



DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

The Land (El Ard)

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Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Company: Ogec

Screenplay: Hassan Fouad

Based on the novel by: Abderrahman Sherkaoui

Director of Photography: Abdel Halim Nasr

Editor: Rashida Abdel Salam

Décor: Saleh Gaber

Decor Supervised by: Gabriel Karraze,

Muhammad Tanun al-Naggar

Music: Ali Ismail

Sound: Hassan El-Touni

Cast:

Nagwa Ibrahim (*Wassifa*)

Mahmoud el-Milligi (*Abu Swelam*)

Ezzat el-Alaïli (*Abdallah*)

Yahia Chahine (*Hassuna*)

Tawfiq al-Dekn

Ali al-Sharif (*Diab*)

Abdel Rahman el-Khamisi

Salah El Saadani

Hamdy Ahmed (*Mohammad Effendi*)

Egypt 1969

129 mins

DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Daddy Amin aka Father Amin (Baba Amin)

Sat 1 Jul 15:30; Wed 12 Jul 20:30

Dark Waters (Seraa Fil Mina)

Sat 1 Jul 20:30; Sat 15 Jul 18:00

The Devil of the Desert (Shaitan el Saharaa)

Sun 2 Jul 18:20; Mon 17 Jul 20:40

The Blazing Sun (Seraa Fil Wadi)

Mon 3 Jul 20:20 + intro by season curator Elhum

Shakerifar; Sat 15 Jul 12:30

My One and Only Love aka You Are My Love

(Enta Habibi)

Tue 4 Jul 20:40; Sun 16 Jul 12:50

Cairo Station (Bab El Hadid)

Fri 7 Jul 18:00; Sat 29 Jul 15:00

Dawn of a New Day (Fagr Yom Guedid)

Sat 8 Jul 15:30; Wed 19 Jul 20:25

Saladin aka Saladin the Victorious aka Saladin

and the Great Crusades (Al-Nasser Salah Al-Din)

Sun 9 Jul 14:30; Sat 29 Jul 17:00

The Land (El Ard)

Sun 9 Jul 18:00; Thu 26 Jul 18:00 + intro by

filmmaker May Abdalla

The Sparrow (Al Asfour)

Mon 10 Jul 18:15 + intro by poet and essayist

Momtaza Mehri; Thu 20 Jul 20:50

Return of the Prodigal Son (Awdet Eil Ibn El Dal)

Fri 14 Jul 18:00; Sat 22 Jul 20:20 + intro by novelist

Ahdaf Soueif

Alexandria... Why? (Iskindereya Leh)

Sun 16 Jul 15:10; Sat 22 Jul 11:30

An Egyptian Story (Hadouta Masriya)

Sun 16 Jul 18:15; Sat 22 Jul 14:40

The Sixth Day (Al Yom El Sades)

Tue 18 Jul 20:30; Mon 24 Jul 18:00

Alexandria Again and Forever (Iskindereya

Kaman we Kaman)

Sun 23 Jul 18:10 + intro; Fri 28 Jul 18:15

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The novel on which this film is based is about the Egyptian *fellah* and his land; the film itself is about the same subject and much more. In 1969, with all of Palestine, the Golan Heights, southern Lebanon and Sinai occupied by Israel, it was inevitable for Chahine to resume his effort to translate into film the best Arabic novel addressing the attachment of people to the land. Abderrahman Sherkaoui's novel, *The Egyptian Earth*, is a sombre, mournful testimony to the *fellah's* feeling of loss without his farm. Published in 1953, but depicting rural Egypt in the 1930s, it tells of the corruption of the ruling class and the exploitation of the peasant. Reading it one wonders at the depth of depravity that drives human beings to be so heartless. That such cruelty is inflicted by Egyptians against Egyptians makes it doubly tragic. Chahine improves on the novel, enlarges its scope and amplifies its implications, creating in the process one of the glories of Arab cinema.

Like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Egyptian Earth* itself is a sprawling narrative that needed compression. But its evocation of time and place is so powerful that one feels engulfed in the harsh reality of that remote Egyptian village. What gives it weight is the author's depth of compassion and the honesty in his telling it moves our sensibilities as a cry for justice. A Marxist, Sherkaoui questions and we question with him the system that treats the *fellah* as sub-human. And Chahine etches the *fellah's* drama with the same care, the same tenderness and the same revulsion.

Basically, the novel is the story of a village standing up against the authorities. An unscrupulous Pasha wants to build a palace, and to do so he inflicts pain on the villagers nearby. First he cuts their irrigation days from ten to five, and then confiscates their land to build a road that leads to his mansion. That they will suffer and might go hungry does not deter him. That they are so poor that women fight over camel dung and a girl exchanges sex for a cucumber does not matter. The corruption has its own hierarchy from the Pasha all the way down to the *umda* (village headman) they all prey on the decent and utterly destitute people of the village. They jail innocent people to organise a welcoming parade for the visiting dignitaries, they rig elections and punish those who boycott them, take bribes and never honour a promise. A colonial power is compassionate in comparison.

Three scenes will suffice to show the kind of visual beauty Chahine uses to illuminate his drama. One scene involves Shaykh Hassouna leaving town. The scene is shrouded with smoke. On the side of the frame is his cousin, Mohammad Effendi's mother. Shaykh Hassouna emerges on top of the steps, enveloped with smoke as though he were emerging from a furnace. His descent down the staircase is a descent into hell. He stops by his cousin, who, in her innocence, asks God to protect him. The irony renders him speechless and he leaves wrapped in disgrace. The second scene involves Abu Swelam, in prison on some trumped up charge. In a stark close-up, one soldier holds his head and another shaves his moustache. To an Arab, this is the ultimate act of humiliation. In Arab culture a moustache is a man's symbol of manliness. To have it forcibly shaved is to dishonour him.

The Emigrant (Al Mohager)

Mon 24 Jul 20:20; Sun 30 Jul 18:10

The Other (Al Akhar)

Wed 26 Jul 18:00; Mon 31 Jul 20:30

Destiny (Al Massir)

Thu 27 Jul 20:20; Mon 31 Jul 18:05

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Ciné Lumière will present a selection of Chahine titles throughout the summer: institut-francais.org.uk

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For a long time after he is freed, Abu Swelam walks around with his headpiece covering his mouth and upper lip. How could he face the public, knowing that they might suspect his shame? The novel speaks of a beating, but the film develops this much further, giving it a devastating visual concreteness. Chahine's cinema is rich with imagery, but there are two scenes that are indelible on the viewer's mind. One comes at the end of *The Sparrow*, when Bahiyya runs down the street screaming 'NO!' to Nasser's resignation and 'NO!' to the end of fighting. The other is here in *The Land*. When, at the end of the film, soldiers arrest Abu Swelam because he had the audacity to have his own cotton picked before they confiscated his land, they smite him until his face and body are covered with blood. Then they tie him up and drag him behind a galloping horse. Again, in a tight shot, we see his strong hands exerting a tremendous willpower to cling to the land, as though he were leaving his soul behind. The grooves his fingers make on his precious land remain imprinted on the mind.

The women in the family are marginal, except for Wassifa and Khadra. The comparison and contrast between them register on different levels. Wassifa is Abu Swelam's beautiful daughter with whom every bachelor is in love. She provides relief from the gloom that permeates the novel, and acquaints us with the mores and values of the village. She exudes beauty and sexuality, but she knows her limits. She desires romance, but she, is the daughter of proud Abu Swaylim and would do nothing to tarnish his good name.

On the other hand, there is Khadra, the village whore who is used, abused and discarded. Her death at the hand of a phoney holy man is an indictment of religion and a metaphor of what would happen to those without land. In both novel and film much is made of the fact that she is doomed not because she is poor or without family, but because she owns no land. She provides Ghahine with another opportunity to sound the alarm bell woe betide those who sacrifice an inch of their land. Cling to it, he warns.

The transfer of the warning from the personal to the national is obvious Arab land must be reclaimed. Arab land belongs to the Arabs and no one else. Without it we are doomed, just as Khadra is doomed. Palestine, the Golan Heights, south Lebanon and Sinai must all be liberated – by force, if necessary. Thus, Shargawi's theme of cruelty and exploitation becomes in Chahine's film a foundation for another theme the land. The totality of these themes is his message, and that is how Arab viewers read it.

Popular as it is in the Arab world, *The Land* has many admirers abroad as well. Roy Armes calls it 'a masterly rural epic.' David Kehr deems the water in it an 'image of political change, as in the irrigation project that rejuvenates the parched fields of the peasant farmers.' Jean-Louis Bory first-considers it a masterpiece comparable to Tarkovsky's *Andrey Rublyov* (1966), then lavishes on it the highest praise 'Youssef Chahine finds the accents that recall the great era of Russian cinema. *The Land* by Youssef Chahine, United Arab Republic, 1969: a date not only in the Arab cinema but also in international cinema.'

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