Anxieties of Fundamentalism and the Dynamics of Modernist Resistance Youssef Chahine's Al Maseer (The Destiny)

Malek Khouri (Cineaction 69)

Introduction

In this article I provide an assessment of Youssef Chahine's 1997 film Al Maseer (The Destiny).1 The film was awarded the 50th Palme D'or Anniversary Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in the same year, and eventually became one of Chahine's better-known and probably most popular films outside of the Arab world. Al Maseer tackles various issues relating to religious dogmatism, and sketches out underlying elements in this phenomenon's rise in the Arab world since the mid 1980s. The film loosely interprets events that took place in 12th century Arab Andalusia, and as such it functions as a piece of history in the sense that it depicts a historical setting where an Arab cosmopolitan culture spanning across cities such as Baghdad, Fez, Damascus and the Spanish cities of Cordoba and Grenada made them centers of economic expansion, scientific progress and philosophical and cultural innovation. The film is also a piece of history in that it uses a moment in Arab and Muslim history (and inadvertently European history) to weigh on current political and ideological developments and issues. As it tackles contemporary anxieties associated with the rise of religious fundamentalism, Al Maseer provides a 'modernist' strategy that presumes an active experiencing subject/audience in and through whom it (the film) becomes memory and history.

The film presents a story of struggle against religious fundamentalism through the subject-consciousness of a famed Arab philosopher. The historical Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was an astronomer, medical scientist, religious interpreter (Fakih) and above all a philosopher who lived between 1123 and 1198 AD and later became one of the main sources of atheist thinking during the European Renaissance. As a materialist thinker, Ibn Rushd translated Aristotle and contributed to the emergence of an evolutionary interpretation of the notion of creation. In his treatise titled Incoherence of the Incoherence, a polemic against a book by al-Ghazali, a theologian and defender of religious dogma, titled Incoherence of the Philosophers, Ibn Rushd professed the eternity of the world, implying the existence of uncreated matter, and affirmed the primacy of reason over faith. The philosopher was later exiled to the North African desert and his books were burned. His followers were condemned and persecuted in Europe during the Inquisition.2 For an audience that is unfamiliar with Arab culture and history the film brings to light references that have been long absented by 'Orientalist' discourse on Arabs and the Arab world. As such Chahine's film counteracts perceptions that allege a long-standing historical clash between, on the one hand, a Western civilization that is beacon of secular and rational discourse and, on the other, an Arab/Muslim culture that is inherently irrational, fanatical, violent and anti-progress.

This essay describes the film's estimation of the fight against religious dogmatism in the Arab world as integral to an anti-colonial struggle for liberation, national self-determination and modernization; it also highlights the film's modernist structural and formal strategies. On the one hand, the essay's utilization of the term 'modernity' integrates an outlook toward lived experience that encompasses various political, ideological, and cultural paradigms. My use of the term 'modernization', on the other hand, refers more specifically to the processes of change that result from the introduction of certain technologies, such as the technology of cinema itself, into the various spheres of private and social life. My employment of both terms, however, also considers the specificity of their use in the context of Arab history, philosophy and culture.

By offering an 'Other's', a post-colonial—and in this case a specifically Arab post-colonial—perspective on 'modernity', my approach naturally poses a challenge to the 'universal' (read, colonial) use of the notion of 'modernity'. Furthermore, this approach proposes an alternative to what Edward Said once described as "corporate institution of dealing with the Orient"3 as it pertains to Western scholarship on Arab culture and ultimately on Arab cinema. Therefore my reading of Al Maseer submits some crucial and often disregarded theoretical and methodological considerations for those pursuing further research on Arab and Egyptian cinemas as well as post-colonial film texts in general.4

This essay also gives prominence to discussing broad historical and cultural attributes relating to the film. These elements are imperative for understanding Al Maseer's signifying codes and its ideological connotations as they pertain to Arab audiences. While this methodological approach remains, in my view, critical for reading any film, I contend that it is even more necessary in discussing a film like Al Maseer. In light of this film's heavy reliance on references that, for the most part, are not readily accessible for all non-Arab audiences/readers, some elaboration on historical and cultural issues becomes of paramount analytical relevance.

The essay first discusses the film's significance as commentary on post-colonial struggle against religious fundamentalism. Here the essay traces the rise of Islamic fundamentalist influence in Egypt and the Arab world in the 1990s, then draws attention to how the film

represents the struggle against fundamentalism as integral to the struggle against colonial and neo-colonial hegemony in the Arab world. The article then offers an analysis of the film's modernist outlook and strategy. First I introduce the cultural continuum through which the struggle against religious fundamentalism in Arab history was construed via a modernist symbiosis, and how this struggle associated modernization and modernity with the struggle for national unity and self-determination. Here I draw connections between the philosophical/religious propositions set forth by the main protagonist in the film, the historical figure of Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd, and their subsequent revival in the 1800s through the rise of the Arab Renaissance Movement (al-Nahda) and into 20th century's anti-colonial struggles. The essay then goes on to discuss how the film's thematic emphasis on combating contemporary religious fundamentalism is matched by a 'modernist' estimation of the nature and significance of the historical text itself. In this context I demonstrate the film's exploration of modernist meanings through its articulation of a modernist plot structure and cinematic text.a) The film within the historical context of rising religious fundamentalism

Upon its release in 1997, Al Maseer swiftly became symptomatic of the challenges faced at the time by Arab intellectuals in light of the rising influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups in their region throughout the mid 1980s and 1990s. After years of extensive United States' logistical and financial backing for the fundamentalist 'Mujahidin' groups in Afghanistan and other areas, Islamic fundamentalists in the late 1980s were acquiring wide influence on the grass roots level in Egypt as well in several other Arab and Muslim countries. Within this atmosphere, Egyptian intellectuals such as Nasr Abou Zeid (persecuted for his 'blasphemous' interpretation of the Koran), Nawal Saadawi (a feminist who targeted the issue of female circumcision) and Naguib Mahfouz (the Nobel laureate who explored aspects of working class life in Egypt) along with numerous others, became victims of scare mongering and direct attacks by religious fanatics who were promoting dogmatic religious agendas.

However, Islamic fundamentalists were not able to assassinate Faraj Fawdah, a radical liberal intellectual and a lifelong campaigner against obscurantism and fanaticism, until 1992. Similarly, writer Naguib Mahfouz—for a period of over 50 years—grappled with God and wrote passionately about prostitutes and homosexuals, and celebrated working class sexual promiscuity while expressing disdain for middle and upper class hypocritical Puritanism. Yet fundamentalist groups had never made an attempt on his life until 1994, when he was eighty-two years old. Clearly, the government's discount of the rising danger of such groups allowed them to proclaim themselves as guardians of 'morality' in the country. Succumbing to pressure from religious groups, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture allowed the head of al-Azhar, Egypt's central religious authority and censor, a free hand to deal with "blatantly sexual and offensive books and cultural products".5 Condemning fundamentalist "intellectual terrorism" Mahfouz himself issued a furious statement, declaring: "The censor in Egypt is no longer just the state. It's the gun of the fundamentalists." Eventually, the witch-hunt against writers and artists as well as other sections of the population intensified throughout Egypt and spilled over its borders to the rest of the Arab world.

From Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and Yemen to the Gulf Sheikdoms, Arab intellectuals were being assailed and hunted by religious zealots for 'disseminating blasphemy'. The Yemeni writer Abd al-Karim al-Razihi was forced to seek asylum in Holland; legal charges were launched against the Kuwaiti women writers Layla al-Uthman and Afaf Shu'aib as well as against Jordanian poet Musa Hawamidah; in Algeria, Wasinin al-A'rag's novel, The Hostess, was banned for impiety, and several Rai musicians were assassinated and targeted as

advocates of sexual impropriety and godless communism. Back in the Arab east, Lebanese popular musician Marcel Khalifeh was being charged with blasphemy for a song which he adapted from a piece by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darweesh.

The situation had direct effect on intellectual and cultural life in Egypt including its film industry and production. Filmmaker Youssef Chahine himself was not immune from the fallout of this charged atmosphere. In 1994 Chahine was taken to court over his 1994 film Al Mouhager (The Exiled). A fundamentalist lawyer charged that the film presented the prophet Joseph and that according to Islam and to al-Azhar religious rulings it is forbidden to show prophets on the screen. The lawyer wanted the court to pull out the film from Egyptian movie theatres and to stop its distribution outside of Egypt. The court battle lasted over six months and the film was eventually forced out of movie theatres, but not before becoming the highest box office grossing Chahine film to date. Initiating the production of Al Maseer less than one and half years later denoted the filmmaker's own commitment to facing up to the challenges created by these events.

b) The film as a statement against religious fundamentalism

The film ventures back into 12th century Spanish Andalusia to explore the story of the philosopher who is also appointed by the Caliph as the Grand Judge of Cordoba. Andalusia's Caliph (al-Mansour) has two sons: (al-Nasser) a follower of the philosopher Ibn Rushd, and (Abdallah), a party animal who is decoyed into the camp of fundamentalists. Political schemes are rampant in the area. The Caliph supports Ibn Rushd, but is opposed by an Islamic fundamentalist cult that hopes to overthrow him and to get rid of the "heretic" philosopher. Meanwhile, the oldest son is concealing a forbidden love with Manuela, a gypsy, and his trusted adviser is working both sides of the street. A clandestine project is set in motion where a group of Ibn Rushd's disciples who study his books decide to copy them by hand and send them to a safer place, in case the tide turns and the books are burned.

The film's plot structure points out religious fundamentalism as a trend that encourages intellectual regression, and one that, at its core, benefits powers seeking to curtail the struggle for national independence, unity, heterogeneity and the drive towards social and political progress and emancipation, as well as fundamental human freedoms. Al Maseer is constructed in a largely accessible linear fashion. The film's lucid plot progression represents a relative departure from the filmmaker's complex use of flashbacks and dream sequences in many of his other films. As the film opens, a follower of Ibn Rushd in France is being burned at the stake, the bonfire fed by his writings and his translations of the philosopher's books. The smoldering man calls out to his son Joseph to seek out Ibn Rushd (ironically, the name Joseph, Youssef in Arabic, is identical to Chahine's own first name, who himself, like the film's Joseph, also happens to be of an Arab Christian background). The scene sets in motion a story about the cross-cultural and cross-historical phenomenon known today as religious fundamentalism. The trajectory between the first and the last scenes of the film where we witness the burning of Ibn Rushd's books in Andalusia carries particular resonance for present day viewers. Together, the two scenes enhance the film's critique of religious dogmatism as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Ibn Rushd himself is portrayed as part of an open and pleasant intellectual and artistic community living in a predominantly free-thinking atmosphere. The depiction of Ibn Rushd's

character—his enlightened philosophical vision, his intellectual openness and his playful yet politically engaged lifestyle—is highlighted by the film's plot which pits, on the one hand, the philosopher's determination to move across a range of religious, ethnic, gender and cultural boundaries against, on the other hand, religious fundamentalism's self-inflicted imprisonment within controlled, secretive and prohibitive structures and politics. Presenting an attentive portrayal of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious 12th century Arab Andalusia the film draws attention to the dangers facing today's heterogeneous Arab national society and identity.6

Furthermore, Chahine's celebratory delineation of an Andalusian carefree life-style accentuates his emphasis on the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism as an antithesis to social progress, intellectual freedom and the aptitude to celebrate life's blissful pleasures. In many respects the plot of the film is consistently intermitted by scenes depicting all kinds of earthly sacrileges that fundamentalists loathe! For example, much of the dramatic events in the film are set against backgrounds of exuberant dance, music, poetry, humour, sex, romance and captivating and colourful landscapes, architecture and costumes.

Romantic sub-plots enhance the film's emphasis on social and intellectual heterogeneity and on combating dogmatic interpretation of religion. Stories depicting relationships between Abdallah and Sarah, Manuella's younger sister, and between An-Nasser and Salma, Ibn Rushd's daughter to whom Joseph—the son of the executed Christian philosopher—also has an attraction, all enhance the film's main thematic preoccupations. While Abdallah and Sarah's relationship is interrupted by the young man's involvement with the fundamentalists, the second affair concludes in Salma's marriage to the Caliph's eldest son and Ibn Rushd's own disciple, an-Nasser.

The linearity of the plot compounded with its dependence on the general familiarity of its Arab audience target with the history of the conflict between Ibn Rushd and the fundamentalists—as well as with the contemporary situation in the Arab world—infers a clear political statement in support of progressive change and against the rise of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism in the Arab world and beyond. As it traces the philosopher's story Al Maseer reclaims aspects of Arab history by way of describing a continuous struggle between reactionary forces and proponents of intellectual enlightenment and social progress. The film posits history as an arena of exploration and recovery of collective identity; this history is offered as memory and as an informant for understanding and addressing present dilemmas.

c) The film as a story about the challenges facing Arab unity

Al Maseer inadvertently makes reference to two critical components of Arab and Egyptian post-colonial politics, both of which allude to the role of colonial powers in combating the pan-Arab project for national self-determination by their encouragement of religious sectarianisms within the Arab region. The first relates to the centrality of the notion of Arab identity, which the film depicts as a heterogeneous entity, and the second deals with the relationship between fundamentalist politics and colonial political manipulations.

Historically the movement advocating pan-Arab unity reflected the goal of a democratic unification and national self-determination of Arab speaking peoples. Contrary to what

'Orientalist' discourses customarily suggest, Arab nationalism has been largely associated with advocating national identity as a socially and politically heterogeneous alternative to religious, ethnic and tribal divisions.7 The early movement for Arab unity also epitomized an initial phases in the anti-colonial struggle for national self-determination and unity when much of the Arab world, particularly east of the Mediterranean, was still under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Between 1831 and 1840 Egyptian ruler Mohammad Ali and his son Ibrahim made the first attempt to create a larger united Arab state in modern history, which in addition to Egypt included greater Syria (comprising present day Syria Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and Jordan). The campaign was eventually crushed after a joint political and military campaign was initiated by the Ottoman Empire in alliance with Imperial Britain and the tacit approval of other European colonial powers at the time. But despite its failure, Mohammad Ali's attempt enhanced an intellectual and political maturation of the struggle for Arab unity, independence and modernization.

The first effort to create a united Arab state reflected in its essence the rising role and influence of an emerging national bourgeoisie against old feudalist structures. The ideological character of the reform demands by this emerging class echoed in multiple ways those raised by the European bourgeoisie as it began to affirm its own power during the European Renaissance and as it finally affirmed its reforms after the French Revolution. In the Arab world a similar movement was on the ascendance by the 1800s. This movement was later termed al-Nahda al-Arabiah (the 'Arab Renaissance' in English). Since its emergence in the mid 1800s the al-Nahda movement informed and was informed by a strong emphasis on social and cultural heterogeneity as integral to achieving self-determination and national independence.8 Later, the social and political composition of 20th century modern pan-Arab movement consistently involved the active and leading participation by individuals from a wide cross-section of the region's ethnic and religious mosaic, and unswervingly advocated secular forms of government.9

Al Maseer's attentive celebration of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and politically pluralist Arab society in 12th century Spain is conducive to pan-Arab political reclamation of heterogeneity as a defining character of Arab identity. In other words the film puts a great weight on depicting the struggle against religious fundamentalism also as a struggle for reviving a heterogeneous Arab identity and unity. It is within this breadth that the film also recognizes the polity of religious fundamentalism in the context of externally induced colonial politics in the region.

The plot of the film explicitly alludes to the role played by European leaders in fomenting support for fundamentalist sects in Arab occupied Spain. In this context the role played by European kings is portrayed as an affront for their pre-Renaissance medieval hostility towards what Andalusia's Muslim/Arab culture largely symbolized at the time (i.e., cultural and national heterogeneity, scientific progress and intellectual freedom and openness). As such the film allegorically refers to the 'colonial'10 politics of divide and conquer as exemplified here in its collaboration with Islamic fundamentalism; inadvertently the film envisages how Arab struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism has been consistently informed by the struggle for modernist renewal. Today, emphasizing this modernization/national liberation dynamic remains part of how most prominent Arab modernist intellectuals challenge the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a politically and ideologically regressive movement.11

d) The notion of Modernity within an Arab cultural and cinematic continuum

Within its own specific historical and cultural parameters Arab intellectual articulation of modernity acknowledges a paradoxical disposition of a project which is not dissimilar to how 'modernity' was articulated within, for example, a Latin American context, as "neither a break from the past nor a new way of describing and categorizing the present; [but] instead [as a re-articulation of] the process whereby historical and cultural formation mediate and condition contemporaneity" to quote Zuzana Pick.12 Modernity as a specifically Arab frame of reference equally finds its origins within an intellectual and political paradigm (which was at its height in the mid to late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries) that was part of an anti-colonial project which also sought progressive political, economic and cultural renewal.

As I noted earlier, the al-Nahda movement epitomized the struggle to reaffirm Arab identity and sought ways to assert Arab rights for national self-determination. Equally as important, Arab intellectuals in the 1900s aspired for a transformation that involved a 'cross-fertilization' and integration of Muslim and Arab heritage with the humanist traditions of the European Renaissance, the ideals of the French Revolution, and 19th century scientific and industrial Enlightenment. As such al-Nahda saw itself primarily as a 'modernist' and 'modernizing' movement combining various political, social and philosophical features.13

Al Maseer reincorporates modernity and the struggle for modernist renewal in the Arab world into the struggle against religious fundamentalism. In this regard the film reaffirms a long-standing Arab approximation of the notion of modernity. However, to understand the significance of the film as a modernist text, it is important to give a brief overview of the development of modernism as an artistic Arab endeavor.

Chahine's selection of the story of Ibn Rushd as the subject of his film bears direct relevance to how the notion of modernity in Arab societies is conceived within a specific political, social and philosophical/religious continuum. In the film Ibn Rushd the philosopher is quoted directly from one of his comments on the relationship between philosophy and religion:

Wisdom guides the virtuous theologian in his study of what we call "syllogism". And divine law guides the philosopher in his study of what we call "reason". Reason is the study of wisdom. Everything that has been deduced from divine law is subject to interpretation. Reason is the sister of divine law. The supposed conflict between them is a malicious invention.

Religious Muslim Arab intellectuals of the mid-19th century such al-Afghani, Mohammad Abdo and Abdel-Rahman al-Kawakibi consistently stressed the need to overcome barriers between Islam and philosophy that initially emerged after the burning of the books of none-other than Cordoba's philosopher Ibn Rushd. These intellectuals emphasized the need to break away from traditional dogmatic reading of the Koran and embraced openness in interpreting religious texts. In essence, this group of al-Nahda theologians sought to rejuvenate and modernize the process of inferring the religious text in a way which—as Ibn Rushd himself described over seven centuries earlier—, respected the primacy of reason, fought intellectual and religious mysticism, and by extension promoted philosophical rationalism as well as scientific modernization and social progress.14 Discussions around the interpretation of the religious text soon expanded to include wider and even more vigorous debates around breaking away from the sanctification of language and written texts in general. What ensued was a movement which put a specifically Arab spin on the notion of

'modernity'.

After centuries of intellectual stagnation (Joumoud) under the Ottoman rule, Arab intellectuals provided the thrust for a wide literary and artistic body of work that promoted renewal (Tajdid) of critical and literary practices. By the 1920s, and later during the period of the struggle for national liberation in the 1940s and 50s, a movement involving intellectuals and artists from a cross-section of anti-colonial, socialist and left-liberal trends and groups began to introduce and incorporate various aspects of early 20th century western modernist movement in the arts and literature. However, Arab modernity also strongly emphasized the dynamic recovery and reexamination of Arab and Muslim history, literature and language; the development of classical Arabic language to make it more reflective of the realities of contemporary life, arts, literature and sciences; and third, developing contemporary Arab literature and arts by deepening their social relevance and celebrating their connections and interactions with the wider heritage of humanity as whole.15 As a result of this confluence between local and external intellectual and political trends and orientations many Arab artists began to see themselves and their role in society as integral to the process of recuperating a cross-historical, cross-cultural, cross-textual and determinedly political struggle for renewal. As such, the acknowledgement of the polity of the text constituted the essence of defining Arab modernity.

As we have seen earlier, discussions on the interpretation of the religious text during the early period of al-Nahda later expanded to include a call to break away from traditional sanctification of language and its use in literary and artistic work. In the late 19th century a broad cultural cluster of writers and artists began to advocate renewal (Tajdeed) of critical discourse by way of challenging and overcoming centuries of social and intellectual stagnation (Joumoud) under the colonial rule of the Ottoman Empire.16

With the collapse of the Ottoman rule after World War I and its replacement with Western colonial powers, new alignments of anti-colonial forces began to emerge. In the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s the anti-colonial movement in the Arab world comprised forces whose outlook was more open than ever to western politics and cultural discourse. For example liberal, socialist and Marxist ideas increasingly asserted their presence among Arab intellectuals, ushering in the process a closer examination of the new artistic and cultural trends there were emerging at the time in Europe (including in the former Soviet Union).17 Such re-alignments constituted the nucleus for a nuanced 'modernist' cultural discourse. Basing itself on al-Nahda's philosophical push for opening the use and interpretation of language and religious texts (rather than the closing them to stagnant forms, conventions or authority structures) and its political challenge to colonial hegemony as well as social reaction and conservatism, Arab adaptation of a 'modernist' text increasingly became synonymous on the one hand with its stylistic heterogeneity and diversity and on the other with its conscious awareness of the polity of the artistic text.

Since its early beginnings in the 1920s and throughout its development during the last century Egyptian and Arab cinema has reinvented itself by simultaneously incorporating various stylistic and generic approaches. All through its history Egyptian cinema has sustained a concomitant interest in various cinematic traditions including those of classical Hollywood and the avant-garde, as well as popular and high art both on the production as well as the circulation and consumption levels.18 Up until today and despite occasional set-backs, Egyptian film (as part of a nationally based, controlled and operated studio system) largely maintained broad popular appeal among its national audience.19

Western cinematic modernist impulses—originating in early and mid 20th century western art and literature—were assimilated by Egyptian filmmakers as equally valuable and complementary rather than antithetical to Arab national and cultural modernist traditions. Adaptation of western versions of modernism by these filmmakers was partly re-fashioned via their own indigenous modernist traditions and history.

Following Gamal Abdel-Nasser's left-nationalist revolution the public sector in Egypt began to play a major role in supporting a socially and politically dedicated, modernist, 'Third Worldist' cinema.20 By the early 1950s Egyptian cinema was integrating a loose adaptation of various realist cinematic trends including French poetic realism, Italian neo-realism and socialist realism.21 It was also incorporating a mixture of approaches associated with Soviet dialectical formalism particularly those articulated by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, as well as various expressionistic techniques and innovations introduced by classical German filmmakers of the 1920s.22

The interest in a wide range of 'modernist' trends was rearticulated through a symbiosis of themes and to the background of local settings and experiences. Chahine's 1958 film Cairo Station for example reflected this symbiosis in its simultaneous incorporation of techniques used by neo-realists, German expressionists, Eisenstein's editing techniques and the French new wave, all while maintaining a fundamentally classical Hollywood plot structure. Building upon their own national modernist paradigm, many Arab filmmakers consistently recuperated a cross-historical, cross-cultural, cross-textual and an inherently and determinedly political cinematic project.

As a post-colonial text, Al Maseer explores Arab modernist meanings not only through content, but equally through a reciprocal articulation of the textual mode itself. In such text, as Russel McDougall suggests, "[the] interest is in the attitude of the image, the strategies of the narrative, the placing of the reader, and the cultural coding those aesthetic principles that inform the whole process of fiction."23 The film's thematic accent on combating religious fundamentalism is juxtaposed with a 'modernist' re-articulation of the cinematic text.

e) Modernist Impulses in Al Maseer's Stylistic Strategies

Chahine's film freely utilizes several generic and stylistic conventions in a way that delineates its challenge for the sanctification of history and its embodiment within the artistic text. By employing a pattern that has been intrinsic to Arab filmmaking practices since the late 1920s, Al Maseer works stylistically with and against an assortment of representational conventions. The dynamics of the struggle against fundamentalism in 12th century Andalusia assume multi-temporal and cross-spatial political significance, one which infers current growth of religious fundamentalisms of all denominations and throughout the world. These thoughts are of course inferred within the theme of the film and its political relevancy to contemporary audience, but they are also capsuled within extensive moments of cinema.

The film makes effective use of several classical stylistic techniques, avoiding, for the most part, the use of hand held camera, natural lighting or violating the rules of continuity editing. However, and as it articulates the chronicles of conflict between political reaction and progress, the film operates across a complex paradigm of representational systems.

Generically, Al Maseer assumes the appearance of a historical epic, but it is also largely constructed as a passionate melodrama that in turn incorporates all the conventions of a musical genre film. The film also brings together music and dance tableaus that transcend the specificity of 12th century Andalusia and simultaneously incorporate contemporary, multi-ethnic and multi-religious references. In the process, Al Maseer breaks down multiple artificial barriers—of form, geography, 'high' and 'low' art, performer and artist—that are so often used to delineate cinematic cultural practices in the West. This allows the film to effectively reach out to a wide audience with a message of urgent relevance not only to regional but also to world politics. Therefore the film is construed within an elaborate system of multi-temporal affectivity and cross-fertilization of various generic conventions and cultural signifiers. But this is a multiplicity presented in a qualitatively different fashion from the one associated with post-modernist textual 'play'.

In her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire" Linda Hutcheon specifically points out the distinctiveness of the political agendas of the post-modern and the post-colonial. She denotes that while the first concerns itself with deconstructing orthodoxies, the latter prioritizes social and political action. As such, post-modern strategies are ineffective in bridging this gap, and they rest within the sphere of deconstruction.24 In contrast, multi-temporality and the cross-fertilization of various generic, stylistic and cultural conventions and signifiers as used by Chahine are offered as political commentary on the static reading of history and of the historical text, and on the need for using history to understand and respond to today's struggles and dilemmas. To achieve this, the film relies heavily on music and dance tableaus to enhance narrative and thematic lucidity.

At times the narrative seems to unfold in-between a series of dance and music sequences that almost appear superfluous to the development of the plot. These sequences inhabit a conceptual space which helps ascertain the political preoccupations of the film. Music culture in Andalusia after the 8th century witnessed major and at the time some unique developments; this included the creation of the world's first known music schools (the Zuriab school) to which students from across the Muslim world and Europe flocked to study music theory and history and to learn singing and playing instruments.25 Here the film utilizes historical and cultural references to mediate and ultimately provide political annotation on modern day struggles, particularly against contemporary fundamentalist claims that music and dancing are incompatible with Islamic or Arab traditions and culture. As such the film also reaffirms the on-going conflict between dogmatic traditionalism and dynamic incorporation of modernist in Arab as well as human history in general.

Al Maseer also draws on a coalescence of oral story telling, poetry recital, music and dancing as long-standing traditions in Arab history. In post-colonial texts, such performative practices emerge "as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity."26 By depicting various aspects of cultural performance—ones that have also played key roles in the development and popularization of Arab cinema itself and in the shaping of its national identity27— Al Maseer reiterates its allusion to the modernist continuum in Arab history. As he combines Arab, Spanish, gypsy, flamenco, old and contemporary music and dance formats in at least three sequences within the film Chahine rearticulates for its contemporary audience a historically heterogeneous Arab culture. As such, the body performance becomes a cultural signifier, which, in the tradition of the post-colonial text "stands metonymically for all the 'visible' signs of difference, and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription."28

By using multi-ethnic references, the film's embellished song and dance sequences also render body performance as an act of defiance and resistance which transcends cultural boundaries. For example, the forceful and self-assured gestures associated with flamenco dancing reiterate the film's preoccupation with bliss and pleasure as antithetical to fundamentalist repression. But the reference here is clearly not to the dominant Andalusian Arab dance form of the period (known as al-Samah), but is rather to one that, at the time, was emerging within a coalescence of Spanish, Arab as well as Gypsy dance traditions. As such, the film's celebration of cultural heterogeneity is enhanced by the choices made in building the filmic text itself and its use as means for commenting on the politics of contention between fundamentalism and modernism.

The film also employs iconographic patterns of costume, architecture and landscapes to create a rendition of its thematic dialectic. These patterns initiate a rather subjective, multi-layered and decentred re-articulation of history. By carefully choosing his visual and cultural references, Chahine challenges classical 'realist' conventions that largely convey an illusion of a closed universe, which, as J. Paech would suggest, becomes a 'panopticon' in which reality and fiction are rendered as one.29

For its part, Al Maseer's extravagant and colorful mise-en-scene and its highly coded imagery work against the dark and insidious plot. As such the film puts forward references that subvert widely held static conceptions vis-à-vis Arab and Moslem societies and cultures. The film's representation of life in Arab Andalusia elects landscapes, costumes, architectural exteriors and interiors that, as signifiers, destabilize dominant Western imaging (as well as fundamentalist a-historic nostalgia for a misconstrued past) of an Arab "Orient" characterized by dusty deserts, clay architecture and women covered in black from head to toe. Such images are contrasted with the film's depiction of an Arab landscape out of a green mountainous Mediterranean (the film is mainly shot in Syria and Lebanon) which is almost identical with the Andalusian setting. The interiors of Andalusia's houses, palaces and alleyways are richly decorated and markedly nuanced with a variety of red, rose, pistachio and apricot colors in addition to a wide range of purple, ruby red and blue shades.

The film's excessive emphasis on the colorfulness of the set functions beyond the necessity of plot structuring and historical accuracy; it provides for a modernist challenge to classical realist cinematic tradition which heavily relies on the dominance of the plot which subordinates all other stylistic elements including the mise-en-scene. On the one hand, this textual exposé actually bestows credibility on the film's historical setting and provides it with an ostensibly authentic feel. On the other hand, the careful construction of the mise-en-scene largely contrasts and defies the dark and menacing plot and draws attention to itself (i.e., the mise-en-scene) as an embodiment of resistance against the political scheming by the fundamentalists in the film as they attempt to impose their dark intellectual uniformity.

On another level, the film emphasizes other spatial and signifying patterns that claim our attention in their own right. Visual representation here consistently re-envisions images and episodes by mediating them as the point of view of a bewildered spectator who is being challenged to reassess his/her perspective. From the outset, the stipulation of the film as a commentary on Islamic fundamentalism is subverted by an episode depicting the burning at the stake of a follower of Ibn Rushd in medieval France.

As we gaze at the gruesome execution of the man, Chahine's camera steers our view from one corner to the other as our eyes wander about a Christian medieval cathedral. Lingering

close-ups scrutinize the cathedral's architectural exterior, the deafening silence and heaviness of its gargantuan medieval stones, its statues and its crosses, and the army of Catholic clergy and priests accompanied by their henchmen to perform the violent execution. 'But this is not supposed to be about the Christian west', our wit alerts us! Yet, as we are forced to re-adjust our perceptional gawk to accommodate this unanticipated dislocation of the object of our gaze, we realize that we are being set up to challenge and question our own ideological preconceptions pertaining to the nature of religious fundamentalism, its history, its players and its victims.But fundamentalist revival in Arab society remains the film's main preoccupation. To the musical rendition of al-Thikr (a old ceremonial religious custom), an ominous re-enactment of Abdallah's fate after he decides to join the fundamentalist sect is played as our eyes follow the camera's creation of a visual trail (this is the only hand held camera shot in the entire film) that delves forward into the dark and narrow path underneath an old castle. The camera leads us to where the young man and the rest of the group are holding one of their secret rituals. The camera's own stumbling and menacing movement fuels a sense of anxiety and apprehension, one which Chahine brilliantly uses to reflect upon the world of religious fundamentalism.

The film also allows us a glimpse of the actual leader of the fundamentalist sect, al-Amir (the Prince), a man who surrounds himself with hallow of sanctity and power. This 'prince' "appears" once a year and this advent is accompanied by full-scale celebration impeccably choreographed to re-affirm the myth about his super-human angelic stature and to stress his religious piety in the eyes of his followers. One of the Amir's supporters proclaims: "al-Amir "commands knowledge of everything, and is able to see and interpret the past, the present and the future." Our first glimpse of the man presents him dressed in a white robe, riding a white horse and his head and beard cleanly shaven. Another of his followers informs that the Amir's diet consists only of a single date per day! In the eyes of his cohorts this neo-nazi look-alike is an angel of some sort! Worth noting here is that this sequence introduces us to the leader of the fundamentalist group through a compelling interpretation of the power of iconography as it informs and is informed by the manipulation of subaltern masses' 'common sense philosophy', and how this manipulation ultimately enhances their submission to hegemonic ideology. Allusion to visual and cultural signifiers of purity and disdain for life's pleasures, associated with the Amir's white robe and horse along with the reference to his dietary abstention (fasting), demonstrates how symbolisms of long standing cultural and religious relevance enhance hegemonic consensus.

The film also refers to how the notions of Arab modernity and modernization represent historical challenges to fundamentalist dogma. In one scene we take pleasure in watching an intriguing and detailed delineation of one of the great Arab contributions to sciences. We look in amazement at a fascinating invention, an early telescope that works by using the magnifying power of water. Ibn Rushd and his assistant Marwan look through the device to monitor the activities of the fundamentalist sect in their military training in an old castle. The scene assumes important allegorical significance. Similar to how the cinematic camera emerged over a hundred years ago, the telescope more than seven centuries earlier also assumed a symbolic modernizing significance. The telescope allows Marwan—and us in the process—a clearer viewpoint of the actual training activities conducted by the fundamentalists in an isolated castle. Marwan's mediated gaze allegorically alerts us to the need for vigilance in responding to sectarian and dogmatic politics of all sorts. The film here symbolically accentuates the centrality of Arab modernity and modernization as part of the transformational endeavor for progressive social, political and national unity and self-determination. It also self-reflexively emphasizes Chahine's own interest in the process by

which critical examination and analysis of certain phenomena can be enhanced (i.e., through political utilization of modern and modernizing tools such as cinema).

The film also deliberately juxtaposes images and sounds of young people singing, dancing, reciting poetry, drinking and making love against images and sounds of fundamentalists expressing their detestation for "life's material pleasures." As I mentioned earlier, the film's soundtrack includes reference to the religious practice of al-Thikr which the sect uses to recite verses deploring life's "joys as well as its sorrows." Through the song, members of the religious sect express their reliance on faith to help them "accept what has been already determined for them" and to remain content while they await the inevitability of death. In contrast, Marwan's songs expressly call on people to celebrate life.

The primary phrase in Marwan's first song in the film includes an appeal to 'life lovers' to reaffirm their defiance against attempts to silence their music and to prevent them from indulging in what life offers. It also calls on people to "raise their voice as they sing" by way of expressing their resistance to all forms of repression and terror (it is important to note here that the first attack on Marwan in which he is stabbed in the neck bears identical resemblance to how fundamentalists attacked Nobel laureate writer Naguib Mahfouz just a couple years before the making of the film). The song is repeated twice in the film, first as part of a musical dance tableau and the second in eulogy to Marwan after he dies during the second attack on his life. In both cases, singing takes on symbolic significance as an expression of resistance against terror, violence and dogmatic interpretation of religion.

Another important element in the film is its use of contemporary colloquial Egyptian rather than classical Arabic dialect. Traditionally in Arab cinema, classical Arabic is the dialect that is exclusively used in historical epics. Chahine's use of Egyptian colloquial Arabic in this historically inspired film represents a unique break in Arab film practice. On the one hand, the dialect reflects Chahine's interest in an oral text which is accessible and reflective of the popularity of Egyptian cinema as pan-Arab cinema. Equally as important, on the ideological level this also represents a break from the monopoly of presenting history through the mediation of high and inadvertently sanctified text (i.e., through classical Arabic).

The free use of popular Egyptian dialect for the film's dialogue as well as its songs (in a similar fashion to how other textual signifiers such as dance are used in the film), breaks with a traditional outlook on classical Arabic as the only means by which history can be transmitted and addressed. In this context the film once again asserts its modernist approach, this time by emphasizing the role and function of language as a dynamic signifier of history. This is of particular importance considering how classical Arabic is customarily appreciated for its mythical qualities which, as Viola Shafik suggests, reduces it to "a transmitter of divine revelation" based on its use in the Koran which itself "marks in every respect, politically as well as culturally, the beginning of Arab Muslim culture."30

Through their attempts to invoke a different use of the Arabic language, writers of al-Nahda "contributed to the separation of language from the context of religion and paved the way for its use as a basis of national, non-confessional identity."31 These Arab modernists consistently attempted to revolutionize the use of the Arabic language as a dynamic tool for social and cultural communication as well as harbinger to address and analyze history and to contemplate lessons for future social and political struggles. Therefore in addition to allowing for a less pretentious and more reflexive articulation of history, Chahine's use of more popular and popularized tools to address his subject denotes continuity in the

endeavor initiated in mid 19th and early 20th centuries by Arab modernists. Just as Al Maseer deliberately uses a free visual and cultural articulation of 12th century Andalusian setting, it also juxtaposes contemporary colloquial Arabic 'against' the official history of the period and draws from this disparity an entirely new, synthesizing function of words, sketching from this dialectic a renovation so basic it would be alphabetic.

Conclusion

By foregrounding a rich and dialectically charged rendering of historical and cultural references, artifices and practices, Chahine forges an inter-textuality which links the past, the present and the possibilities for future change: a sort of cultural memory which in the words of Jesus Martin Barbero has the capacity to exceed the "cumulative user-value function; [one which] is processual and productive, it filters, charges and empowers shaping a dialectic permanence and change, resistance and exchange."32

Chahine's film draws attention to itself as a cry against the sanctification of history and the historical text; it challenges preconceptions of this text as static, beyond reproach and as an arena with little or no relevance to the presence. Rather than approaching it as nostalgia, Al Maseer's representation of a crucial moment in Arab history stipulates this moment with a vigorous exploration of the dynamics of oral and visual representation of collective memory. As such, resistance against religious fundamentalism is rendered synonymous with post-colonial struggle for national unity, self-determination and economic, social and political progress.

The name and image of Ibn Rushd becomes an epithet, but also assumes the stature of a signal of history. The 12th century philosopher becomes a chunk of history, in that it shows the transformation of a people and a space during a critical period in Arab collective memory. But Ibn Rushd also signals the childhood of Arab culture—its dynamism violently interrupted by the hegemony of colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as its submission to its own political and religious regression and terror.

Malek Khouri is associate professor of Film Studies at the University of Calgary. Khouri is currently working on a book on Chahine which concentrates on the counter-hegemonic significance of his work in the context of Arab and post-colonial resistance.

Notes

1 This essay is part of a comprehensive study on modernism and anti- colonial resistance in Youssef Chahine's cinema. (return)

2 To elaborate on philosophical inquiry in Andalusia in general and in relation to Ibn Rushd's contributions in particular consult Miguel Cruz Hernandez's "Islamic Thought in the Iberian Peninsula" and Jamal al-din al-'Alawi, "The Philosophy of Ibn Rushd" in S. Jayyusi Legacy of Muslim Spain, pp 777-803 and pp 804-829. (return)

3 Edward Said, "Orientalism" in B.Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Post-

colonial Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 2001), 88. (return)

4 Historically, Arab cinema has been relegated to the margins of film studies scholarship. New interest in Arab cinema however is manifest in activities within film and media studies' circles. Examples of this include the creation of the Middle East Caucus in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and the relatively more frequent presentation of studies on Arab cinemas within academic conferences in Canada and the United States. Articles, interviews and reviews and casual references to Arab films are now found in film trade-magazines and journals such as Canadian Journal of Film Studies, Cinema Journal, CineAction, Cineaste, New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Screen, Sight and Sound among others. Over the last fifteen years several anthologies, monographs and books variously dealing with Arab cinema were published by Ghassoub (2000), Dikelman (1999), Darwish (1998), Shafik (1998), Zuhur (1998), Arasoughly (1996), Armbrust (1996) and Malkmus and Armes (1991), among others. Worthy of specific mention is Ella Shohat's work on Third World and Israeli cinemas most of which inadvertently offers a major contribution to understanding the dynamics of Arab film practice and to critiquing Western readings of 'third world' cultures in general. (return)

5 For a detailed account of the role of the Egyptian government in strengthening the ideological grip of Islamic fundamentalists in the areas of culture in the 1980s and early 90s and its effect on Egyptian cinema, see Zyad Fayed's (in Arabic) Revolution in Egyptian Cinema (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Society, 1999), 85-102. (return)

6 Many of Chahine's films, including all his historical epics such as Saladin, Adieu Bonaparte! make allegorical reference to the heterogeneity of Arab culture and pan-Arabism as hybrid, multi-religious and multi-ethnic project. (return)

7 Contemporary pan-Arabism first took shape in the Arab east (mainly Syria and Lebanon) in the mid 19th century and later in Egypt and gradually assumed the stature of a heterogeneous movement with one of its main political goals being the struggle for reforming the 400 year old Ottoman rule over the Arab world. This movement rejected what it conceived to be a medieval despotic and conservative hegemony by the Ottoman Empire. Consequently and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I the struggle for Arab unity and independence became the hallmark of resistance against carving the Arab world into separate colonial areas between England, France and Italy (in the case of Libya and Somalia). This movement played a critical role in the mobilization against colonial hegemony and exploitation; it also allowed Arabs over most of the last century to continue to seek eliminating the much-dreaded legacy of the colonial creation of several mini 'national' states in the region. It also offered means for ushering a renewed sense of a pan-Arab national identity. (return)

8 From a cultural perspective, the pan-Arab project may be seen by some as somewhat problematic because it brings together diverse populations with various cultural and historical specificities (of which the problematic exclusion by some Arab nationalists of African, Kurdish and Berber minority populations, for example, cannot be overlooked). However, the fact remains that a substantial number of the movement's intellectual and political leaders largely came from a cross-section of the region's diverse religious and ethnic minorities including many from Christian, Jewish and Kurdish backgrounds. (return)

9 Irrespective of their varied approaches and political agendas, almost all major influential

pan-Arab nationalist parties in the second part of the 20th century advocated a secular approach to governance. In fact, most founders of these movements and groups came from religious and ethnic minorities in the region; this includes three Christians, Michael Aflak (the Baath Party), George Habash (The Movement of Arab Nationalists) and Antoun Saadi (the Syrian Social National Party), not to mention the theoretical father of modern day Arab nationalism, Costantine Zureik. Marxists of pan-Arab persuasions included Lebanese Christian (Farajallah Al-Hilou) and legendary Kurdish Syrian communist leader Khaled Bakdash. (return)

10 There is no consensus when it comes to characterizing the nature of Arab presence in Spain for over 400 years (i.e., whether this presence can be conceived as colonial or as 'liberatory'). What is important here is to stress the dynamics by which Arab audiences perceive this presence, and consequently how Chahine himself utilized this perception to present a narrative about the colonial role in fomenting divisions among Arabs. (return)

11 See Adonis, "To Mohammad Jaber Al-Ansari: A Call for the Declaration of a Historical-Intellectual Manifesto," trans., Al Hayat, no.14731 (July 24, 2003): 15. (return)

12 Zuzana Pick, "The Politics of Modernity in Latin America: Memory, Nostalgia and Desire in Barroco," CineAction, 34 (1994): 43 (return)

13 For an excellent account of the rise of the Arab Renaissance Movement see Albert Hourani's History of the Arabs (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 299-372. (return)

14 For a more comprehensive look at the interaction between Arab modernity, renewal of religious interpretation of the Koran, and 19th century Arab Renaissance movement see Maher Al-Sharif (in Arabic) "How the End of the Movement for Religious Renewal Contributed to Jeopardizing Arab Renaissance Projects" in At-Tarik, 1 (January – February 2002): 6-27. (return)

15 Mohammad Khalaf-Allah Ahmad (in Arabic), Markers on the Road towards Modernist Arabic Classicism (Cairo: League of Arab States, 1977) 5. (return)

16 By the early 1900s even traditional critical interpretations of classical literary Arabic texts, including those of the pre-Islamic period (al-Jahiliah), came under fierce scrutiny opening the way for a vigorous discussion on the historicity and the interpretive value of language and text. A major development in this regard was the publication of Egyptian writer Taha Hussein's groundbreaking book On the Jahili Literature. Other major literary figures and social and cultural reformists who contributed to this re-evaluation process during the same period included Gibran Khalil Gibran, Jirgi Zaydan, Ameen Al-Rihani, Qassem Amine, among others. (return)

17 For example, most leading Arab literary and arts journals between the 1920s to the 1960s were initiated by and included contributions by intellectuals who were loosely or closely allied to various socialist oriented movements and groups. Journals such as Al-Hilal, Al-Thaquafah, Al-Risalah, Al-Kateb Al-Masri, Al-Makshouf, Al-Aarfan, Al Thaquafah Al-Jadidah, Al Tarik, etc., were the first to publish material by intellectuals who played a major role in the rejuvenation of modernist Arab literature. Leading writers such as Salamah Mousa, Jirgi Zaydan, Taha Hussein, and later Naguib Mahfouz, Omar Fakhoury, Maroun

Abboud, Tawfik Youssef Awwad, were among those who saw their first writings published in journals such as the ones mentioned above. On its 60th anniversary, a leading Arabic cultural/journal Al-Tarik published a special issue, which mapped out the history of these journals and their significance on Arab cultural history (January-February 2002): 227-277. (return)

18 An example of the openness to the concomitant development of Egyptian cinema relates, for instance, to how the social realist movement, which reaffirmed its presence after the 1952 Revolution against the monarchy, coexisted with and fed upon the success of the generic and stylistic conventions of classical Hollywood cinema that were widely adopted by local filmmakers since the early days of Egyptian cinema. In the late 1960s and early 1970s classical Hollywood stylistic strategies effectively coexisted with an emerging popular interest in neo-realism and to a lesser extent with various avant-garde film movements. (return)

19 In a recent research trip to Cairo I was pleasantly surprised to discover that, in any given week, Egyptian made films constituted a minimum of 70-80 percent of the films screened in movie theatres across the city. This in a country where the government, in the interest of maintaining good relations with the World Bank and the government of the United States, has essentially abandoned all remnants of support for its national cinema both on the levels of production and of distribution. (return)

20 See Ella Shohat's article "Post-Third Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema," in M. Jacqui Alexander, ed., Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures (New York: Routledge 1996). (return)

21 Viola Shafik Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity (Cairo: The American University Press, 1998) 126. (return)

22 Salah Abou-Seif's 1953 film Raya Wa Skina is a classic early example of an effective integration of social realism, Soviet montage techniques and German expressionist traditions in one film. (return)

23 See Russel McDougall, "The Body as Cultural Signifier," in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffith and H. Tiffin, eds., The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 336. (return)

24 Linda Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout of Empire," in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 130. (return)

25 Among the few studies to be published in English on Arab music and its impact on world music history is Henry George Farmer's Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence (New York: B. Blom, 1971). (return)

26 See Helen Gilbert, "Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics," in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 345. (return)

27 See Viola Shafik, Arab Cinema, History and Cultural Identity (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1998), 101-120. (return)

28 See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffths and Helen Tiffin, eds., in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 321. (return)

29 See Joachim Paech, Literature and Film (Stuttgart, 1988): 79. (return)

30 Viola Shafik, Arab Cinema, History and Cultural Identity (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1998): 82. (return)

31 Ibid. (return)

32 Jesus Martin-Barbero, Communication, Culture and Hegemony. From the Media to Mediations, translated by Elizabeth Fox and Robert White (London: SAGE Publications, 1993): 148. (return)