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From the Field

Cairo-Berlin Return. Early Arab-German Cooperation in Film – The Egyptian-German Example

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Abstract: The Arab-German cooperation in film began after World War I in 1919/1920 when the first Egyptians came to learn the then brand new art in Germany, and has been continuing with different Arab partners ever since. Yet there is neither a public nor a professional awareness of this history. When Arab and German film professionals meet at international co-production platforms today, they practically get together as strangers. Despite its richness, the common history does not serve as a point of reference. It is not written. This paper, therefore, attempts to shed light on this forgotten period of cooperation. It looks at how and why such a collaboration was initiated. Moreover, it describes its different formats and also why the Egyptian-German encounter eventually came to an end.¹

Keywords: cinema, pioneers, sound-movies, Weimar Republic, Egypt, anti-colonial liberation, international co-production, transnational cooperation

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Introduction

Arab filmmaking started in the context of anti-colonial liberation. Egypt gained formal independence in 1922, thus long before the other Arab states, which were under foreign rule until after World War II. With this head start, its film industry had strongly influenced and dominated the Arab film market for decades.

While quite a lot is known about the Italian and French influence on early Egyptian cinema, barely any research is done about the cooperation with Germany in the years after the First World War. Yet, the protagonists of Egyptian cinema had learned and worked in the Weimar Republic and enormous technological deals were made with German companies to equip the new film studios.

In the last five years an increasing amount of studies about Egyptians in interwar Germany and about Germans in Egypt has been published. However, only Henriette Bornkamm's book *Orientalische Bilder und Klänge: Eine transnationale Geschichte des ägyptischen Tonfilms* (2021, *Oriental Images and Sounds: A transnational history of the early Egyptian sound movies*), that was released during the proof-reading phase of this text, is focusing on cinema. There are documents available in German and Egyptian archives, which are waiting to yet be studied and evaluated. The text at hand is gathering the rather scarce, already released information on German-Egyptian film-relations in the interwar years to get a principal first overview. The cinematic cooperation was not the first time Arab and German paths had crossed.

Arab-German encounters before the invention of cinema

Germans have been present in Arab countries and Arabs have travelled to Germany for centuries. Since Christianization (7th till 10th century) and throughout the Middle Ages, Jerusalem was the center of German world maps. Anyone who could afford it, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, including sites that are situated in today's Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. With Napoleon's *French Campaign in Egypt and Syria*², as the invasion from 1798 to 1801 is officially called, a fascination and mystification of Egypt began throughout Europe. Travelogues of all kinds became a popular genre in literature, and paintings associated with the Eastern Mediterranean shifted from the illustration of biblical stories to the expression of orientalist fantasies. The latter were soon adapted by photography³, mocking Arab life with the help of the new technique.

Napoleon's occupation of Egypt and Syria also deployed a new Arab interest in the West. After Mohamad Ali came to reign in Egypt in 1805, individual men began travelling mainly to France, but also to England, Italy, Austria and Germany. At times they were sent by the Khedive, at times they did the journey on their own

² Until 1917 Syria and Egypt were neighboring countries as today's Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel were part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire.

³ Photography was invented in 1839.

initiative. Some of them wrote elaborate accounts about the social and political structures as well as the educational systems of the European countries (see Abu-Lughod 1963/2011: 97-140). They followed in the footsteps of Arab travelers during the Middle Ages who had published reports about their travels north of the Alps. Since the foundation of the German Empire in 1871 and the subsequent new German historiography, several scholars had worked on those medieval Arab travelogues and reports as they are the most comprehensive sources of German day-to-day life during that period of time. In the 1920s, the orientalist Georg Jacob published the booklet *Arab Reports from Envoys to Germanic Royal Courts in the 9th and 10th Centuries*, in which he translated the reports of Ibn Fadlan, Tartushi and Ibn Yaqoub from Arabic to German⁴.

The reform period of the Ottoman Empire⁵, the *Tanzimat* (1839 till 1876), catalyzed European colonial aspirations in the region. At the Berlin *Africa Conference* (1884/5) the Western European colonial powers, Russia, the USA and the Ottoman Empire had regulated the division and colonization of the African continent and taken those lands which had not yet been under foreign rule. In the wake of this colonial euphoria and based on century old orientalist fantasies, cinema was born in 1896. Films served not only as entertainment but also as propaganda. Before the introduction of TV to private households in the 1960s, cinemas were the place to watch the news. The term cinema thus, is used here also for newsreels and other short film formats and refers as well to the place where the films were presented.

Egyptians and Germans – common enemies, common interests?

The [German, I.N.] emperor's last trip to Tangier and his famous speech in which he proclaimed the independence and integrity of Morocco are still the favorite subject of conversation in Muslim circles. The Anglo-French treaty has been understood everywhere as the initiation of the occupation of Egypt by England and of Morocco by France. The imperial declaration that Morocco should remain independent and master its own fate was received everywhere with an understandable joy. [...] Since Germany has no Muslim colonies of importance and focuses only on economic and commercial expansion, it is able better than other powers to maintain friendly relations with the Muslim world,

wrote Egyptian lawyer and journalist Mustafa Kamil Pasha (1874-1908) in the editorial article of Berlin's daily *Berliner Tageblatt* of 23 October 1905. Since his first visit to Berlin in 1896, Kamil had published in the German press. An unusual detail related to Kamil's text is striking: In a lengthy annotation, the paper's editors explain that the "exuberance and fevered patriotism" of the author are caused by the "elutiation- and depression-plans" of the English against the Egyptians. It was the

⁴ See also his earlier publication Jacob, Georg (1891/2019): *Welche Handelsartikel bezogen die Araber des Mittelalters aus den Nordisch-Baltischen Ländern?* Mayer & Müller, Berlin.

⁵ During that period the Arab regions of the Empire comprised today's Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Yemen, the west coast of Saudi Arabia and the northern parts of its east coast, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. France had occupied Algeria, which had also belonged to the Ottoman Empire, in 1830; Morocco was not yet colonized.

support of the Egyptians against the British Empire that had made the newspaper decide to give the word to the “Egyptian patriot” at this prominent spot, they clarify. With the political and financial support of lawyer and author Mohamed Farid (1868-1919), Kamil had founded the Egyptian anti-colonial *National Party* (Hizb al-Watani) in 1907. After Kamil’s death only one year later, Farid led the party – since his flight from Egypt in 1912 from his Swiss and finally from his German exile where he died in 1919. During World War I, Farid, like other exiled Egyptian nationalists⁶, had worked with the *Intelligence Bureau for the East* (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient), an institution of the German General Staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the German Empire’s war strategies was to revolutionize the Muslim world against England and France with whom Germany was competing over power in Europe. From the perspective of “the Muslim World”, England and France were the two main colonial powers. The German insurgence plan was, in correspondence with the Ottoman Fatwa from 14 November 1914 (see Ottoman Government 1914), to initiate a Jihad. Outside Berlin, two special camps for prisoners of war were set up: the *Half Moon Camp* for Muslim colonial soldiers from the British and French armies (also some Sikh were imprisoned there) and the much smaller *Vineyard Camp* for Muslim soldiers that were part of the Tsarist Russian troops, another enemy to the Germans and ally of England and France. Prisoners could be released if they went to fight the Jihad with the Ottoman army, which over the years only about 2,200 men decided to do (Samsami and Donath 2014: min 4). Within the German war system, the camps were also called the “propaganda camps”, since 1916 photographers and film teams could visit and shoot there (see Höpp 1997: 69). The *Half Moon Camp* had approximately 30,000 prisoners and was constructed as what Germans invented as a “typical Muslim village”. The inmates came from regions as geographically distant as India and Morocco. The first mosque on German soil was inaugurated there in the summer of 1915 and religious laws were respected. Even Muslims residing in Berlin came here for prayer.

The 6 min film *Bayram celebration in the Mohammedan prisoner camp Crescent and Vineyard at Wünsdorf near Zossen* (Bayramfest im Mohamedaner-Gefangenenlager (Halbmond- und Weinbergslager) zu Wünsdorf bei Zossen)⁷ was shot there in 1916 by the regional *Military Film and Photo Office* (Militärische Film- und Photostelle). The office was founded on the initiative of the Supreme Army Command in summer 1916, and renamed *Photo and Film Office* (Bild- und Filmamt BuFA) in early 1917. “BUFA’s task was to centralize film propaganda, to produce and distribute military film productions and to supply newsreel production companies and the press with film and photo material” (Filmothek Bundesarchiv: n.d.). The film starts with squads of the prisoners marching out of the camp. In the front a

⁶ In the context of anti-colonial liberation struggles the term nationalism is used with a very different connotation than in the context of the imperial powers. As long as the struggle goes on it stands for liberation, which at times includes social emancipation, at times not. After independence, debate about the ambiguities of nationalism is mostly oppressed. The overall international power relations are not overcome yet.

⁷ <https://www.filmportal.de/video/bayramfest-im-mohamedaner-gefangenenlager-halbmond-und-weinbergslager-zu-wuensdorf-bei-zossen> (all links retrieved in November 2020)

military band with drums and trumpets, followed by men in black coats and caps, after them men in white caftans and turbans, followed by a squad of prisoners in black knickerbockers or suite-like long trousers and another kind of turban. Their dresses do not resemble the uniforms they wore as colonial soldiers in the British and French armies. The escort of the German military stays rather in the background, the camera is filming from outside the fence. Inside the camp, behind the prisoners and in the exact center of the image the big wooden mosque of the *Half Moon Camp* is showing. In the next scene the men kneel in file in another fenced area heading to a little tribune on which stands an Imam. The camera pans along the masses to the right bottom of the frame to a line of men with knives in their hands and sheep laying in front of them. Upon command, they simultaneously cut the sheep's throats. The skinned animals are hanged in the same setting besides the kneeling men, to which the camera returns. Several of the prisoners directly look into the camera. Before the ceremony is dissolved, German troupes, obviously also high-ranking soldiers wearing spiked helmets and medals on their coats, walk along the crowd. This official part ends after minute three of the film. In the second half a celebration of Eid, the Bayram of the film's title, is documented. The prisoners are divided into smaller groups. Tracking shots show units of men around fireplaces. They sit on the floor in small squares that are marked by ribbons. In the background, along the walls of the barracks German soldiers and individual civilians sit on chairs and observe the scene. Next to them are prisoners with turbans, also observing the scene. Between the fireplaces, costumed prisoners, partly dressed as women, perform a dance, around them musicians with percussions. This second half of *Bayram celebration in the Mohammedan prisoner camp Crescent and Vineyard at Wünsdorf near Zossen* reminds of film recordings of human zoos from before the war. In fact, Rudolf Pöch, professor of the then newly founded department of anthropology at the University of Vienna said about war prisoner camps in WWI that they offered "an unprecedented and probably never recurring opportunity for scientific research, it is an unparalleled peoples' show!" (quoted according to Lange 2015: 17).

Production companies that were not part of the military also used the camps. The *German Colonial-Film Society* (Deutsche Kolonialfilm-Gesellschaft, Deuko), for example utilized the *Half Moon Camp* as exotic set for some scenes for Hubert Moest's feature film *The Prisoner of Dahomey* (1918) in which it served to mock the west African Kingdom of Dahomey (today's Benin) at the time of the French occupation. In the immediate post-war period, before the closing of the camps, up to several hundred prisoners were lent as extras for mega productions of the Weimar cinema, like for Joe May's productions *The Mistress of the World* (1919) and *The Indian Tomb* (1921, script Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou) (Lange 2015: 28).

With regard to print media, the Intelligence Bureau for the East published the journal *al-Jihad* for distribution in the two Muslim war prisoner camps in several languages. The Egyptian nationalists Abdel Aziz Gawish, Mansur Rifat and

Mohamed Farid were working for the Arabic edition's team⁸. If and to what degree they were also involved in the film productions made in the camps is not yet researched.

The Egyptian film directors and technicians that came to Germany right after the war usually were related in one way or other with the *Ufa* (Universum Film AG). This private and important German production and distribution company was founded during the war "with the aim to overcome the dominance of foreign films on the German market and to increase the potential of German films on the international market" (Filmothek Bundesarchiv: n.d.).

Egyptian film professionals and Berlin

After the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 – popular uprisings against the English occupation – more nationalists had left Egypt temporarily. At the same time, the process of nationalization of the Egyptian economy began. Cinema played a role in both developments. Egyptian film critic Samir Farid describes the socio-political and cultural climate in Egypt of those years as follows:

The nascent Egyptian commercial cinema was nurtured by the liberal climate of the post 1919 Revolution era. The 1919 Revolution was the one truly populist revolution in contemporary Egyptian history. Its essential unity of purpose brought about the British declaration of Egypt's independence in 1922, the constitution of 1923 and the first free political party elections in 1924. The birth of the Egyptian feature film in 1927 cannot be separated from Qassem Amin's *Liberation of Women* (1899), the appearance of the first Egyptian actress on stage in 1907, the publication of Mohamed Hussein Heikal's *Zeinab* in 1913, the appearance of the first Egyptian Muslim actress on stage in 1915, the creation of the Ramsis Theatre Troupe in the same year of the promulgation of the post-revolutionary constitution and the creation of the Egyptian Communist Party, the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1927, and the appearance of Ali Abdel-Razeq's *Islam and the Principles of Government* (1925) and Taha Hussein's *Jahiliya Poetry* (1926).

Indeed, the emergence of Egyptian cinema is inextricable from other cultural developments. In 1908 the College of Fine Arts was founded in Cairo, a development made possible by the fatwa issued by the Mufti of Egypt in 1905 decreeing that statues were prohibited only if intended for worship. In addition to the appearance of Mahmoud Mukhtar, Egypt's first sculptor since the age of the Pharaohs, Egyptian cultural life also teemed with the music of Sayed Darwish, Mohamed Abdel-Wahab and Umm Kulthoum, the poetry of Ahmed Shawqi and Hafez Ibrahim, the writings of Taha Hussein, El-Aqqad, Heikal, Al-Mazni, El-Zayyat, Ahmed Amin, Tawfiq El-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz. At the same time, scholastic life brought forth the philosophical treatises of Abdel-Rahman Bedawi and the historical works of Abdel-Rahman El-Rafie.

No less crucial was the creation of Misr Bank by Talaat Harb in 1921. This bank financed the founding of the Egyptian Acting and Cinema Company in 1927 and Studio Misr in 1935, the largest cinema studio in the Arab world to date (Farid 2000).

⁸ According to Gerhard Höpp, who researched Arab and Muslim periodicals in Berlin and Brandenburg between 1915 and 1945, there is no doubt that content and tone of *al-Jihad* were subordinated to German interests. Yet he warns to perceive it as a purely German propaganda tool, as its Arab staff members consciously used the German antagonism to the other European powers in order to support their own aspirations for liberation. "This line between patriotism and collaboration was certainly very narrow, but by treading it, they preserved something of their own in the apparently bipolar world of the First (and Second) World War" (Höpp 1994: 10).

Arab students, businesspeople and scholars had been living in Germany, and especially in Berlin, since the early 20th century and throughout WWI. After the war, Germany, bankrupt, deeply indebted and on the verge of civil war, opened its borders for anyone who brought in solid foreign currency. The exchange rate, especially in the years of the hyperinflation (1921-23), made a good life affordable also in the posh West, the new part of Berlin. Students, scientist and artists from various British colonies, usually coming from the upper class, made their temporary homes in the Weimar Republic. Among them leading figures of early Egyptian cinema like Mohamed Bayoumi or Mohamed Karim. Most of the newcomers were part of, or affiliated with, national liberation movements and had a high degree of political and social organization. For example, the Egyptian National Party had a German section, there were two Egyptian student unions in Berlin, and in 1921 Abdel Aziz Gawish and Syrian Shakib Arslan had founded the *Orient-Klub* (Nadi al-Sharq) in Berlin, which hosted many political events (see Höpp 2002: 6).

Mohamed Soliman (1878-1929), an Egyptian variety artist who came to Berlin in 1900 was member of the Orient-Klub and supporter of Mohamed Farid. In contrast to most of the other members, he settled in town. Soliman had met a German woman, Martha Westphal (1885-1952), with whom he travelled as a magician and variety artist until their first daughter was born in 1904. In 1906, Soliman had opened his first cinema in Rummelsburg – one of the first cinemas in Berlin. In 1915 he leased the *Passage-Panopticum* inside the famous Kaisergalerie in Friedrichstraße where he turned the Passage-Theater into a cinema-variety, operated a wax museum and added an “Oriental Floor” to the Passage-Café. In the course of the hyperinflation he lost his businesses in 1923. Soon after Soliman’s early death in 1929, his widow and daughters renewed the business and ran different cinemas in Berlin till 1961 (see Gesemann and Höpp 2002: 33 and Gesemann 2002: 48f.). Soliman also operated the “Oriental Section” of the Luna Park in Berlin-Halensee that had opened doors in 1910. During summers, he organized the pleasure ground’s human zoos, a “Somali Village” and a “Street in Cairo”. At times he still performed as magician and fire-eater himself. Soliman was not only a successful entrepreneur but he also supported Arab exiled politicians financially and seems to have had access to high ranking German political circles (see Ahmed 2020: 143ff.). While through his professional work in the entertainment industry he contributed to foster the colonial mindset, he was at the same time part of the anti-colonial movement and sponsor of some of its representatives in Berlin. In June 2019, an official memorial tablet was installed on the wall of Soliman’s last address in Berlin, in Oranienburger Straße 65. In the press release it says: “Soliman was considered an excellent businessman who significantly promoted film and theater” (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa 2019).

Mohamed Bayoumi (1894-1963) arrived, together with his Austrian wife, in Berlin in 1919. He is regarded the pioneer of Egyptian cinema, as he directed and produced the first newsreel in Egypt, built his own camera and studio equipment and founded the first cinema institute. About his time in Germany Bayoumi wrote in the Egyptian

magazine El Kawakeb in 1951:

In 1919 I was made a reservist because I had participated in the national movement. As Germany had flung its doors wide open in welcome of Egyptian students, I spent 6 months there, spending my few pounds in it [Germany, I.N.] to enjoy its famed arts and photography. I spent 7 days in the Leipzig exhibition, concentrating on the cinema photographic equipment, and a desire was born within me to study this art.

When I settled in Berlin, I did all I could to get closer to those working in the cinema. Egyptian cigarettes had a major role to play in cementing the friendship between me and the master of German directors, Wilhelm Carol, who paved the way for me in Diva (sic!) Studios: first as a visitor, then as a second. An excellent second had nominated me to work with him in a film because of my black hair and eyes.

While I was immersed in the Berlin cinema circles, I met the German photographer Boehringer [Bähringer, I.N.]. I became friends with him because of Egyptian cigarettes, which had a magical effect on Germans!

This photographer was most generous with whatever information he had regarding the art of cinematic photography. He eventually made me his assistant, and so I started practicing photography. Afterwards, I worked in a lab for developing and printing film, and studied all I needed to know in that area.

In October 1921 I left Germany, armed with a wealth of information I was determined to bring to Egypt to revive a new industry that was non-existent. I suggested the idea of establishing a cinema company to some wealthy gentlemen, but none believed that such a venture would succeed in Egypt. So I decided to undertake the project myself. I brought the equipment with the help of my friend the photographer, Boehringer [Bähringer, I.N.]. I started by directing a cinematic newsreel called *Amon*, and used to shoot it myself, and develop and print it all in the small lab I had created (Bayoumi 1951)⁹.

With his own production company, *Amon*, Bayoumi realized four newsreels under the title *Amon Newsreel*¹⁰, and he wrote, directed, filmed and produced the short fiction films *Barsoum is Looking for a Job* (Barsoum yabhath an wazifa, 1923, 15 min), which was the first fictional film entirely shot and produced by an Egyptian, *The Chief Secretary* (al-Bashkatib, 1924), and *Fiancé Number 13* (al-Khatîb nimrah talatâshar, 1933, 5 min). There is a hint that he had placed advertisements for his productions in German trade journals¹¹.

Bayoumi's debut fiction *Barsoum is Looking for a Job* is existent in full length and digital form¹². It tells the story of the Copt Barsoum and the Muslim Sheikh Metwali who are unemployed and hungry. Barsoum, goodhearted and naïve is homeless, living in the backyard of a tenement house. He is hiding his very few belongings,

⁹ Karol had referred Bayoumi to the Ufa Studios (there have been no Diva studios). The scarce information about Karol is contradictory. As Jew, and maybe a communist, he had to leave Germany after the Nazi Party came to power in 1933. His last sign is from Cuba in the mid-1940s, where he wanted to make a film about a "Muslim subject". Maybe Arab sources on the film world in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s could help to trace some of the many Jewish and communist film professionals that were denaturalized and whose whereabouts remain unknown till date.

¹⁰ The first newsreel is *The Nation Welcomes Saad Zaghloul from Exile* (1923)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiXN6iftlvo>

¹¹ In the manuscript for his contribution *Film Technicians and Directors* in Gesemann, Höpp and Sweis: *Araber in Berlin*, Höpp writes "To promote the distribution and sales of the films produced by his company, he published advertisements in German trade magazines." In: *Künstler/Kultur. Filmregisseure und Filmtechniker in Berlin*. 01.21.079 assets of Gerhard Höpp, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin.

¹² Online: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Bayyumi or on various YouTube channels.

mainly newspapers, under the rubbish, which the woman from the first floor is throwing out of the window. In his yard's corner hangs a picture of Jesus and one of Virgin Mary on the wall. Sheikh Metwali has a home. The wall is decorated with a picture of Saad Zaghloul, leader of the nationalist Wafd Party, who had just returned from exile. If Sheikh Metwali is hungry or needs cloths or the newspaper, he sneaks off to Barsoum's corner and steals them from him. Thus comes that both apply for the same job at a bank advertised in the newspaper and they wait in front of the door to see the manager. The banker mistakes them for guests he had expected and invites them to join him to ride home for lunch in his automobile. During the meal the two guests show strange manners. When the banker realizes his mistake, he kicks them out in the street. There, full, they take a nap on the sidewalk and are arrested by a policeman.

This social critical comedy has Egyptian as well as Weimar Cinema references. With regard to Egyptian politics, the call for secularism is as strong a message of the film as is the accusation of class divide. It takes on the demand of early Arab nationalists to replace the religion-based social structure of Egypt by granting equal rights to all its citizens regardless of their religious affiliation. The ideal to overcome religious attributions is represented in the cast, yet not fully effective: while the Copt, Barsoum, is played by the Muslim Abdel Hamid Zaki, and the Muslim, Sheikh Metwalli, by the Copt Bishara Wakim, the nameless heavysset banker is played by the Jew Victor Cohen. In terms of Weimar Cinema, the film at times reminds of famous director Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *The Rosentopf Case* (Der Fall Rosentopf, 1918, 18 min). Esthetically the 'tableaux vivants' with the frontal camera are representative of the early Weimar Cinema, which is mainly due to the heavy and inflexible cameras of the time.

In 1925, he [Bayoumi] met Talaat Harb. During their meeting, Harb agreed to Bayoumi's proposal to film the different stages of constructing the new building of Bank Misr. The importance of this meeting, however, is that it was to change the face of cinema in Egypt because Bayoumi suggested later on a number of pioneering ideas to Talaat Harb. For instance, he suggested to Harb the founding of a cinema branch affiliated to Misr Advertisement Company (AlexCinema 2006).

Talaat Harb (1867-1941) had founded the privately-owned Bank Misr¹³ in 1920 as part of the nationalist movement. In order to evaluate the foundation of a national bank, he had repeatedly travelled to Italy and Germany (see Al-Obaidi 2009: 85ff.). His bond to Germany remained strong, mainly through the cotton business and the Egyptian textile manufactures which were equipped by the German Siemens corporation through its *Siemens Orient S.A.* branch in Cairo. Siemens Orient S.A. later supplied most of the technology for Bank Misr's film studios.

In the five years after its formation, Bank Misr founded over twenty sub-companies, in 1925 the *Egyptian Company for Theatre and Cinema* (Sharikat Misr lil-teatro wa lil-sinema). Mohamad Bayoumi sold his studio equipment to the new business and became its chairman. The Egyptian Company for Theatre and Cinema sent young men to Europe to study cinema, e.g. later renowned cameraman Hasan Murad or

¹³ Misr means Egypt in Arabic.

recording engineer Mohamad Abdel Azim were trained in Berlin. Bayoumi and Talaat Harb travelled to Arab as well as European countries to get the best equipment for the new company as well as to recruit personnel. It was in Berlin that Talaat Harb met actor Mohamed Karim (1886-1972), who had learned at Ufa close to Fritz Lang and would become a pioneering Egyptian film director and in 1959 the first director of the *Higher Institute of Cinema* in Cairo. Berlin-born Mustafa Wali, a sound engineer trained at Lignose Breusing, and set designer Wali el-Din Sameh, who had obtained a diploma from the University of Karlsruhe on his own initiative before working in different film studios in Berlin, were to follow the call of Talaat Harb and joined the new cinema endeavor in Egypt (see Höpp n.d.: 4f.). They became indispensable for the big Egyptian productions of the coming decades.

Following one of the trips, Bayoumi stayed in Austria for some further training. Upon his return, he was confronted with substantial changes in the development of the Egyptian Company for Theatre and Cinema that he could not support. Bayoumi quit and settled back in his hometown Alexandria. There he tried to restart with a film and photo studio but was soon indebted and had to close the studio's doors¹⁴.

In 1927, Bank Misr opened the *Egyptian Company for Acting and Cinema* (Sharikat misr lil-tamthil wa al-sinema) which was mainly a renaming and shift of focus of the *Egyptian Company for Theatre and Cinema* to cinema. In that same year the first feature length sound movie, the musical drama *The Jazz Singer*, was released in the USA and the first two feature length silent films were out in Egypt: *Qubla fil-sahra* (Kiss in the Desert), produced by the Palestinian Lama Brothers and *Leila*, by Egyptian Aziza Amir. Politically, nationalism in its different forms was vibrant. Regarding cinema, Egypt's leading newspaper al-Ahram wrote in November 1927:

There is a simple and extremely effective means of propaganda. The foreigners will pounce on it and even pay for it. And the audience will trust in what is shown to them. This propaganda, that will do the greatest service to the nation, will shorten the distance between us and Europe and silence the European doubters - this propaganda is in the cinema (al-Ahram, 10 November 1927, as in Löttscher 2005: 5).

¹⁴ Bayoumi was forgotten until director Mohamed al-Qalyoubi made the film *Mohamed Bayoumi: Chronicles of Forgotten Times* about him in 1990 and published the book *Mohamed Bayoumi: The First Pioneer of Egyptian Cinema* in 1994. While film professionals today are aware of Bayoumi, the general media started to report about him only very recently. Among others, *al-Masry al-Youm* newspaper published a short report "Like Today"... *The death of the film pioneer Mohamed Bayoumi, July 15, 1963* ("zai naharda"... wafa al-raed al-sinemayi Muhamad Bayoumi 15 youlio 1963) on 15 July 2020 and Noujoum FM broadcast also the short program *Who is Mohamed Bayoumi, the pioneer of the Egyptian film industry that no one knows?* (man hua Muhamad Bayoumi raed sinaat al-sinema al-masria alazi la yaarif ahad?) on 7 November 2020.

German Film Professionals and Egyptians from Germany – the Egyptian commercial cinema

Still in Berlin, Mohamed Karim had read Mohamed Hussein Heikal's *Zeinab* (1913), the first modern Egyptian novel. *Zeinab* is entirely written in the Egyptian dialect and is the first contemporary text criticizing arranged marriages. Karim suggested the story to Ufa for an Egyptian-German coproduction. The German cinema giant rejected. Upon return to Egypt in 1926, Karim started working as director with the Bank Misr's *Egyptian Company for Acting and Cinema*. He also offered Talaat Harb to turn *Zeinab* into a film, which the latter rejected. Hence to accomplish the project, Karim approached his friend, the famous and wealthy actor Youssef Wahbi, who would become the producer of several of Karim's following works. *Zeinab* was released as silent movie in 1930 (and as sound remake, also directed by Karim, in 1952). Karim's next film was the second Egyptian talkie, *The White Rose* (al-Warda al-Baida, 1932, 121 min, Arabic), starring singer Mohamed Abdel Wahab who also functioned as producer. For the project, Abdel Wahab joined forces with Berlin based Arab gramophone company *Baidaphon* (also Istiwanat al-Ghazalah or Disques Ghazala) who had been releasing his music recordings since the late 1920s.

The Baidaphon company was founded around 1906 in Beirut by five cousins of the Lebanese Baida family. For their recordings they had negotiated a cooperation agreement with the *Lyrophonwerke* in Berlin-Kreuzberg, whose facilities the Baida cousins took over after *Carl Lindström AG* in Berlin-Weißensee, just becoming one of Europe's largest record companies, bought *Lyrophon* in 1912. Baidaphon was registered as a trademark in August that same year (Lotz 2018: 2). The company's co-founder and entrepreneurial head Michel Baida had already lived in Berlin at that time as a doctor and facilitated the deal. Politically he supported and financed above mentioned Syrian nationalist Shakib Arslan (Ahmed 2020: 262f.). Baidaphon was the only non-European owned gramophone company operating in the Middle East and North Africa. It did so with great success.

Baidaphon invested in promising names. It also sought to sponsor already-accomplished performers in the Near East, Egypt, and North Africa who would bring the company publicity and profits. By the mid-1920s Baidaphon catalogues were replete with big names. They also offered a wide variety of selection. One 1926 catalogue that specialized in Near Eastern artists listed recordings by Farajallah Bayda, Muhyi al-Din Ba'yn, and Yusuf Taj, who were famous singers in Lebanon. The same catalogue also listed Greek Orthodox hymns, Armenian popular songs, and Turkish instrumental compositions. In Egypt the company released recordings by the Egyptian celebrity 'Abd al-Hayy Hilmi before 1912, the year of his death. [...]

After the death of Butrus Bayda (ca. 1931), which resulted in disagreements among the company's heirs, a new partner from Egypt entered the scene. This partner was Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahab, himself a Baidaphon recording celebrity. By the mid-1940s, while operations continued as usual in the Near East and in North Africa, the Egyptian Baidaphon branch had already been transformed into a new Egyptian record company known as Cairophone (Racy 1976: 39ff.).

Thanks to revenue in foreign exchange, the Baidas had been able to economically survive the First World War and the years of inflation in Berlin. In his travelogue *Am Kreuzweg der Welten* (At the Crossroads of the Worlds, 1930), Armin T. Wegner writes that Michel Baida “supplies the entire Orient with records of Arabic songs. He recruited the country’s best folk singers and in a short time earned a fortune in the millions” (quoted according to Gesemann, Höpp and Sweis 2002: 32). The address for mail order of Baidaphon records to Europe and the Americas was Mittelstraße 55, on the corner of Friedrichstraße, in Berlin. It was, and is, one of the most prestigious and most expensive addresses in town. The building was owned by Michel Baida¹⁵.

In the early years of sound movies, it was common that gramophone companies turned into film production companies as did Baidaphon in the joint venture with Mohamad Abdel Wahab to realize *The White Rose*. The film’s opening credit in fact is *Abdel Wahab Film*¹⁶. *The White Rose* tells the story of Galal (Mohamed Abdel Wahab), the son of an upper-class man who had fallen into disgrace among his fellows due to his gambling. After his parents’ passing, (relatively) impoverished Galal is looking for support at an old friend of his father’s. He goes to see him at his villa to ask for employment – something associated with shame in those circles. Ismail Bey (Soliman Naguib), a land and real estate owner, tries to arrange something and asks Galal to come back in a couple of days. The Bey’s daughter Ragia (Samira Kholoussi) and second wife (Daoulat Abiad) live in the palace-like villa as well. His second wife is a woman who imitates French ladies in fashion and attitude, puffing cigarettes nonstop while the maid tries to fit the new evening dress. Ragia and her stepmother don’t get along well. Ragia keeps an eye on Galal and once he returns for his second visit, she presents him with a white rose from the garden. The white rose will be, in addition to the many letters Ragia sends to Galal, her sign of love throughout the film. Galal is becoming the rent collector of Ibrahim Bey’s real estate and therewith a marriage between him and Ragia is socially not acceptable. The class wise more appropriate adorer of Ragia is her stepmother’s brother, Shafik (Zaki Rostom), whom the young woman rejects. Ibrahim Bey, who has always been in favor of liberal education, finally gives in to his wife’s and brother in law’s pressure. Shafik, aware of the ongoing romance between Ragia and Galal, plots intrigues to separate the secret couple twice. The second time his lies succeed and the film ends, like *Zeinab*, unhappily for the young woman – and Galal.

The White Rose is a social drama as well as a music film. While today it is more remembered for its music, it was rather praised for its nationalism when it opened

¹⁵ Michel Baida’s name is listed in the Berlin address book until 1943 as owner of the house Mittelstraße 55, his business was export transactions. Research about the Baida family usually ends with the split of Baidaphon after the death of Butrus Baida in the early 1930s. In the German Federal Archive, a file can be found regarding Dr. Michel Baida and Gabriel Baida dealing with the confiscation of enemy property (BArch, R 87/8677). Baida was originally from what is now Lebanon. At that time, Lebanon and Syria were under French Mandate rule and therefore Lebanese and Syrians were considered enemies after the declaration of war on 1 September 1939 and thus, he would have had to leave Germany.

¹⁶ *The White Rose* / al-Warda al-baida: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNvsFa5cxes>

in cinema in December 1933. Egyptian students, for example, that had boycotted foreign owned cinemas – thus almost all cinemas – encouraged spectators to watch *The White Rose* even in a foreign cinema as it was a film made by Egyptians. High-ranking politicians thanked Mohamad Karim for his “nationalistic and futuristic project” and for his “patriotic film” (see Armbrust 1996: 114). German Fritz Kramp, who was employed by Talaat Harb as technical advisor to Bank Misr’s *Studio Misr* and would become the director of the studio’s first talkie, *Wedad*, wrote about *The White Rose* and *Love’s Tears* (Doumou’ el Hub, Mohamad Karim, starring Mohamad Abdel Wahab, 1936), in the German cinema industry journal *Film-Kurier*:

In 1932 the local Baidaphon-Film started the first vocal sound film with an Egyptian director. The well-known oriental singer Abdel Wahab was hired for this. The film was shot in the Tobis Studios in Paris with the help of French specialists and was grafted with long languishing chants. One of these chants had a record time of ten minutes, which you really realized because they only had two shots for the record-singer. Record box office success wherever the film was shown. Orientals love songs and music and therefore tend to overlook the technical deficiencies. There was talk of £35,000 net revenue.

Two years later, next Baidaphon film with Abdel Wahab. The chants haven’t gotten any shorter. Manuscript idea adopted from the modern European milieu does not quite meet the approval of the population. Nevertheless, the applause roars at the end of the film when the lover sings a last love song at the grave of his immortalized loved one. The film is good business after all (Kramp 1936: 3).

Studio Misr opened in 1935 and was the first studio in Egypt which could carry out all production stages, making studio recordings or post-production in Europe needless. The studio’s technology was mainly provided by the Cairo-based *Siemens Orient S.A.* (see Communications of the Siemens-Schuckert Overseas Dept. 1939: 8ff.). Studio Misr intended to produce internationally competitive films that could attract a mass audience not only in cinemas in the Arab world but also in Europe and the USA. Indeed, the studio’s first movie, the Arabic-language vocal sound film *Wedad*¹⁷, directed by Fritz Kramp (co-directors: Gamal Madkour and Ahmed Badrakhan, 1936, 98 min, Arabic), was invited to the International Film Festival in Venice, had a theatrical release in the USA, and was reviewed in different European papers (see Bornkamm 2015). The historical drama was written by Ahmed Rami and adapted for cinema by Ahmed Badrakhan. It is set in the Mamluk Era (1250-1517) and tells the story of the slave Wedad (the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kulthoum in her first film role) who has a golden voice and lives in a love-relation with her owner, the rich merchant Baher (Ahmed Allam). When Baher’s caravan is attacked and robbed by bandits, he loses his wealth and with it his reputation. After having sold all his goods, Wedad suggests Baher to sell herself and to use the revenue to rebuild his business. After some reluctance, Baher accepts Wedad’s sacrifice with deep pain. For her new owner she mainly sings in grief, yet the old man appreciates Wedad because of her wonderful voice and her good-heartedness. On his deathbed he presents her a certificate that sets her free. Wedad returns to Baher, who, thanks to her deed, could rebuild his wealth and now also their common life.

¹⁷ *Wedad*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbFxmDQTo4E>

Like the story, also the music for *Wedad* was written by Ahmed Rami, who worked with Umm Kulthoum from 1915 to 1972 and had written the lyrics for Abdel Wahab's songs in *The White Rose*, too. *Wedad's* opening music takes 9 minutes and 36 seconds, on the level of image a series of frames is used to introduce the story. It doesn't take a minute until the next melody begins, which is at times crosstalked by short dialogues. While in *The White Rose* the only music is Mohamed Abdel Wahab's singing, rarely accompanied by an orchestra, in *Wedad* music is used, additionally to Umm Kulthoum's songs, for ambience and makes it a rather noisy film.

Technically very well done, the movie is aesthetically a mix of Arab theatre and early cinema, European fantasies and contemporary fashions. The belly dance scenes are more reminiscent of women's open-air gymnastics in Germany in the 1920s and 30s than of belly dancing: the women of the harem jump around a fountain in baggy pants and long-striped tops resembling football shirts, convulsively teasing each other and splashing water. Or they appear as background entertainment in a café and combine their dry, crop topped fusion of belly dance and gymnastics with saber fencing – a sport that had just been approved as an Olympic discipline for women at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin¹⁸.

Kramp's second and last film for Studio Misr, historical heroic epic *Lasheen*¹⁹ (*Verräter am Nil*, 1938, 95 min, Arabic) is set in the 12th century and shot on almost the same studio set with almost the same costumes. Also, *Lasheen*, like *Wedad*, was written by Ahmed Rami. It is based on a proposal by German H. von Meyenn and called in the opening titles "Lasheen. Superproduction Misr". The film stills and photos used for the advertising are confusingly similar to the PR images of Joe May's earlier mentioned *The Indian Tomb* from 1921. In the German promotional leaflet for *Lasheen*, the film is introduced as follows:

A single cheer, a sigh of relief goes through the people - Lakin is returning home! Lakin, the victorious general, the horror of the enemy, the savior of the country, the darling of the people. While he was fighting the hostile armies, the sinister governor Kangor managed to win the blind trust of the Sultan and virtually force the country under his rule. While being in the service of the hostile Mongols and in secret conspiracy with them, he worked towards disunity, fragmentation and rebellion (*Verräter am Nil* n.d.).

It is difficult to re-narrate the film due to its rather incomprehensive script and stylistic fusion. Again, Kramp inserts European elements: the belly dance has almost the same choreographies like in *Wedad*, additionally here, *Lasheen* and his army

¹⁸ Author and journalist Kristina Bergmann mentions in a footnote in her book *Filmkultur und Filmindustrie in Ägypten* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Darmstadt, 1993, p. 8) that several film professionals from Studio Misr criticized Kramp as authoritarian and high-flying as well as that the progressive group around then assistant director Salah Abu Seif suspected him of being a Nazi. While Bergmann herself states that this cannot be due to Kramp's film-technical qualities and the unique scenes of hunger, hardship and popular uprisings in his films, exactly these scenes are rather reminiscent of Nazi cinema in my view. Kramp's reference to the 1936 Olympic Games and his several articles in *Film-Kurier* also give reason to wonder. Research about the question to what degree, and in which respect the rise of the Nazi Party to power in Germany in 1933 had an effect on Egyptian-German cinema relations would be of great value.

¹⁹ *Lasheen*: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3odfka>

look like Richard Lionheart and the crusaders. When Lasheen is returning home, European military marches are played as ambient sound. Neither a short summary in the *RAWI Egypt's Heritage Review*, nor the long description of content in the *Ufaleih* leaflet for the German release can help to understand the story. The film's intention does become clear in the German text though: Lasheen is freeing his people from the traitor, Kangor, and "his Mamluks" (though above it says in the same text that Kangor was in the service of the Mongols) by spiking him with his sword. "The country is redeemed, the people cheer their ruler and their loyal general, a beautiful future, free from foreign (volksfremd) oppressors, lies before everyone" (ibid.)²⁰. *Lasheen* was released in German cinemas in the Arabic original with German subtitles. In Egypt it was censored, as newer publications tell. In the *Egyptian Independent* it says that the film "was accused of bringing 'insinuations related to the Royal Highness and the regime'" and "having no choice but to lose their film altogether, 'Lashin' producers Studio Misr reshot another end sequence for the film" (Beshir 2013). In *RAWI Egypt's Heritage Review* the author explains:

The end of the original version, however, which the writer of this article found a discarded copy of by chance, differs. It ends with an oppressive sultan being overthrown by the corrupt Kangiar, and Kangiar's supporters chanting his name inside the royal palace while Lasheen's supporters chant his name outside the palace gates. This original open-ended version was deemed inciteful by the Egyptian crown and banned by the minister of interior after its premiere at Cinema Diana in Cairo on 8 January 1938 (Ramzy 2018: 36).

The traces of Fritz Kramp are lost here. He had to leave Egypt at the latest at the declaration of war on 1 September 1939. His whereabouts are not known, nor when or where he died. While in more recent Arab sources he is called a famous German director, in German cinema he never played a role. Though the Second World War had ended the Egyptian-German collaboration in film rather abruptly, Egyptian film professionals' purpose of cooperating with Germany was fulfilled. Over the previous twenty years a large number of Egyptians were trained in European, among them German, film production companies. Egyptian cinema indeed had become an industry and would deeply influence the day-to-day culture in the Arab World for the following decades. When the two German states rewrote German (film) history after the Second World War according to the respective new ideologies, Egypt did not find a place in either of it. Also on the Egyptian side the history of the cooperation with Germany is muted. While cinematic cooperation was not renewed, the German Democratic Republic (GDR, 1949-1990) and Egypt had a strong cooperation in the field of TV during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, Egyptians received professional training from German TV specialists.

²⁰ The German word volksfremd, foreign, used in the quote derives from the terminology of Nazi eugenics. While most probably it meets the ideas of H. von Meyenn, it cannot be concluded that the Egyptian makers of the films shared, or fully comprehended, this ideology. Experience from international cooperation shows, that even though the same language is spoken - in the case of Studio Misr many employees knew German - the meaning of individual terms is understood very differently and in relation to the reality in the respective society.

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