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Barra and Zaman: Reading Egyptian Modernity in Shadi Abdel Salam's *The Mummy*

Youssef Rakha

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Palgrave Studies in Arab Cinema

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PRAISE FOR BARRA AND ZAMAN: READING EGYPTIAN MODERNITY IN SHADI ABDEL SALAM'S THE MUMMY

“An anecdotal and ultimately engaging meander through the imagined pasts and disjointed legacies of Egyptian history, setting out from and repeatedly returning to Shadi Abdel Salam’s masterpiece.”

—Tim Power, archaeologist and historian, author of *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate*

“Egyptian novelist Youssef Rakha captures the personal relationship with art that lies beneath all scholarly endeavor, but which too often gets lost in academic analysis.”

—Kevin Blankinship, *Brigham Young University, USA*

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Series Editor's Foreword: An Introduction to Youssef Rakha's Mummification

Dear Reader:

The creative non-fiction you are about to read is not an argument. It is not a professor telling you what a film means, nor is it a film critic alerting you to the nuances that you as a human being cannot see. It is not an orderly work of scholarship that maintains a continuous search for a position in a conversation you might not be part of. It is a literary experience of myth, memory, modern Egypt, and Youssef Rakha's mummification. Mind you, he is still alive as I write this. Please allow for some suspension of disbelief. It is, after all, what cinema is about, but allow me to contradict this.

Myth and memory weave their fabrics against Time. They beckon us to enter the warm cocoon of beginning, middle, and end. We are veritable mummies, enshrouded in layer upon layer of myths, stories, and images. We concern ourselves with the wrappings and foldings of one particular fabric: *cinema!* Yes, cinema would have to be accorded pride of place as that most adhesive gauze of the modern age. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, we marched headlong into the cocoon of cinema, feverishly wrapping ourselves within its silken bosom. I envision cinema as composed of the totality of images which spring from our dreams and

fantasies. You don't have to agree with my definition, but bear with me. Each intimate moment with cinema strips us and then clothes us with new emotions, ideas, and desires. It is a perpetual relationship laden with allegiances and betrayals. Cinema is not innocent, and neither are we. Our confrontations with it are always reciprocal. It is safe to say that, now more than ever before, the cloth of the cinematic image acts to mummify our collectivities and our own personas.

So tightly do we find ourselves wrapped in cinema's aura, so utterly engrossed in its play of light and shadow, that we scarcely see it for what it might be, for what it truly means to us. The prose for which these lines act as an introductory preface is singular for its bold envisagement of precisely this: Youssef Rakha gropes for the moment of intensity in which the very fabric of our relationship to cinema is revealed. His gaze has no claim to transcendence but remains vulnerable and honest. The prose you are about to read reanimates our relationship to and tells us a story about one of the most widely acclaimed and celebrated films in Arab cinema: Shadi Abdel Salam's *Al-Mumiya'* (The Mummy), also titled *The Night of Counting The Years* (1969).

Barra and Zaman: Reading Modern Egypt in Shadi Abdel Salam's The Mummy, highlights the work of the creative writer and novelist Youssef Rakha, whose prose inaugurates a new form of writing in English on Arab cinema. Rakha's work adds depth to the book series, *Focus on Arab Cinema*, edited by myself and Samirah Al-Kassim, whose goal is to challenge and provoke new forms of writing on Arab cinema. As we all know, books on cinema tend to be written by professors teaching at universities or by film critics with well-established careers. General readers expect explanation, description, and expertise on well-known films. Readers in universities expect the tokens of erudition, a more or less well-adorned rehearsal of the protocols of disinterested, rational argumentation complete with the customary litany of citations and references. Youssef Rakha defies these general expectations, but at the same time enriches both university professors and students, enthusiasts of Arab cinema and history, and readers of creative non-fiction. A literary writer who works in both Arabic and English as well as an established Egyptian novelist, he has written an essay that is no less analytic and perspicacious for its brilliant creativity.

Readers should be aware that Rakha's intellectual and creative efforts resonate in their multiplicity and daring. His novels published in English, such as *The Crocodiles* or *The Book of the Sultan's Seal*, reveal a dexterity

at interacting with layers of history and politics that continue to afflict the world and more specifically his world of Cairo, Egypt. Both of those novels take risks in the structure of storytelling. However, Rakha's experimentation goes beyond the novel. His bilingual online hub entitled *The Sultan's Seal: Cairo Cosmopolitan Hotel* has been generating a community of poets, essayists and artist from all over the world and his photography has also challenged the representation of Cairo itself. His creative nonfiction which this text exemplifies displays a range of topics and styles from a long essay on Arab Porn to a photo travelogue on the city of Beirut.

Rakha's *Barra and Zaman* is simultaneously academic, literary, and personal. Numbered paragraphs and aphorism both read like a linear story and also like a Borgesian labyrinth while situating this canonical film, *The Mummy*, within the history of cinema and the Middle East by way of reference to a broad and inclusive range of scholarship. As mentioned this work belongs to a genre of creative nonfiction, most especially perhaps what has been described as "autotheory".

Autotheory is found in seminal texts such as Cornel West's *Race Matters* or Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, in which the autobiographical merges with theory in a literary way. Creative nonfiction, we argue, is part the menu of literature and the work *Barra and Zaman*, is part of a body of writers who have penned literary works on cinema from Robert Bresson's aphoristic *Notes on Cinematographer*¹ and the Syrian director Muhammad Malas' existential record of filming Palestinian refugees in Beirut² to Mark Cousins' work *Story of Film*³ and Salman Rushdie's *Wizard of Oz*.⁴

This menu of literature bequeaths to us a smorgasbord of piquant delicacies we would rather see alongside names such as fiction, poetry, or drama and not as some genre that begins with a "non." This vague "non," however, wafts many flavors that make us compelled to begin changing our menus as scholars, teachers, and intellectuals. Nonfiction literature such as the memoir allows for an exchange between essays, travel literature, polemics, ethnographies, histories and oral histories, journals,

¹ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, New York: Urizen Books, 1977.

² Mohammad Malas, *The Dream: A Diary of the Film* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016).

³ Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film*, London: Pavilion, 2013.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz*, London: British Film Institute, 2012.