

To stand by the ruins of a revolutionary city

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A scene from the film “*In the Last Days of the City*” happens on the rooftop of one of the buildings overlooking Tahrir Square.¹ In it, four Arab film makers contemplate the messy and meaningless cacophony of downtown Cairo: Bassim from Beirut, Khalid from Egypt, Hassan from Baghdad, and Tariq, an Iraqi living in Berlin. Khalid frantically gestures towards the Square. He screams to his friends: “This...I need to make sense of this”! They talk about a film that Khalid wants to make to tell the story of Cairo, and which he cannot complete, because he feels unable to make sense of his relationship to his city that appears to be in ruin.

In this paper, I want to pause at this gesture from the rooftop, particularly on the subtle —yet ubiquitous— way in which *making sense* of the city is central to making sense of selfhood. The gesture is a hope that by narrating the city in film Khalid —the filmmaker— might reckon with Cairo, with his life and with their failures. For me, this gesture captures a banal affective relationship to the city that is constitutive of political subjectivity despite of, or perhaps because of, its banality. My premise, then, is the centrality of the “city” and its materiality to the affective mediation of politics. In other words, the material and physical spatial make-up of urban space holds, structures, and at times inhibits the possibility of narration and meaning-making. This affective relation draws on the work of Lauren Berlant, which ties the role of the ordinary to

¹ Tamer El Said (Director) *In the Last Days of the City*, 2016.

patterning our desire to sovereignty, the nation or the promise of good life.² I look at the city as one of those spaces and objects of fantasy. It is this navigation of attachment and disappointment that underpins the desire to narrate the city, so central in the film I started with. Here, film is a key to begin unpacking a ubiquitous, ephemeral and even ordinary affective relationship between the city and politics. By focusing on film, I do not argue that film merely *represents* images of urban space—although it clearly does that, but that through the cinematic lens and its narrative storytelling it also negotiates the fragmentary and material making and breaking of a fascinating and overwhelming reality that it a city. One that is lived, and survived, on an everyday basis.

Ruin serves as a focal point through which film-makers and narrators of a city like Cairo, offer a critical poetic to the material, economic, and political processes that bring about *ruin*; the depletion of matter and mind. Of course, ruins and debris have a long-held position in European traditions and specifically in cinema.³ For the postcolonial city however, the poetics of ruination attune us to a temporality of the postcolonial affective hope that disinvests from a teleological narrative of triumphant sovereignty. I use ruination in the sense developed by Ann Laura Stoler.⁴ For her, ruination emphasises a critical positioning of the present within violent structures making it an ongoing process with multiple temporalities at work. This understanding, I find, empowers a critical engagement with processes of material and social undoing that differs from a

² Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

³ Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor, 'Reckoning with Ruins', *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4 (August 2013): 465–85. One of the earliest films by the Lumière brothers is a film on demolition of a wall, see: see von Miltoke's chapter in Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2010), 395–417.

⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

fascination with ruins and, instead, questions the political complicity in processes of ruination.⁵ I deploy this concept to argue that the material poetics of debris are used as a critique to urban violence, authoritarianism, neocolonialism and process of neoliberalising the city. Against a conception of (geo)politics that seeks to solidify revolutionary failure, filmic representation might capture the ambiguity of dealing with the debris of the revolution in a city like Cairo. Poetics of ruination here offer alternative urban and geo-political constellations that do not necessarily challenge the images of crises that override a Middle Eastern city a decade after the Arab Spring, but that, instead, works with them.

Creative expression, space and the revolution:

Film, as researched in relation to mid-20th century Egypt, gestures to the fantasy of urban modernity that both structured a relationship to revolutionary hope and navigated the looming ghosts of urban anxiety.⁶ I explore this relationship between urban space and political hope elsewhere, where I make the case that building the city, and the faith in architects, urban planners and engineers was a key pillar in the postcolonial promise of the Egyptian post-independence state.⁷ This, of course, went hand in hand with many infrastructural national projects, where an

⁵ Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 9–11.

⁶ See Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt*, vol. Chicago studies on the Middle East (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002) and Paul Sedra, 'Anxiety About the Urban in 1950s Egyptian Cinema', *Q&A Paul Sedra* (AUC, School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS), 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiQTadPKjiU>.

⁷ Aya Nassar, 'Spaces of Power: Politics, Subjectivity and Materiality in Post-Independence Cairo' (PhD thesis, Coventry, University of Warwick, 2019); see also: Mohamed Elshahed, 'Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt 1936-1967' (PhD dissertation, New York, New York University, 2015); Clement Henry Moore, *Images of Development: Egyptian Engineers in Search of Industry*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: The American University in

infrastructural ambition consolidated the desire for postcolonial self-determination, sovereignty and independence.⁸ However, the city does not only mediate the fantasy of belonging to the nation, but it also becomes a central site through which we might experience the disappointments of this fantasy. The political historical ambition of the postcolonial moment was interrupted with *al-Naksa* in 1967.⁹ This had its accompanying reverberations in film. Indeed, film critics and scholars note a shift in film industry after 1967. This shift manifested in a multivocality and non-linearity of narrative for instance, or a with a clear emergence of collapsing buildings as a political metaphor.¹⁰ The way the poetics of demolition, collapse and rubble seeped through filmic representations of the mid 1960s and throughout the 1970s, are, I argue, a way through which the political crisis of *al-Naksa* of 1967 has been symbolically mediated by architecture — at least in this case its collapse and failure. As such, the city, as well as its filmic poetics, absorbed and resonated the defeat of the postcolonial emancipatory project in Egypt through its own material destruction and ruination.

Cairo Press, 1994) and Mercedes Volait, *L'architecture moderne en Égypte et la revue Al-Imara 1939-1959*, Online, Dossiers du CEDEJ (Cairo: CEDEJ - Égypte/Soudan, 1988), <http://books.openedition.org/cedej/870>.

⁸ For instance, see Omnia El Shakry, 'Cairo as Capital of Socialist Revolution?', in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 73–98; Alia Mossallam, 'Hikāyāt Sha'b - Stories of Peoplehood: Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956-1973' (PhD thesis, London, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2012) and Nancy Y. Reynolds, 'City of the High Dam: Aswan and the Promise of Postcolonialism in Egypt: City of the High Dam', *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (April 2017): 213–35.

⁹ Adeed I. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, New edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 282; Yoav Di-Capua, 'The Traumatic Subjectivity of Ṣun' Allāh Ibrāhīm's Dhāt', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 1 (1 January 2012): 80–101; Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, Revised and updated edition (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 286; Essam Zakariya, *Aṭyāf Al-Ḥadāthab: Ṣuwar Miṣr al-Ijtima'iyah Fi al-Sinimā [Spectres of Modernity: Egypt's Social Images in Cinema]*, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lá lil-Thaqāfah, 2009), 79–86.

In shifting the focus on filmic expression to post-2011 urban space therefore, I do not aim to make a claim about novelty of representing city in film *per se*, but to think through the ways in which the city captures a particular affect even if this affect might resonate with other historical instances of hope and defeat. Of course, several films engaged with the presence of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and its aftermath with different ideological and affective bearings.¹¹ Documenting the revolution gained urgency for independent filmmakers, especially with security restrictions on filming. And while the events were still unfolding, there was — from the beginning— a strong concern with the imagery, but also with documenting, archiving, recording everything in what would shortly become a battle of narrative and memory.

Besides this urgency, it might be productive to think about the affective relation to the revolution, its preludes and its afterlives, in slower rhythms and temporalities. One key locus through which this might be investigated is through the ambivalent relationship we—as subjects—have with our everyday spaces of ordinary attachment and disillusionment. A mode for this investigation might well be a poetics of space that does not lock urban space in the realm of representational images only, but that is entangled with its physical and material make-up and break-up. In other words, it invites an understanding of the spaces of the city as both material and metaphorical, aesthetic, poetic and physical. Ruination here acts as a key concept and process to capture this material aesthetic of Cairo and a constellation of other Arab cities.

Shafik notes that while space has not been typically key in Egyptian commercial films, it emerged as central in the wave of new independent films just before and post-2011.¹² Films like Ahmad ‘Abd Allah’s *Heliopolis* (2009) for instance betray the dilapidated physicality of a neighborhood

¹¹ For a discussion on documentaries and global audiences for example see: Alia Ayman, ‘Three Films, One Spectator and A Polemic: Arab Documentaries and “Global” Audiences’, accessed 8 September 2017, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25763/three-films-one-spectator-and-a-polemic_arab-docum, also see a project on filming the revolution <https://filmingrevolution.org>.

¹² Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 56–57, 227.

entangled in relations of nostalgia in popular imagination as well as continual and quiet survival and conviviality. Indeed, this becomes unmissable after 2011, as several films have sought to directly reference and represent city space not only as a context or background but as a key protagonist and poetic. Examples include the rest of ‘Abd Allah’s repertoire like *Rags and Tatters* (2013), theatrical experiences like “*Out on the streets*” (2015), or even most recently Ahmad Magdi’s haunting debut *The Giraffe* (2019). Admittedly these are all very different projects, and in grouping them together I do not seek to impose a unity on what is an individual endeavour to reckon with the city. However, it is precisely this desire to reckon with the city that threads through these films, and that, in turn, captures a collective mode of an enduring attachment to its space. Ayten Ibrahim’s *Villa 69* (2014) for instance weaves in the spatial aesthetic of the villa to the narrative of an architect who wants to live (and die) in peace. In this film, the ailing structure of home is interwoven with an urban space that is undergoing revolutionary change, and inevitably reconciling the personal biography of an architect navigating the temporal transformation of space.¹³

How might we understand this attachment to the poetics of urban space post 2011? Is the collapse and ruination of the city nothing more than a mediation of defeat and failure as might be argued for post 1967 film?

I propose not. By centring the material demolition and ruination I seek—precisely—to counter the aesthetics of ruin as irredeemable failure and catastrophe. Drawing on Stoler’s work, we can appreciate the way ruination can temper with temporality and infuse it with a critical capacity to make sense of the present has broader implication to how we understand failure. The way we think of failure and catastrophe relate to the ways in which we narrate our historical present. Following David Scott, we might want to question the teleological temporality of heroic

¹³ See Muhammed El-Hajj’s statement in this issue.

narratives in which any failure is not accounted for except as catastrophe.¹⁴ The poetics of destruction or undoing of the city need not be only those of catastrophe. Indeed, Berlant asks what if we also look into scenes of ambivalence, where we manage “being in proximity in the awkward and violent ordinary”.¹⁵ For her, film and poetry are primary sites to examine this, they are infrastructures in themselves.¹⁶ Through the prism of the poetic “the world is linked to the body as something that forms part of material *and* cultural space, an association that determines or suggests modes of thinking and acting politically”.¹⁷ Poetics of ruination, therefore, are not simply representations of catastrophe or failure. Engaging these poetics on one hand and a non-teleological mode of narration on the other, serves to precisely counter what might be perceived as an inability to reckon with the contemporary post-revolutionary moment. This counter-attempt is neither to celebrate agency and victory nor to dwell on defeat. In fact, it is to detach from the logic of winning and losing by attuning ourselves to the metaphorical affordances a city has to offer. These are excesses in which we can dwell on alternative temporalities, and in which we can attend to the ambivalence of physical collapse of infrastructures and material built environments that act as objects of attachment and affective investment.

Ruination as a post-revolutionary reckoning

We might then look at the centrality of urban space in post-revolutionary film as a promise of reckoning and narration, even if it is not in an epic and triumphalist form. Let’s return briefly to

¹⁴ David Scott, ‘The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time’, *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 2014): 799–808.

¹⁵ Lauren Gail Berlant, ‘The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times*’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (June 2016): 395.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Angela Last, ‘We Are the World? Anthropocene Cultural Production between Geopoetics and Geopolitics’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 2–3 (May 2017): 151.

the opening ‘gesture from the rooftop’, the scene from a film in which a filmmaker wants to make sense of his city, but is frustrated with his failure to do so. *In the Last Days of the City* deploys poetics of ruination in its rendition of the cityscape of Cairo as well as Alexandria, with specific attention to the city’s materiality. The city is visually drenched in sepia, the colour of dust, and the debris of crumbling paint. At times, the actual film stops to watch and document the demolition of buildings before it picks up the threads of its narrative again. Demolitions here, like protests, and even the revolution, interrupt not only the narrative, but film-making itself.

The film was shot over two years, 2008-2010, but had been almost ten years in the making. The editing and the final cut happened only after the revolution. The filmmakers shot 250 hours of footage, some of it scripted and other documentary, making it not only an immense job of editing, but also of navigating the narrative.¹⁸ Set as a film within a film, the producer enlists his mother, some of his friends as themselves, as well as professional actors. There is a multiple layering of loss in operation in this film surrounding the lead character as he faces the end of his lease, and begins to search for a new place to rent. The film, then, has an unmistakable melancholic tone, as well as an urge to narrate a finality that never seem to come. There is constant waiting, even for the film to end. This abeyance is orchestrated by the radio, for instance and the pulse of downtown dominates the rhythm of the film.¹⁹ This is a hesitant

¹⁸ Jay Weissberg and Jay, ‘Berlin Film Review: “In the Last Days of the City”’, *Variety* (blog), 14 February 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/in-the-last-days-of-the-city-review-berlin-film-festival-1201705591/>.

¹⁹ The cacophony of Cairo has been subject of an earlier film with a psychological take on the fear of the city. *The Aquarium* (2008) features similar takes on the traffic jam, the carnival of lights as break lights mingle with dysfunctional traffic lights all drenched in the soundscapes of the radio. See: Omnia El Shakry, “‘A Radioscopy of the Egyptian Soul’: Yousry Nasrallah’s *The Aquarium*”, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 1, no. 2 (1 October 2008): 216–18.

rhythm even while crossing the street²⁰. The tempo of a busy day looking for an apartment, differently busy and intense nights, a visual crowdedness of Tahrir square with neon billboards, all of these are contrary to the image of resonance that will appear in 2011, even though protest chants intersperse the film.²¹

The hunt for the apartment is an arrested futurity, a temporal glitch that haunts the film.²² The glitch is not only meant to operate on the mundane affective level. Through the arrested temporality of crises Cairo is linked to Beirut, Baghdad and Berlin, the city of Arab exile. Samah Selim, calls these cities the contemporary *Naksa* cities.²³ All in different moments and navigating their own sense of catastrophe that is, nevertheless, interlinked in the narrative of the film. On that rooftop scene Khalid's friend says "Baghdad is a moment, you feel it and it goes...[w]hen did the war begin in Baghdad? 1979, and in Beirut? 1840, so you want me to erase a line of blood from 1840 till forever?" We witness here a temporal enfolding of a chronicle that links traces of the enduring effect of violence from colonialism, to civil war, to neocolonialism going through urban neoliberalisation and gentrification.

Besides the *Naksa* cities, the cities in *In the Last Days of the City* are connected in their materiality and embodiment. As Laura Marks comments on the material interlinkages: "the waters of the Nile in Cairo, the Mediterranean in Beirut and the Tigris in Baghdad — it was as though these

²⁰ Julia Elyachar writes about an anthropology of learning to walk anew in Cairo Julia Elyachar, 'The Political Economy of Movement and Gesture in Cairo', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 1 (2011): 82–99.

²¹ Gastón Gordillo, 'Resonance and the Egyptian Revolution', *Space and Politics* (blog), 6 February 2011, <http://spaceandpolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/resonance-and-egyptian-revolution.html>.

²² See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Berlant, 'The Commons?'

²³ Mada Masr, '12 Viewers on In the Last Days of the City and Its Problems Coming to Egypt', *Mada Masr* (blog), 29 March 2017, <https://madamasr.com/en/2017/03/29/feature/culture/12-viewers-on-in-the-last-days-of-the-city-and-its-problems-coming-to-egypt/>.

bodies of water connected the people in ways that words alone cannot”.²⁴ Indeed, the poetics of bodies in water is not lost on those involved in the film. In the ICA London screening, Khalid Abdalla noted the overwhelming crushing resonance of the final scene where we see a body on water. A few years later, it will be the most common image through which the Middle East bangs on the shores of Europe. Bodies are folded with matter as have been noted by feminist geographers and we see in the film a poetic of this folding.²⁵ Here, materiality is intertwined with the body. The ailing city is coupled with an ailing motherhood and the body is used to perform a withering away of the city.

Beyond fantasy and failure

Samah Selim links the film to the disappointment of politics. “Cairenes today are still trying to come to terms with this meaning and all kinds of questions about personal and collective failure vis-à-vis the revolution”.²⁶ This is a film where narrating the city takes the form of a film that is impossible to complete, because its narrative structure cannot hold as it traces the slow ruination of the Egyptian urban centres Cairo and Alexandria. Disappointment is not resignation however. What might seem at first glance as a self-deprecating critique of a nostalgic relationship to the city, could also be read as an encounter of the materiality of the past, a documentary evidence-making of an ailing city. We glean an anxiety about the past of the city, yet rather than an act of nostalgia, the film here can be read as an attempt of witnessing in the face of crushing sentiments of disappointment. Ruination here, a key poetic of the film, can be seen not as rumination of the past but as a condemnation of the violent processes that enforce this depletion on spaces and people.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Deborah P. Dixon, *Feminist Geopolitics: Material States*, Gender, Space and Society (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015).

²⁶ Mada Masr, ‘12 Viewers on In the Last Days of the City and Its Problems Coming to Egypt’.

As mentioned earlier therefore, ruination can serve as a critical vantage point through which film-makers and narrators of the city like Cairo witness and dwell on the political processes that bring about “ruin”. The material poetics of debris are deployed as a critique to multiple urban violences. Indeed, this wave of films coincides with multiple grass-roots organisations concerned with urban heritage, preventing illegal demolitions, and an overall desire to document and recover alternative narratives. This might cross-cut uncomfortably with bourgeois sentiments of nostalgia to a middle upper class golden ages of cosmopolitanism, but is not simply restricted to that.²⁷ It also demonstrates an awareness of an uncontrollable withering away of physical space and the complacency of multiple sources of violences: corruption in the real estate market, revolutionary hope and despair as well as a neoliberalisation of the city.²⁸

I propose then that film might capture the atmospheric ambiguity of dealing with the debris of the revolution in a city like Cairo. Poetics of ruination could orient to alternative ways of storytelling the city. Beyond the aesthetics of ruins in Europe, ruins have traditionally served as a poetic device in Arabic cultural references. To “stand by the ruins” is the characteristic prelude of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. After which the poetics of narration can begin. Taking cue from this long-held Arabic practice, I have sought to approach the materiality of the city and its poetics in cinematic representation not as a trauma, a destruction, or catastrophe that invites a loss of meaning and stories, but as a generative space for urban critique and (non-heroic) narrative. This, I propose, might offer us a way in which to think the politics of the city as something more than the appropriation and closing-off of public space. A (geo)poetics of the Middle East offers another mode of relating to these cities typically thought of as in catastrophe

²⁷ Galila El Kadi and Dalila ElKerdani, ‘Belle-Époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District’, in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 345–71.

²⁸ Asef Bayat, ‘Revolution and Despair’, *Mada Masr*, 25 January 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/revolution-and-despair>.

or as a “resource or military background”, but also without wishing their destruction away.²⁹ It pushes us to think of the contemporary moment as one in between the images of hope (of bodies in the square) or the crushing weight of defeat. Instead it points to a more fundamental yet ordinary entanglement with the city and its inhabitants who remain attached to it and its political promise.

²⁹ Last, ‘We Are the World?’: 160.