

Film Review

‘A Radioscopy of the Egyptian Soul’: Yousry Nasrallah’s *The Aquarium*

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Fear creeps through Yousry Nasrallah’s 2008 *Genenet al-asmak* (*The Aquarium*) like a miasma. The film’s temporalization is, like fear, slow and meandering. The film opens with a scene in which a caller to a talk show called ‘Night Secrets’ tells of his pervasive fears—of people, neighbors, birds and others. Another tells the story of his fear that his chickens may have contracted avian flu and so he releases scores of white chickens into the desert. Nasrallah’s long pensive shot of these pristine chickens against the desert sky is as ominous as it is beautiful.

The narrative centers on the story of two parallel individuals: Youssef El-Nadi (Amr Waked), an anesthesiologist and Laila Bakr (Hend Sabry), the radio talk show host of ‘Night Secrets’, whose existential angst is only thinly veiled by their daily absorption in work. Both spend much of their time listening to other people’s stories yet rarely living a life of their own. Both revel in the dark pleasures of parasitically feeding off other people’s lives under the cloak of anonymity. Although Laila and Youssef’s lives intersect in several brief moments of intensity, the film denies the viewer any saccharine resolution of their alienation. Youssef is alienated to the extent that he can no longer live in his apartment but lives in his car, while Laila lives with, yet apart from, her mother and brother. Both characters have strained and aloof relations with their parents—clearly emblematic of a generational crisis in the making. As Laila’s mother notes, ‘you are a dirty generation, everything is public domain with you’.

The Aquarium could only be crudely described as realist or rather, it hovers precariously on the edge of the real. Although the film contains verité-like

sequences of abortion clinics, trysting locales and the like, it is punctuated by a dreamlike fairytale sequence (a story of the princess and the pigeon), as well as by numerous examples of what in film and theatre is referred to as ‘breaking the fourth wall’. Actors (such as Zaki the sound engineer who works with Laila, or Youssef’s lover) step out of character, if only partially, to address the audience directly—speculating as to their own motivations as well as those of others. In this way the possibilities of the individuals and their lives are expanded, although some viewers may find this strategy removes the mystery of the inner lives of characters.

The dominant metaphor of the film is, of course, the aquarium, a popular middle class trysting site in Zamalek—an upper class neighborhood in Cairo. The film itself was inspired by an aerial view of the fish garden, which looks like a brain. Youssef, who spends most of the film circling around the garden, comments that he is afraid that if he enters the aquarium he will never come out—but will remain hidden in a dark corner—a dark recess of the brain.

Much of the film centers on the confessions uttered on ‘Night Secrets’ and those uttered under anesthesia in an underground abortion clinic where Youssef works. This conceit allows the film to convey sensitive and controversial sexual issues in Egypt such as *zawaj ‘urfi* (common law marriage), abortion, rape, AIDS and even the ever ubiquitous obscene phone caller. Not afraid of treading on sensitivities Nasrallah even broaches the status of the Christian minority without overt didacticism or sensationalism. In a wonderful cameo appearance, Samah Anwar plays Marguerite, a cosmopolitan landlady who refuses to live in a Christian ghetto and reassures herself that life will be fine despite the possibility of an impending Islamist regime. Although she states that she refuses to be afraid, her affect clearly belies her statements.

Arguably, the most interesting juxtaposition of the film is between the representation of the state apparatus (riot police, state security agents and police) and the emotional lives of everyday people. Indeed, the structure of affect of the film is pervaded by fear and alienation, while cruelty makes its appearance *not* through the repressive state apparatus (one need only compare the histrionic and heavy handed *Yacoubian Building*). Thus, for instance, a state security agent catches a ride with Youssef late at night and has a friendly chat and police simply remove a *kefaya* sticker from Youssef’s car and allow him to pass through a blockade. The filming of the sequences of the state apparatus has a calm, quiet, almost soothing feel—while the images of the demonstrators (carrying *kefaya* placards and demonstrating against nepotism and corruption) have a blank expressionless look to them. The police look on blankly like automatons as well in the final image in which chickens that have contracted avian flu await their slaughter. These two scenes are the film’s

central counterpoints; fluttering, apprehensive chickens in the desert and chickens in the slaughterhouse waiting to be butchered by agents of the state.

In point of fact, the most emotionally devastating, if not brutal, scene of the film is the scene in which a gang rape victim is at the gynecologist having an abortion while her mother (whose face and full form we never see) paces anxiously back and forth, refusing to report the rape to the police while asking the doctor a litany of questions ('will she be a virgin again, will she be able to have kids'), as the girl lies beaten and frightened on the table. Socio-sexual violence, and not state-based violence, thus moves to the forefront of cinematic representation.

Nasrallah rightly notes that this is his most radical film to date. It will also not be as well received as his others—it is a film that staunchly denies the viewer any pleasure or resolution, in its creation of a visual equivalent of fear and alienation. As Nasrallah noted in the West coast premier of the film, it is a 'radioscopy of the Egyptian soul, which is very sick'. A modern day morality tale about the Egyptian present, the film is also part of an emergent 'structure of feeling' in Egyptian cinema and literature—centered on the darkness of interpersonal relations. As such this film is perhaps best compared not to Nasrallah's previous films, from which it departs substantially, but to other recent Egyptian works of literature and theater that dwell on the theme of alienation, such as Hamdy El Gazzar's novel, *Black Magic* and Ahmed El Attar's play *Mother, I Want to be a Millionaire*, and Sonallah Ibrahim's novels *The Committee* and *Zaat*.

Theoretically, the film raises the interesting question of how pervasive political violence and repression relates to the violence of quotidian interpersonal socio-sexual relations. Clearly they are related, but how and why? To his credit, Nasrallah never presents simplistic causal explanations to modern day social violence, a position that has led some of the film's detractors to refer to it as politically naïve. The director, preferring instead to posit and visually meditate on the dyadic relationship of power whereby one is neither solely a victim nor solely an oppressor, but rather always both simultaneously, allows us to ponder, while never fully grasping, the meaning of the social reproduction of violence magnified onto an interpersonal scale.