The films *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* by Rania Stephan, *Domestic Tourism II* by Maha Maamoun, and Raed Yassin’s *The New Film* weave together archival clips from popular Egyptian cinema that feature representations of iconic figures into new stories. The chosen icons symbolize in their own ways Egyptian culture, cinema and history: Soad Hosni in *The Three Disappearances*…, the Pyramids in *Domestic Tourism II*, and former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in *The New Film*. The film’s authors employ a methodology of collecting, logging, and editing previously existing footage to construct and open up new narratives, at the same time providing an experimental survey of Egyptian cinema. In a contrast and comparison of the three films, I will examine how each is a personal deconstruction of how these icons (and their cinematic representations) have penetrated the social, cultural, and political fabric of the Arab world, acting as a “repository of collective memory” (Salti par. 8). I will begin by introducing the significance of popular Egyptian cinema, which has a rich history and wide audience throughout the Arab world. From there, I will describe the formal qualities (with a particular focus on editing), the affective responses evoked, and the overall structure of each film.

**History and Significance of Popular Egyptian Cinema**

In order to bring context to the films discussed in this paper, it is important to briefly account for the impact Egyptian mainstream cinema has had (and continues to have) in the Arab world. As well, popular Egyptian cinema is of personal relevance to filmmakers Stephan (Lebanese-born), Maamoun (Egyptian) and Yassin (Lebanese), who, growing up in the Arab world, would have been exposed to Egyptian films first-hand.

The Egyptian film industry, or “Hollywood of the Middle East,” has been one of the top producers of film and entertainment in the Arab world, and despite a sharp decline in the 1990’s, Egypt “still hosts the major entertainment industry in the Middle East” (Shafik 4). Egyptian movies “with their popular film stars … are still screened and aired all over the Arab world” (Shafik 4). In fact, “low-quality, VHS and VCD’s have
become the prime medium for distributing old and new Arabic films, more specifically Egyptian ones” (Yassin), making them a cheap and accessible form of entertainment to a wide audience.

Egyptian popular cinema is also intrinsically tied to the social and historical moments within which it was made, reflecting “its producers' and consumers' inner reality” (Shafik 2). Major historical events such as “the rule of Egypt by its monarchy, colonialism, post colonialism, the nationalization of the film industry in 1964, then its denationalization in the 1970s”, etc. (Deeley par. 6), have impacted the film industry and are certainly reflected in the content and aesthetics of the films made at various times.

On a social level, Egyptian popular cinema has had “strong appeal to the masses due to (among other elements) its recurrent dramatic patterns, ritualized performances and some almost archetypical, yet partly contradictory stereotypes” (Shafik 2). In this way, Egyptian popular cinema can function as a “repository of collective memory” (Salti par. 8) on both a cultural and political level. By appropriating this cultural material (specifically containing representations of a particular Egyptian icon), Stephan, Maamoun and Yassin activate this “repository” and take it further by constructing and deconstructing personal and historical narratives through montage-style editing: a poetic détournement, which can be read in many ways depending on who is watching. For a Western viewer, the films offer an interesting glimpse into Egyptian cinema (and life), and for viewers in the Arab world, the films contain layered references to favorite movie stars, historical moments, iconic figures, customs and styles. The films search, preserve and build narratives, functioning as a sort of filmic archive, each with their own personal and historical story – and accompanying emotional qualities.

**Description and Affective Responses**

While each of the three films incites unique affective responses, I am struck by the decidedly personal tone and sensuousness they share. It is interesting to notice how the grainy, archival footage evokes different emotions for each film. The films seem to hover somewhere between fiction and documentary, personal memory and historical survey, intimate portrayal and distanced account. This phenomenological and psychological response is certainly a result of the editing choices each filmmaker employs, of which I will provide a selection of examples as follows.
The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni by Rania Stephan (2011)

The word that immediately comes to mind during and after watching The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni is: luscious – applicable to all aspects of the film, from the content of the images to the rich, saturated and tactile texture of the old footage to the dreamlike arrangement of clips. Rania Stephan weaves snippets from 76 of the 82 films starring Soad Hosni (Salti par. 2), resulting in a visual and aural collage that drips with sensuality, femininity, and melancholy. I am left feeling a presence, an impression of this iconic figure and her vulnerability. The film traces the career of Soad Hosni and paints a moving portrait of her through the many characters she has played. The film is a tribute to the actress, “a kind of bio-pic” (Stoney par. 10) of Hosni, who died tragically in 2001 by apparent suicide.

I would say there are two main elements in this film that provoke an affective response in me: the glitchy VHS footage, and the dreaminess of the film. Editing plays a significant role in producing these responses, as well as the “raw material” (Salti par. 8) of the existing footage, which Stephan uses with all its flaws.

The materiality of the grainy VHS footage evokes both an affective and physical response - the snow, scratches, lines and blurs seem to make Hosni's image more seductive and more voluptuous and, as well, to ebb and flow with nostalgic yearning. An example is at 02:51, when the scratchy, saturated footage of Hosni in her red sequined dress gives another dimension to her seduction. The graininess of the images adds a dreamlike, romantic hue to her representation, but also allude to the fading of her career and ultimate death.

Stephan creates a dreamlike quality in her film through editing, using fading transitions between clips. She layers sequences together, overlapping scenes visually and at times overlaying music or dialogue from one scene to the next. This strategy is set up at the outset of the film and is used throughout. For example, Hosni’s character is seen lying down; she is being questioned to remember (remember her life? her career?) – at 01:33, her image fades out and is overlapped by her figure running across a landscape – she continues to run through many different scenes cut together, ending at 02:22. There is a constant reference to dreams and memory, both subject to gaps and glitches, which the grainy footage evokes and brings to the fore.
**Domestic Tourism II by Maha Maamoun (2009)**

In *Domestic Tourism II*, footage that features the most iconic structure in Egypt, the Pyramids, is edited together into a nonlinear narrative. The scenes are edited according to certain transition points, such as one scene where a cab driver is taking someone toward the Pyramids, followed by a car pulling up beside them (05:02), or a particular time of the day (for example two night scenes spliced together at 14:40) or an element of dialogue (such as when a newscaster reports the disappearance of the Pyramid of Cheops followed by a scene of detectives searching a barren area of the desert at 23:28).

The Pyramids are featured as a backdrop to the many different actions, dynamics, and dialogues in each clip – a monument of collective memory, signifying (physically and metaphorically) the history of Egyptian culture and identity both within Egypt and in the imagination of tourists or outsiders.

Similar to both *The Three Disappearances* and *The New Film*, the materiality of the old footage affects me, but in Maamoun’s film, the physical presence or stoniness of the Pyramids are somehow reflected in the graininess of the old VHS footage. I feel a strong affective and physical response between the 43:05-44:06 marks, where the film is saturated a golden color and is alive with scratches, glitches and marks. It is at this point when I can almost feel the texture of the Pyramid stones, their roughness, edifices weathered by time. This is the most poignant moment for me and it becomes clear how effective cinema can be at producing deep relationships between real and imagined, time and space, history and dream. Through cinema, “Egypt is eternal” (9:54).

**The New Film by Raed Yassin (2008)**

Out of the three films, watching *The New Film* is a more jarring, aggressive visual and aural experience. To note, this film is much shorter (12:16), than *The Three Disappearances* and *Domestic Tourism II*. Yassin roughly stitches together clips from found (and degraded) footage from popular Egyptian films of the 70s and 80s, most of which feature men of authority shouting, giving orders, interrogating civilians, or conducting ‘serious’ business – of course with the ever-present, all-seeing portrait of President Mubarak featured in the background of every scene. The more overtly political of the three, *The New Film* has a more abrupt editing style, where clips are cut in series on a point of action: for example, a character entering through a doorway and addressing a person of authority (at 0:56, 01:06, 01:12, 01:17, 01:23, 01:28, etc.). This
strategy of editing and repetition is employed throughout the film, gaining more aggression and volume: for example, the string of authority figures yelling “shut up” (at 02:48, 02:51, and 02:53) and “get out” (at 03:20, 03:23, 03:25, 03:27, and 03:29). I am bombarded by the men’s voices and the aggression they exude through their yelling and physicality with the other actors in these scenes. The rhythm of the film follows a staccato beat, similar to the political "shaabi" (Yassin) song that is woven throughout the film – “am am am am am Amreeka.”

It is at the 03:30 mark where Yassin’s editing choice reveals the real “suspect”: a man with mustache and sunglasses slowly looks back at Mubarak’s portrait on the wall, which hangs behind him. The clip is stripped of sound and slowed down, a cheeky maneuver, and a humorous and personal touch on the part of Yassin. Following this, a series of six clips featuring Mubarak’s portrait hanging above long boardroom tables surrounded by men are edited together. They are also stripped of digetic sound, but with the inserted “click” sound of an old television changing channels. The viewer is now completely aware that this portrait of Mubarak, this representation, is the presence or essence of focus.

Yassin then brings in a movie trailer at 05:09 for The Suspect (incidentally, a film starring Soad Hosni), weaving the glitchy, degraded footage of this action movie into the narrative. The soundtrack and intensely scratched film betray its datedness, bringing a humorous interlude in what I think is another more personal choice on the filmmaker’s part. The integration of this trailer brings it out of the realm of dry, serious political commentary, implicating popular culture as well, to which Yassin himself admits an addiction (Muller par. 4). These editing choices reveal the more personal undertones to this film and the relationship between popular culture and politics.

To summarize, I have provided a brief description of the three films, the affective responses evoked, and some examples of the unique touches each filmmaker has inserted into the narrative. The Three Disappearances, Domestic Tourism II and The New Film, while having their own unique emotive qualities, share important formal similarities: repetition being the most apparent, but also a very personal and intuitive editing style. These strategies work to propel the narrative forward, and as well creatively bring the background (in this case, the Pyramids, the life of Hosni, and the portrait of Mubarak), into the foreground for further investigation.
Search for Structures

Each filmmaker has combined fragments from a vast array of Egyptian mainstream films that span an arc of time, to construct and compose new narratives. By identifying the “inner movement” (Milne 242) of each film, it becomes evident that they offer a distinct, yet experimental survey of Egyptian mainstream cinema and how it relates to political, social, and cultural moments in Egypt's history. The general structure of the films (how the clips are arranged and edited), as well as the affective responses they generate, provide what Jean-Luc Godard describes as “…not a generalized overall truth, but a certain ‘complex feeling’” (Milne 242). I believe this complex feeling is aroused by the interplay between imagination and reality that each filmmaker delicately folds and unfolds throughout each film. The structure of the films, examined below, provides an additional layer, a conceptual framework for the more aesthetic, personal editing choices made by Stephan, Maamoun and Yassin.

In The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni, Stephan edits the footage into what she calls ”a tragedy in three acts,” chronologically tracing the three important career phases of Soad Hosni as well as three important historical events. The first act edits footage “up to the 1967 defeat of the Arab-Israeli war, the second act to the 1973 war, and the third is 1973 to the 1991 Gulf War” (Stoney par. 12). As Stephan remarks in an interview with Elisabeth Stoney: “It organized itself in such a way because, as historical events changed the cinema, so too did they affect her [Hosni’s] career and experience.”

Maamoun in Domestic Tourism II composed her film according to a chronological/pyramidal structure, beginning with the most recent footage (2000s) descending to the latest footage (1950s) and back up again to clips from the 2000s (Maamoun par. 5). Commenting on her conceptual framework, Maamoun writes: “For this historical chronology is at the same time an emotional chronology and brings with it an emotional structure and rhythm for the film, as the drama engulfing the pyramids gradually rises and falls with time.”

In The New Film, Yassin appropriates footage from “feature films produced during Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s reign (1981-2011)” (Yassin). He strings scenes together that are set in official spaces (police stations and government offices), all of which have the portrait of Mubarak hanging on the walls.
In examining the structure of the films, one can access more complex layers, where imagination and reality intertwine and where certain essential qualities are revealed.

Essence

*I had the intuition that her images would reveal something essential about her.*

(Rania Stephan, interview at Doha Film Institute)

The filmmakers discussed here laboriously scoured through low quality, outdated footage in search of the essence of motifs that are both personally and culturally significant. Simultaneously, Stephan, Maamoun and Yassin are active preservers of the essence of vintage Egyptian cinema, which is waning due to the obsolescence of VHS technology needed to view older films, as well as the neglect of Egypt’s National Film Archives (Stoney par. 6). A significant part of the National Film Archives have been lost due to fire and inadequate storage, in what has been deemed a “heritage emergency that is linked to modern Egypt’s own crisis of identity” (Stoney par. 6). Yassin remarks in an interview with Nat Muller for *Ibraaz* magazine:

In the Arab world, ever since we got independence from the colonial powers, there was never any questioning about things related to identity, nationalism, religion, all of these main issues – we never confronted them. We took it for granted. Of course, there were some movements but it was a problem of not having a clear historical narrative. It can also be personal. But at least let’s say that the standards for that are not even clear.

It seems there is a desire, even a need for alternative methods of preservation and representing of popular cinema – which I have illustrated contain important traces of history, style and fashion, customs, and codes, all of which help to build collective memory and identity in the Arab world.

In writing this filmic analysis, I pause to reflect on my own national identity (Canadian) and the icon that serves as an ever-present backdrop in representations of “Super, Natural BC” – the coastal mountains. It is interesting how certain symbols come to function as tools to signify beyond their physical reality, to represent a city, a culture, a
nation, one’s identity. The films discussed in this paper have identified the significance of iconic representations in cinema, pointing out to viewers how this process sometimes unknowingly becomes part of our reality, beliefs and imagination. By editing together various and numerous representations of Egyptian icons, the filmmakers Rania Stephan, Maha Maamoun and Raed Yassin accentuate their presence in the background of life and culture, bringing their essence to the foreground. These films are a new type of archive – emotional, personal, and layered. They weave alternative historical narratives and source out the power of the cinematic image to create and build collective memory – something very powerful within the Arab world and beyond.
Works Cited


