphant music that reverberated when the villagers opened the water channels.

Chahine views the men’s arrest and imprisonment less in terms of
their confrontation with authority and more in terms of the impact their absence has on the land and the village. The film shows a long shot of the rising dust in the desolate main square of the village. A close-up shot focuses on the face of an old woman in black, the immobile features of her face showing no emotion except despair. Later, Chahine expands the scene of the men’s return: the village was dead and then comes alive; the old woman of the earlier shot is put into context when she welcomes back her son; Diyab runs straight to the fields.

The novel’s account of the day when the men were instructed to dance, sing, clap and cheer for Hizb al-Sha’b (The Party of the People) is omitted in the film probably on the grounds of the doubtful realism of the scene portrayed in the novel. Chahine also avoids unnecessary digression and the overtly political motivation of some of al-Sharqawi’s narration, in favour of the implicit politics of the film’s overall message.

Chahine also shows a concern for temporal continuity. In al-Sharqawi’s novel, Muhammad Affandi’s journey to Cairo is related across three separate sequences and the logic of the chronology is difficult to follow. After he has returned to the village, he recounts his visit to Cairo to his mother. The recounting of his visit is interrupted by a mediated sequence which depicts the background to Shaykh Hassuna’s life. Muhammad Affandi met Shaykh Hassuna in Cairo and told him what had happened in his meetings with Mahmud Bey and how the village had been tricked.

Chahine elevates all these elements, resembling a tale-within-a-tale, into the present continuous of the film’s narrative. Muhammad Affandi’s journey to Cairo is expanded and is shown between alternating sequences of the village. By showing the sequences of Muhammad Affandi in Cairo, Chahine is able to contrast them to the images of the waiting farmers in the village who are motionless—all activity is suspended while awaiting his return. The activity and commotion of the demonstrations in Cairo contrasts to the motionless, waiting farmers. Chahine follows the chronological time of the narrative rather than the discourse-time of events as they are revealed in the narrative.

Two sequences are shown in alternating shots, each has its own temporal development and yet as a whole they imply simultaneity. Chahine uses this to keep events on a single time plane and to avoid the use of flashback. This clarifies the temporal logic of the events and increases the pace of the action.

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Chahine again uses alternating sequences between the men in prison and the village. This keeps the events in chronological order and avoids the narrative structure of return and recount which al-Sharqawi uses.

Al-Sharqawi’s novel has a revelatory plot which Chatman describes as moving away from resolution to a state of affairs revealed and displayed. These plots are more character-oriented and events are reduced to a relatively minor role. The plot of Chahine’s narrative, on the other hand, has a plot of resolution which attempts to answer the question, “what will happen?” and to answer that question. There is a stronger sense of temporal order, and events show an unraveling rather than a displaying. By centering the individual, Chahine is able to portray the impact of events on that character and to stress his/her perception of them, showing a single individual in his/her struggle to survive. By providing identification with Abu Suwaylam, he gives a focus of interest and cohesion to events.

Chahine also abandons the concept of the external narrator. Al-Sharqawi’s novel is framed by a first-person narrator, a young boy who returns from Cairo to spend the summer in the village and supposedly witnesses the events there during that period. The narrator is absent, however, from the main body of the novel and reappears at the end on the verge of returning to Cairo for the Autumn term. The use of a first-person narrator shows the influence of earlier works like Taha Hussayn’s al-Ayam and Muhammad Hussayn Haykal’s Zaynab. However al-Sharqawi’s use of the narrator is unconvincing and his presence detracts from the meaning of the novel. Rather than drawing the reader into the action of the novel, he alienates the reader from it. The narrator’s childish desires—to own a watch, to learn French, to have a pair of long trousers—add little to the meaning of the novel. He fails to incorporate the narrator’s presence into the meaning of the novel as a whole, and the narrator seems little more than an artificial imposition on the narrative.

Al-Sharqawi’s narrator is transformed into one of the cast of village characters. His arrival draws the spectator into the action of the film. Chahine takes the concerns of the boy and relates them to the meaning of the film. When the boy asks if he may have a pair of long trousers, he is told to wait and see how the cotton crop fares. His seemingly minor pre-occupations are then related to the wider, general concerns of the village as a whole. This not only gives him relevance to the themes of the film but also puts him on the same time plane as
the other characters. Chahine is working with a visual medium where, although possible, use of internal diegetic sound to imply a narrator slows the pace of a film. His aim is the immediacy and relevance of the continuous present tense.

Al-Sharqawi’s narrative is too inconclusive to reflect the continuity of life. However, Chahine’s film adaptation provides a conclusion where the novel provides none. Chahine balances a desire for realism with the dramatic impact of his conclusion.

Both author and director use the impression of reality in an attempt to engage the reader’s/spectator’s subjectivity and to elicit a desire for change. Where al-Sharqawi attempts identification with the group of villagers, Chahine concentrates on identification with an individual. The function of realism in novel and film is to exact a response from the audience, be it reading or spectating, and an increased awareness. The realistic novels of the Fifties in Egypt were characterised by a focus on patriotic concerns, where, “[w]riters’ attitudes are perpetually directed against his country’s enemies and the obstacles which stand in the way of Egypt’s progress.”

Al-Sharqawi’s use of realism was directed outwards, attacking the old way of life and the external authorities. Conversely, Chahine’s adaptation was inward-looking and showed a desire for change, not of external institutions, but of the internal consciousness of society, through identification with Abu Suwaylam. Through a realistic portrayal of the situation Chahine aimed to produce, not so much a critique of the institutions of the country, but a re-awakening of the consciousness of its individuals.

NOTES
1 George Bluestone, Novels into Film (Berkeley: University of California, 1957) 5.
2 Bela Balazs, Theory of Film Character and Growth of a New Art, trans. Edith Bone (London: Dobson, 1952). Quoted from Bluestone, Novels into Film, 62-3. Balazs also argued for novels as raw material and a source of “naked” narrative events.
4 George Bluestone Novels into Film, 23.
5 Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse Narrative, 118.
6 Hilary Kilpatrick attributes this episodic structure to the influence of the oral tradition. Hilary Kilpatrick, “The Egyptian Novel from

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12 ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr suggests it was probable that al-Sharqawi would have read Yawmiyat Na’ib fi al-Aryaf and ‘Awdat al-Ruh by Tawfiq al-Hakim but could not make reference to them because his novel was set in the 1930s before they were written. ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr, al-Riwa’i wa-l-Ard, 117.


15 Ali B. Jad, Form and Technique, 221.


17 al-Sharqawi, Al-Ard, 88.

18 Ali. B. Jad, Form and Technique, 227

19 Seymour Chatman remarks on this naturalistic use of time in an analysis of Gerard Genette’s study of time relations between story and discourse. He says “the scene is the incorporation of the dramatic principle into narrative. Story and discourse here are often of relatively equal duration. The two components are dialogue and overt physical actions of relatively short duration, the kind that do not take much longer to perform than relate.” Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse Narrative, 72.
20 Yves Thoraval remarks that Youssef Chahine "realise l'une des plus belles adaptions litteraires a l'ecran" Regards sur le Cinema Egyptien 1895-1975 (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1975) 76.


26 Interview with Khaled Osman in Youssef Chahine l’Alexandrin, 45.


28 Samir Farid makes a distinction between old and new Egyptian realism; the latter appearing in cinema from late 1970s and 1980s. This was a new, harsher type of realism with greater use of hand-held camera. Samir Farid al-Waqi’iyyah al-Jadidah fi al-Sinima al-Misriyya (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Misriyyah al-‘Ammah, 1992) 1-3. Chahine’s realism was an embryonic form of new realism. New realism avoided the use of metaphoric reference (See Lizabeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, Arab and African Film Making (London: Zed Books, 1991) 117-21, traces of which are evident in Chahine’s work.

29 Galal al-Sharqawi, in his survey of the history of Egyptian cinema divided the films of the period 1945-51, the period immediately before Chahine started producing films, into two predominant

genres, melodrama... ...and farce/comedy. In fact he notes that in the period 1945-46, out of a total of sixty seven films made that year twenty three were melodramas. Cinema in the Arab Countries, ed. George Sadoul (Beirut: Interarab Centre for Cinema and Television, UNESCO,1966) 89.

30 Roy Armes, Third World Film Making and the West (Berkeley: University of California, 1987) 254.


32 Where such techniques are used, “the paradox of that model of meaning becomes more readily apparent. For if the image’s signified is immediately accessible...then it is ultimately more like the poetic model of self-reflexivity.” Peter Brunette and David Wills, Screen/Play Derrida and Film Theory (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 107.

33 Except for deliberate effect in the scene when Khadrah’s body is found. All the villagers stand in the gloom of the marshes and voices rise up from unknown sources like the mist. This distances the villagers as a whole from Khadrah: no one individual is responsible for her and no one person can be shown to care for her. 34 Teshame H. Gabriel, “Towards a Theory of Third World Films,” 47.


35 Lizbeth Malkmus remarks on this technique in Sa’id Marzuq’s film Saving What Can Be Saved (Inqadh ma yumkin inqadhuhu, 1985) where “all the viewer can see is...nothing. There are obstructions, sails are lowered, masking whatever is going on behind them.” Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, Arab and African Film Making, 126.

36 Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, Arab and African Film Making, 222.

37 al-Sharqawi, al-Ard, 260.

38 al-Sharqawi, al-Ard, 199.


40 Federico Fellini, in an interview with Gideon Bachman, argued “there is always a need for interpretation...to condense, to show the essence of things.” See Gideon Bachman, “Federico Fellini,” Patterns of Italian of Italian Cinema, ed. Giose Rimanelli (New
42 Teshame H. Gabriel argues that the community issue is at the heart of Third-World traditional culture: “Whereas the former (the West) aims at changing the individual through the community, the latter (Third World) wants the community changed by the individual.” Teshame H. Gabriel “Towards a Theory of Third World Films, 140-1.
44 al-Sharqawi, al-Ard, 270.
45 al-Sharqawi, al-Ard, 92.
46 See Seymour Chatman on point of view in film, Story and Discourse Narrative, 158-9.
47 The following conversation between the boy narrator’s father and Abu Suwaylam about the drastic situation of the crops that year establishes the meaning of the mournful music heard in the opening shot. From then on, the nay music has connotations of unknown, tragic future events.(See Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema., trans. Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) 110 on music and connotation.) Chahine uses the shot-reverse-shot technique noticeably in this scene. Robert Stam remarks that this structure enables the spectator to become an “invisible mediator” or a “fictive participant.” The viewer’s subjectivity is bound to the action and establishes the initial identification with Abu Suwaylam. Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Vocabularies in Film Semiotics Structuralism Post-Structuralism and Beyond (London: Routledge, 1992) 167.
49 Bela Balazs, Theory of Film Character and Growth of a New Art, 55.
51 The Bey has clearly allied himself to the Western forms of expression, as characterised by his appreciation of the human form represented in the marble statue.

High-angle shots are used for Mahmud Bey (drinking coffee and descending from his horse) and later when the Police Commissioner arrives in the village and looks down on ‘Ulwani. Teshame H. Gabriel comments on the “deliberate use of low/high-angle shots for purposes of social comment...and to show dominance and power relations” as a feature of cinema in Third World cinema. Teshame H. Gabriel, “Towards a Theory of Third World Films,” 45.


This is a theme which Ibrahim al-‘Aris develops, saying that they give up the struggle for the village to “haggle” for their own land. See Ibrahim al-‘Aris, Rihlah fi al-Sinima al-‘Arabiyyah (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1979) 82.


A long shot shows a carriage in the distance outside Muhammad Affandi’s house. Shaykh Hassuna’s departure is alluded to rather than specific.

al-Sharqawi, al-Ard, 129.

This is an example of Barthes’ social gest; a whole social situation can be read into this image. See Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Einstein,” Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967) 73-5.

Seymour Chatman proposes a vocabulary to describe the hierarchical logic of narrative events: “kernels” which give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events in a narrative (these cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic) and “satellites” (minor plot events which can be omitted without impoverishing the narrative). Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse Narrative, 53-5.

Christian Metz, in his attempt to analyze the narrative units of film, proposed the “alternating syntagma” as one of these units; “a rejection of the grouping by continuous series (which remains potential), for reasons of connotation—the search for a certain “construction” of a certain “effect.” Metz subsequently reviewed his ideas on the alternating syntagma; however, his initial analysis.


63 Chatman remarks that “No end, in reality, is ever final in the way “The End” of a novel or film is.” See Seymour Chatman *Story and Discourse Narrative*, 47.

64 Realism or reality? Kracauer argued that tragedy was un-cinematic, criticising in particular its pre-supposition of a “finite, ordered cosmos.” See Seigfried Kracauer *Theory of Film The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960) 266.