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ARTICLE

Counting Kisses at the Movies: The Screen Kiss and the Cinematic Experience in Egypt

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Abstract

In this article, I use the 1969 Egyptian film *Abi fawq al-Shagara* and the motif of the kiss as a launch pad to explore broader cinematic experiences and cultures in 1960s Egypt and beyond. I argue that the deployment and debates around screen kisses not only represented wider conflicting and shifting impulses around questions of audience tastes, sexuality, and the role of the cinema, but became central motifs through which audiences experienced the movies. Inspired by a historical approach to the study of cinema, one in which media texts and audiences are central, this article shifts the gaze away from the screen to consider the public lens through which films were appreciated, the broader global media landscape in which they existed, and the tensions between audiences and critics. I bring popular magazines, audience reactions and memories, and wider international cultural trends into the frames of analysis not only to nuance our understanding of Egyptian cinematic cultures, but to shed light on an often-neglected component of Egyptian history of the 1960s; the fun, the pleasures, and the anxieties of a quickly changing cultural and leisure landscape, and the wider cultural mood that helped shape a generation's experiences of the cinema.

Keywords: 1960s; *Abi fawq al-Shagara*; Egyptian cinema; Egyptian culture; film history

The 1969 film *Abi fawq al-Shagara* (My Father Is Up the Tree) captured the frictions and fantasies of late-1960s Egypt. A summer flick set on the shores of Alexandria, it melded all the ingredients that ensured its box office success: color technology, an all-star cast, and a tale of sexual escapade and youth rebellion. The film was so popular it ran in one Cairene cinema for an entire year, and continued to play in second- and third-class cinemas well into the 1990s. Directed by Husayn Kamal and written by Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* follows 'Adil, an engineering student, who travels to Alexandria to spend the summer with friends. When his romantic interest Amal rebuffs his kisses and pleas for intimacy, he plunges into a seedy cabaret world and into the embrace of the “dancer of the sea” escort, Firdaws. Upon hearing of his son's bacchanalian nights, 'Adil's father travels to Alexandria to save him, only to be ensnared by a cabaret girl himself. The sight of his once-esteemed father drunk and duped by a dancer is too much for 'Adil to bear, and he pleads with him to leave. After some resistance, and a series of heavy-handed slaps across his son's face, the father agrees to leave the cabaret, and 'Adil returns to his university sweetheart.

Abi fawq al-Shagara's success stemmed, no doubt, from its famous lead, the musician, singer, actor, and producer 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz, who played the role of 'Adil and did the soundtrack for the film with hits that arguably became his most beloved.¹ Described in

¹ *Al-Musawwar* even described the final song in the film, “Fi Ahdan al-Habayib” (In the Lap of Lovers), as “the most moving melody of our time”; 'Abd al-Nur Khalil, “Ashja Naghham fi Hayatuna: Hatta fi Ahdan al-Habayib Shawk ya Qalbi,” *al-Musawwar*, 8 April 1977, 27.

al-Musawwar (Illustrated) magazine as the “heartbeat of a young generation in search of a path,” Hafiz made a total of sixteen films during his career, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* being his last.² His production company, Sawt al-Fann, produced the film, giving him significant creative license. Although the film was very much an extension of Hafiz’s cinematic oeuvre in terms of its narrative arch, it signaled a dramatic departure in terms of characterization and style.

In *Abi fawq al-Shagara*, Halim’s screen persona shifted from gentle, romantic crooner, which previously had been his dominant screen character, to a sexually frustrated and transgressive student. The black and white dawdling moodiness of most of his previous films gave way to a quick-stepped tempo and bright colors; the camera broke out of the studio and sprawled on the sand. Hip bikinis and jeans replaced evening gowns, and male short-shorts reigned supreme.

More importantly, gone were the quick and constrained screen kisses of his other films. *Abi fawq al-Shagara* offers a fusillade, a tidal wave of untamed kisses and pecks; wet, bilabial, and executed in quick bursts or long dives. ‘Adil and Firdaws do most of the kissing, their lips perpetually on the ready, their mouths audaciously open. They kiss in bed, they kiss at the bar, they kiss on a boat, they kiss on the mountains of Lebanon, they kiss in the pool, they kiss by a stream. The film was so kiss-filled, it humorously became known as the film of 1001 kisses.

The film’s record number of kisses became an ongoing point of discussion, drawing on a broader debate about the purpose of filmmaking in post-Naksa (“setback” – a reference to the 1967 defeat) Egypt and the ever-lurking threat of for-profit cinema. Even the screenwriter Ihsan ‘Abd al-Quddus protested against so many kisses in the film, arguing that the filmmakers only included them for profit.³ Nadia Lutfi, who played Firdaws, later complained that the use of so many kisses was over the top and “meaningless.”⁴ Yet during its release the film obtained cultlike status. People watched the film multiple times, and during screenings audiences mirthfully counted each kiss.

In this article, I use *Abi fawq al-Shagara* and the motif of the kiss as a launch pad to explore broader cinematic experiences and cultures in 1960s Egypt and beyond. I argue that the deployment and debates around screen kisses not only represented wider conflicting and shifting impulses around questions of audience tastes, sexuality, and definitions of good cinema, but became central motifs through which audiences experienced the movies.

Abi fawq al-Shagara’s kisses have enjoyed incredible longevity and consistent audience appeal. Walter Armbrust, who saw the film in Cairo in a hash-hazed cinema in the 1990s, described a boisterous scene of young men crackling and laughing as the film’s sexiness intensified. The kisses also continue to generate debate about on-screen intimacy and expose the cultural fault lines around romance, the bounds of female respectability, and

² Ibid. For studies on ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz, see Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002), 117–29, 260–69; Martin Stokes, “Adam Smith and the Dark Nightingale: On Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 3, no. 2 (2006): 201–19; Joel Gordon, “The Slaps Felt around the Arab World: Family and National Melodrama in Two Nasser-Era Musicals,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007): 209–28; Mufid Fawzi, *Halim: Ayyam ma’a al-‘Andalib* (Dar Dawin: Cairo, 2007); Martin Stokes, “Listening to Abd al-Halim Hafiz” in *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, ed. Mark Slobin (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 309–36; Martin Stokes, “‘Abd al-Halim’s Microphone,” in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (London: Routledge, 2016), 55–74. Halim also has been the subject of countless memoirs and nonacademic works, recent examples of which include Hisham ‘Issa, *Halim wa Ana* (Dar al-Shuruq: Cairo, 2010).

³ “Ihsan ‘Abd al-Quddus ‘Ghayr Radin ‘an qubulat ‘Abi fawq al-Shagara,” *Veto*, 17 February 2017, <https://www.vetogate.com/Section-32/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%81%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86/%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B3-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-2589030>.

⁴ See interview with Nadia Lutfi: “Nadia Lutfi: Faqadtu Wa’i fi Film *Abi fawq al-Shagara*,” ON-E TV, 15 October 2018, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6viyyw>.

modernness. In 2012, forty-three years after its release, when the Muslim Brotherhood took power in the country, rumors swelled that state censors would cut *Abi fawq al-Shagara's* kissing scenes.⁵ Cries of anguish rang from secular nationalist quarters, as did vows to protect the screen kiss from Islamist assault. For many, protecting the film's kisses became a proxy for protecting a secular way of life from the ostensible threats of an Islamist government. But it was not only *Abi fawq al-Shagara's* kisses that animated people's imaginations. Regular articles appear in the Egyptian press about cinematic kisses, often focusing on a particular actor's opinion of them.

The screen kiss in general, therefore, can be a useful conduit for exploring the fault lines around meanings of romance and experiences of leisure in Egypt. Its constant emergence as a point of discussion and a topic of trashy celebrity news and clickbait is testament to its power as a proxy for broader anxieties about intimacy in the country. Charting the kiss through time can also allow us to tease out some of the tensions around intimacy and sex in Egypt, and show how filmmakers, audiences, and writers have experienced and deployed it to make broader claims about what it means to be modern, intimate, and in love in Egypt.

Other than the works of Marle Hammond on kisses in Egyptian film language, little scholarly attention has been paid to the motif of the screen kiss.⁶ This is, of course, not surprising. The kiss is a slippery subject of study, an intimate act that is contradictory and susceptible to ahistoricism. It is precisely the slipperiness of the kiss as a historical subject, however, that can help us wade through the messy debates about romance, gender, and the social role of the cinema.⁷ Since the beginning of feature film exhibition in Egypt, the screen kiss has been a potent symbol of intimacy that stirred debate and was recognized as a key ingredient for box office success. Beginning in the 1920s, directors deployed the screen kiss sparingly and briefly, often to signal romantic resolution. Magazines featured articles about the "cinematic kiss" as anxieties increased about gender mixing and premarital sexual relations. By the 1960s the kiss exploded onto the screen, open-mouthed, poppysmic, signaling noncommittal passion, fun, and new modes of romantic courtship. *Abi fawq al-Shagara* was not unique in this regard, but represented the pinnacle of this new kissing trend, symptomatic of a new era of filmmaking and visual culture.

The idea that films of the 1960s broke new ground for their representations of sexuality is, of course, not new. Much has been written about representations of sexuality and gender in 1960s films, often with a focus on how they reflected changing social values and policies in Nasser's Egypt.⁸ My article, however, widens the focus by shifting the gaze away from the

⁵ "Abi fawq al-Shagara Yuwajih al-Man' ba'd 43 'aman min 'ardihi" *al-Arabiya*, 2 April 2012, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/02/204941.html>.

⁶ Marle Hammond, "The Kiss in Egyptian Film Language of the 1940s," in *Les Mots du désir: La langue de l'érotisme arabe et sa traduction*, ed. Frédéric Lagrange and Claire Savina (Marseille: Diacritiques Éditions, 2020). Most scholarship on screen kissing in general focuses on the psychological aspects of the kiss, whereas I am interested in how the kiss is used and debated as it moves through time. For studies on screen kisses in cinema generally see Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) Chapter 1; Ralph S. J. Dengler, "The First Screen Kiss and 'The Cry of Censorship,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7, no. 3 (1979), 267–72; and Scott McKinnon, "Watching Men Kissing Men: The Australian Reception of the Gay Male Kiss On-Screen," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): 262–87.

⁷ On love and romance in Egypt, see Hoda Elsadda, "Imaging the 'New Man': Gender and Nation in Arab Literary Narratives in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 2, (2007): 31–55; Aymon Kreil, "The Price of Love: Valentine's Day in Egypt and Its Enemies," *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 2 (2016): 128–46; and Aymon Kreil, "Territories of Desire: A Geography of Competing Intimacies in Cairo," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12, no. 2 (2016): 166–80.

⁸ Walter Armbrust, "Sexuality and Film: Transgressing Patriarchy; Sex in Egyptian Film," *Middle East Report* 206 (1998): 29–31; Sherifa Zuhur, "Victims or Actors? Centering Women in Egyptian Commercial Film," in *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East*, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998): 211–28; Viola Shafik, "Prostitute for a Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24 (2001): 711–25; Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo:

screen to consider the public lens through which films were appreciated, the broader global media landscape in which they existed, and the tensions between audiences and critics. I bring popular magazines, audience reactions and memories, and wider international cultural trends into the frames of analysis not only to nuance our understanding of Egyptian cinematic cultures, but to shed light on an often-neglected component of Egyptian history of the 1960s; the fun, the pleasures, and the anxieties of a quickly changing cultural landscape, one not insulated from the global “sexual revolution,” but a part of it. In bringing these different sources together, I move away from a traditional focus on films to shed light on sensual cinematic experiences in 1960s Egypt and bring into sharp relief the cinema as a space of coming-of-age and play, and a site where new ideas around sexuality were explored and debated, indulged in and resisted.⁹

The Sixties as Both Slap and Kiss

In Joel Gordon’s study of the film, *Abi fawq al-Shagara*’s ultimate motif is not the kiss but the father-on-son slap, the “single powerful dramatic act of parental discipline” that comes toward the end of the film.¹⁰ For Gordon the slap (or series of slaps) “provide[s] intriguing frames of reference for social and political transformations in the world of Nasser’s Egypt that existed behind the cameras and outside the movie theaters.”¹¹ Gordon puts *Abi fawq al-Shagara* in direct dialogue with Nasser’s paternalistic regime, peeling away the layers that reveal its underlying message about a wider culture of authoritarianism in the face of youthful rebellion. For him, it is the slap, the “violent paternal act that freezes the frame—and that has kept it frozen in the imagination of several generations of viewers.”

It takes no stretch of the imagination to understand why Gordon focused on a violent paternal act. The history of the 1960s in Egypt indeed reads like a stinging proverbial slap; an era of dashed postcolonial hopes and fallen postcolonial heroes, nothing left except, in the words of the poet Nizar Qabbani, a “retching, coughing, syphilitic generation.”¹² The historiography on the 1960s thunders with the themes of Nasserism and the tracts of leftist intellectuals, and is haunted by the Naksa.¹³ Historians scavenge for signs that paved the road to defeat, trying to understand the blunders that led to Egypt’s “inglorious stagnation.”¹⁴

American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 122–33; Sabrina Joseph, “Representations of Private/Public Domains: The Feminine Ideal and Modernist Agendas in Egyptian Film, Mid 1950s–1980s,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, no. 2 (2009): 72–109; Mona Abdel-Fadil and Koen Van Eynde, “Golden Age Divas on the Silver Screen: Challenging or Conforming to Dominant Gender Norms?” *Journal of African Cinemas* 8, no. 1 (2016): 11–27; Carolina Bracco, “The Creation of the Femme Fatale in Egyptian Cinema,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 15, no. 3 (2019): 307–29; Rania Mahmoud, “Who Advocates for Egypt? Women Lawyers in Egyptian Film on the Eve of Independence,” *Gender & History* 33, no. 1 (2021): 192–208.

⁹ This speaks to a broader historiographical turn in Arab cinema studies, with more and more scholars looking away from the screen toward broader contexts of production and reception and the use of parafilmic content. See for example, Ghenwa Hayek, “Where To? Filming Emigration Anxiety in Prewar Lebanese Cinema,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 2 (2019): 183–201; and Ghenwa Hayek, “Locating the Lost Archive of Arab Cinema,” *Regards—Revue Des Arts Du Spectacle* 26 (2021): 15–19, <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/regards/article/view/660/550>.

¹⁰ Gordon “Slaps Felt,” 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹² Nizar Qabbani, “Notes in the Margins of the Defeat,” trans. Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Shakespeare’s Prince and Nasser’s Ghost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 120.

¹³ Sabry Hafez, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7, no. 1 (1976): 68–84; Elisabeth Kendall, “The Theoretical Roots of the Literary Avant-Garde in 1960s Egypt,” *Edebiyat: Journal of ME Literatures*, 14, no. 1–2 (2003): 39–56; Yasmine Ramadan, “The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2–3 (2012): 409–30; Yasmine Ramadan, “Shifting Ground: Spatial Representations in the Literature of the Sixties Generation in Egypt” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012).

¹⁴ Jesse Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1.

In this article, I build on Gordon's work by using the kiss, and on-screen intimacy in general, to consider a parallel framework for the history of the 1960s and for the history of cinema during the Nasser period. I ask: What happens to the narrative of the 1960s when we raise the volume on the sounds of lips smacking and mischief that filled the movie theatres? What happens to that narrative when we carve out a space for fun, frivolity, and sexiness, and lean into themes of teenagers coming-of-age and experiences of cinema-going?¹⁵ If *Abi fawq al-Shagara* has been, for the most part, remembered and experienced through the motif of the kiss, why has this been dismissed as a mere symptom of increasingly commercial interests in the film industry, rather than indicative of a generation's experiences of cinema and broader negotiation of new ideas around dating and sex?

Unlike the slap, the kiss sits awkwardly in the memory of 1960s Egypt, its softness and sensuality contrasting with the usual aesthetics of the period; heavy on industry, Nasser, and permanent states of war.¹⁶ Despite the drones of defeat that dominate 1960s historiography and memorialization, the film industry at the time, and slightly after in the 1970s, actually churned out sexy flicks full of music, laughter, and kissing, softening the edges of political dogma and disrupting the sounds of martial nationalism, the audience cracking apart the pretense of Nasserist discipline and rigidity. The academic trend to focus on leftist cinema, or "Third World cinema," ignores the vast swath of cinema culture during the period: playful, undisciplined, and thrill-seeking. I am not suggesting that films such as *Abi fawq al-Shagara* cannot be read through the lens of the Naksa, paternalistic politics, and the shadow of Nasser. But by shifting our attention to audience responses to films and debates about sex in films, we can magnify narratives of intimacy and leisure in a history dominated by the ghosts of angry fathers and smuggle experiences of pleasure and frivolity into histories of political uncertainty and defeat.

Locating kisses in the historical sources necessitates a bouncing off and on the screen, an investigation of public discourses, and a focus on audience reaction that widens the frames of cinema history. In this way, I am inspired by a historical approach to the study of cinema, one in which media texts and audiences are central.¹⁷ In the context of Egypt, Walter Armbrust's discussion of screenings of *Abi fawq al-Shagara* in the 1990s is a key text on this subject.¹⁸ Armbrust zoomed into the audience's reactions as they engaged, laughed, and had fun in the cinema halls. He showed that despite 'Abd al-Halim's reverence in official discourse, the audience's treatment of "the [film] almost as camp," could be read as subversive.¹⁹ As I show in this article, this experience of the film—as an occasion to laugh, interact, and destabilize official narratives and critical taste—has a far older history.

¹⁵ On issues of fun and stifling of fun, see Asef Bayat, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007): 433–59.

¹⁶ For more on alternative visual cultures in the 1960s, see Mohamed Elshahed, "Shafiq's Bag of Memories," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building*, ed. Chen Jian et al. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 504–11.

¹⁷ Walter Armbrust's approach to the Egyptian cinema, to look beyond the film texts and the broader debates, has been important in this regard. See, for example, Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For recent examples of this approach, see also Chihab El Khachab, "The Sobky Recipe and the Struggle over 'the Popular' in Egypt," *Arab Studies Journal* 27, no. 1 (2019), 35–62; and Ghenwa Hayek, "Where To?" The literature on historic audiences also has been instrumental in helping me formulate my ideas. For some examples, see Charles Ambler, "Popular Film and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 81–106; Richard Maltby, Daniël Biltreyest, and Philippe Meers, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Laura Fair, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018); and Daniël Biltreyest, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2019).

¹⁸ Walter Armbrust, "When the Lights Go Down in Cairo: Cinema as Secular Ritual," *Visual Anthropology* 10, no. 2–4 (1998): 413–42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.



Figure 1: Advertisement for the pre-code Paramount studio film *She Done Him Wrong*, starring Mae West (Arabic title *al-Sayyida Lu*, referring to the lead character's name). *Al-Ahram*, 21 November 1933, 3.

This article is divided into three parts. I first set the context by showing how the screen kiss emerged as a motif of romantic love and provoked debates about proper middle-class notions of romance and female respectability. My article then turns to the long decade of the 1960s, exploring the public response to sex and kisses on screen, focusing mainly on debates in the press and documentary evidence of audience reactions. In this section, my argument is not only contextual in the sense that it examines the layers of debate that screen kisses and sex engendered, but also historiographical. Here I make the case for reading the 1960s not only in the historiography of “Third World” postcolonial liberation movements in which it is often positioned, but also in the historiography of the global sexual revolution, of the intimate and personal, in which it is often neglected. In the last section of this article, I turn to more contemporary debates about screen kisses, and show how the motif is deployed in the larger debates about social change and new attitudes toward intimacy on the screen.

The Kiss in Egyptian Cinema

Starting in the silent film period, kisses formed part of a visual mosaic of cinematic romance, a familiar motif for audiences in Egypt who enjoyed a steady dose of pre-code Hollywood and European films (Fig. 1). Popular interest in the kiss coincided with the spread of cinema, as lip-on-lip kisses became synonymous with film culture.²⁰ Going to the movies was not just a passive occasion to watch a film, but constituted a broader social experience in which acts of romance and kissing were often first encountered in a semipublic setting. The satirical magazine *al-Fukahā* (Humor), for example, published cartoons that poked fun at the “educational” benefits of screen kisses.²¹ In one 1927 cartoon, a woman ogles a screen kiss and explains that her objective for going to the cinema was not to have fun, but to learn how to kiss (Fig. 2).²² In a similar tone, a 1928 cartoon featured children at the cinema watching

²⁰ The topic of the kiss was also a familiar item in the early American film press. See Hazel Simpson Naylor, “Kisses According to Cecil B. DeMille,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, June 1921, 28–29; W. A. Williamson, “Kinema Kisses,” *Picture and Picturegoers*, December 1923, 32–33; and Dorothy Wooldridge, “The Truth about Screen Kisses,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, March 1926, 43–45.

²¹ Cartoonists in this magazine typically targeted women or children with their jokes, unmasking an anxiety about changing gender roles in the 1920s.

²² “Girls at the Cinema,” *al-Fukahā*, 28 December 1927, 15.

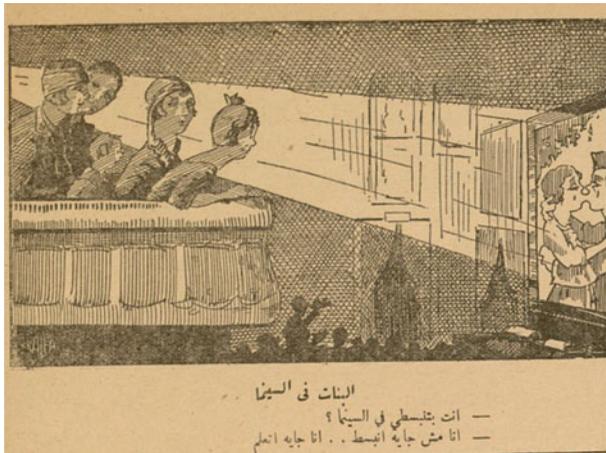


Figure 2. Girls at the Cinema
 -Do you have fun at the cinema?
 -I don't come to have fun. I come to learn.
Al-Fukaha, 28 December 1927, 15.



Figure 3. “And the cinema to teach boys and girls flirting.” *Al-Fukaha*, 14 November 1928, 3.

an on-screen kiss, the cinema painted as a “modern art form” that teaches “boys and girls flirting” (Fig. 3).²³

Early Egyptian film productions quickly picked up the kissing motif as a signifier of romantic love. The 1927 film *Qubla fi-l-Sahra'* (A Kiss in the Desert), a desert adventure film by the Palestinian-Chilean brothers Badr and Ibrahim Lama, played directly on the motif. Other films, like the 1929 *Ma'sa al-Haya* (The Tragedy of Life), even sent film stills of characters kissing to magazines (Fig. 4).²⁴

Magazines featured stories about film kisses, interrogating whether they provoked real feelings of affection in the actors.²⁵ In 1932 the Egyptian film magazine *al-Kawakib* (The Planets) mused about whether a kiss between actors could have the power to facilitate real-life love.²⁶ A two-page article, “The Kiss on the Silver Screen,” questioned whether actors could fall in love after “a long embrace and a passionate kiss” (Fig. 5). “Does it ever cross your mind when you are sitting at the cinema” the author of the article ruminates, “to

²³ “And the Cinema to Teach Boys and Girls Flirting,” *al-Fukaha*, 14 November 1928, 3.

²⁴ Although the films are lost, stills from the films can be found in surviving magazines of the period. See *al-Kawakib*, 26 December 1932.

²⁵ “Hadith ‘an al-Taqbil,” *Kul Shay'*, 4 June 1927, 9.

²⁶ Fann, “al-Qubla ‘ala al-Shasha al-Bayda’,” *al-Kawakib*, 27 June 1932, 12–13.



Figure 4. Film still for *Ma'sa al-Haya. Al-Kawakib*, 26 December 1932.



Figure 5. Fann, "al-Qubla 'ala al-Shasha al-Bayda'" *Al-Kawakib*, 27 June 1932, 12–13.

ask yourself whether the actor or actress feel[s] any thrill from these passionate kisses that look, in most cases, as if they had sprung from a heart replete with love." It must be so for some actors, the author contends. William Powell's screen kiss, according to the author, "was the reason he married the beautiful Carole [Lombard]."²⁷

As kisses flourished on screen and in print, a chorus of critics pondered how many kisses were too many, and whether more stringent censorship laws should govern on-screen intimacy. Critics rallied, for example, against the 1929 *Faji'a fawq al-Haram* (A Tragedy on the Pyramid) for ostensibly eschewing traditional Egyptian values with its kissing scenes, which according to one writer took up half the film.²⁸ This writer, Ahmad Sa'id Nasir, asked: "[Do] our Egyptian life and Eastern traditions allow a young woman to meet a man in her house? . . . Yes, there is love in the film, but it is a vulgar love articulated through continuous and depraved kisses that [says nothing of the] virtuousness and bashfulness of the woman." In a classist swipe against poor audience members, Nasir claimed that the film merely sought to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ahmad Sa'id Nasir in *al-Sabah*, 3 February 1929, quoted in Ahmad al-Hadari, *Tarikh al-Sinima fi Misr: Tarikh al-Sinima fi Misr: al-Juz' al-Awwal (Vol.1) min Bidayat 1896 li-Akhir 1930* (Cairo: Nadi al-Sinima, 1989), 278.

“arouse the instincts of the mob and dregs of society.” With its woeful filmic construction and its “disregard for the ways and traditions of Egyptians,” Nasir called on the government to tighten the censorship of films so that another “tragedy” would not occur.²⁹ Such was the ubiquity of the kiss at the cinemas that in 1935 the writer Tawfiq al-Hakim, head of the censorship board at the time, penned a report on the matter. Al-Hakim condemned “long kisses” in the movies, arguing that they provoked “vile instincts” and caused a deterioration of morals.³⁰

By the time filmmaking took off in the late 1930s, the style of the Egyptian cinematic kiss had been established. Film after film contained elegant heterosexual kisses; lips pressing against each other, heads tilted and unmoving to a crescendo of Western classical music. For the most part, however, film kisses remained brief or obscured, as al-Hakim had advocated. In many cases, and as Marle Hammond also shows, directors built tension and humor with promises of canoodling lovers, and often the kisses remained illusionary, referred to but never fulfilled.³¹

Censors routinely asked for kisses to be shortened, and Hollywood films were not spared.³² In 1943, Egyptian censors only allowed the screening of MGM’s *We Were Dancing* after the removal of “250 feet of love scenes” and the “too impetuous” kiss between the film’s protagonists, Norma Shearer and Melvyn Douglas.³³ Egyptian censors had previously warned that “no scene which could be even slightly shocking or immoral will be allowed for projection in our territory. Therefore, too long kisses, suggestive dresses, hot dancers or any other scenes of the same kind will be eliminated from all films intended for projection in Egypt.”³⁴

The 1947 censorship law specifically outlawed “hugs and kisses that cross the bounds of normal emotion and reach a point of eroticism.”³⁵ Other images subjected to the censor’s cut were “scenes of a man and woman in bed together in a vulgar position”; “alluring scenes in a bathhouse”; “naked bodies, on camera or in shadow”; and “immoral movements, such as lewd and tempting dancing.”

Beyond the screen, the “cinematic kiss” inspired light-hearted columns and magazine features. *Al-Studio* magazine, for example, published a page-long feature, titled simply “The Kiss,” in which different movie stars spoke about their favorite kiss, the kiss they dreamed of, and other kissing tidbits.³⁶ Readers learned of Ruhiyya Khalid’s dream of a “burning hot” kiss, and were entertained with short fun rhymes such as “I am a kiss / fun, good looking, and good humored. As long as I am on the cheek; I don’t let anyone worry.” The feature also included a section under the title “Busa, ma’ Iqaf al-Tanfidh” (Kisses with a Suspended Sentence), in which it referred to two male actors who did not want their actress wives to kiss anyone on screen. The feature was mostly fun and light, but points to the tensions through which the kiss was mediated in Egypt; hovering between the forbidden and the delightful, the fun and the shameful.

²⁹ Ibid., 279.

³⁰ “Al-Sinima: Hamla did al-Qubla al-Sinima’iyya al-Tawila,” *al-Sabah*, 15 November 1935, 56. Thanks to Raph Cormack for drawing my attention to this article.

³¹ Hammond, “Kiss.”

³² Mahmud ‘Ali, *Mi’at ‘Am min al-Raqaba ‘ala al-Sinima al-Misriyya* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A’la li-l-Thaqafa, 2008), 147, 163.

³³ Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, “We Were Dancing (Motion Picture, 1942),” Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll30/id/16745>.

³⁴ Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, “Love Crazy (Motion Picture, 1941),” Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll30/id/7788/rec/3>.

³⁵ Husayn Bayumi, *al-Raqaba ala al-Sinima: al-Quyud wa-l-Hudud* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘amma li-l-Kitab, 2012), 128–30.

³⁶ “Al-Qubla,” *al-Studiyu*, 27 October 1948, 7.



Figure 6. Poster for *Abi fawq al-Shagara* .

1001 Kisses in *Abi fawq al-Shagara*

By the time ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz entered the movie world, the Egyptian cinematic kiss was an established motif of romantic love. Before *Abi fawq al-Shagara*, Halim’s on-screen kisses were either absent or confined to one or two at the finale or during the film. Halim’s screen kisses represented an apotheosis of a drawn-out romance or a moment of love’s revelation. Halim and his female costars performed quick pecks or the classic head-tilt lip-press; a loving kiss with his new wife in *al-Wisada al-Khaliya* (*The Empty Pillow*, 1957) or a final kiss in *Fata Ahlami* (*Girl of my Dreams*, 1957). In *al-Khataya* (*The Sins*, 1960), it takes over an hour of romantic struggle and tension-building for the protagonists to kiss quickly, and shyly. *Hikayat Hubb* (*A Love Story*, 1959) contained the most kisses in Halim’s films to date.³⁷ Despite the record number of kisses (which people remember until this day), they remained strictly between the film’s protagonists, elegantly executed amid palatial settings, or in one case by the pyramids. Halim’s kisses are performed standing and always fully clothed: Halim, neatly dressed in a suit or tuxedo, his female costars in a smart casual outfit or gown.

The women Halim’s characters breathlessly and timidly pursued in his films were usually of the “good sort,” sweet and polite. Take for example, his love interest in the 1957 film *Banat al-Yawm* (*Girls These Days*) a film that rebuked young women who crossed the boundaries of 1950s feminine propriety. The main character Salwa (played by Magda) is set against her sister, Layla (Halim’s initial love interest in the film). Whereas Salwa maintains strict boundaries around her behavior, teased by girls in her school as *Hagga* Salwa (*hagga* is a title given to Muslim women upon completion of a pilgrimage to Mecca, but is popularly used to refer to elderly women), Layla is a reckless socialite who wants to party and play. When Khalid sees Layla frolicking at the pools with other men, he rebukes her, only for Layla to retort that he is “old-fashioned” (*da’a’ adīma*). Predictably, Halim’s character rejects Layla, and falls in love with her good-sister Salwa (no kisses occur in this film). Even though his love interests in some films might “go astray,” destabilizing the good girl image, as in

³⁷ For the trailer, see “‘I’an Nadir film Hikayat Hubb Mariam Fakhr al-Din ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz 1959,” YouTube video, accessed 5 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_CQWqkANGU.

Ma'budat al-Gamahir (The People's Idol, 1967), an adaptation of *A Star is Born*, the path went no further than bouts of alcohol consumption and melancholy: no kisses in this film either.

With its near naked scenes and kissing lovers rolling in the sand, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* marked a stark departure for Halim and a dramatic shift in the deployment of the kiss. The advertisement of the film, plastered on city walls and published in major newspapers and magazines centralized the promise of the open-mouthed kiss (Fig. 6).

Although no doubt a key component of drawing audiences to the film, the kisses also played a pivotal role in constructing the film's mood, setting its tempo, and engaging in a wider conversation about sex, romance, and love in late 1960s Egypt. The kisses lay at the very heart of the film's attitudes about romantic relationships and the social parameters that bind them. Whereas in *Banat al-Yawm* Halim's character is accused, much to his offense, of being *da'a qadima* in *Abi fawq al-Shagara*, he and his friends mirthfully jab their parents with the same epithet. The kisses in 'Abd al-Halim's previous films are slow to build; in *Abi fawq al-Shagara* it takes only fifteen minutes, and 'Adil is laying it on thick, trying, but failing, to kiss Amal. When their first kiss in the film comes at around the fiftieth minute, as a series of playful pecks during the film's fantasy scene, it portends what's to come. The kisses intensify after 'Adil meets Firdaws. Their kisses also are a series of pecks, often in bed or in Lebanon, the quintessential libertine destination in the popular Egyptian imagination. They are uninhibited, unconstrained, and stylized to denote total loss of control.

The kiss in *Abi fawq al-Shagara* is a motif not of romantic finality but of sexual experimentation and playfulness. Each peck heralds a fleeting experience of romance, rather than a door to long-term monogamy. The kisses extend the film's themes of generational change, championing a different idea of courtship and romance to that of the hero's old-fashioned parents. At no point does the film depict Firdaws as a *femme fatale*; she is instead a "fallen woman" in love.³⁸ The film depicts her as a woman who unapologetically has desire and enjoys the kisses she gives and receives. The noncommittal kiss extends to 'Adil's relationship with Amal. When Amal and 'Adil reunite and kiss, there is no suggestion that their romance is anything but a "getting to know each other" phase as 'Adil wanted; there is no ululation indicating marriage or engagement in the end but instead a frolic on the sand and a final few kisses. In this way, the film is a defense of the casual kiss, a call-to-kisses, and a classification of the summer fling as the shibboleth of the middle class.

Shame, Kissing, and Defeat

Last year the war fell upon us just before our vacations and our summer love affairs. Our lives have always oscillated between these two poles: love and war; these two forces: Cupid and Mars. That is why one can easily fall in love right in the middle of a blackout. Then love is blind.³⁹

On the surface, the film represented a glaring disconnect from the realities of Egypt in 1969. It came two years after the 1967 Naksa and only a few months after the student protests of 1968. From March through November, students staged strikes, occupied campuses, and engaged in running street battles with police, lashing out at the Nasser regime for suffocating the very possibilities it purported to represent. At one point, students from Cairo University surrounded the parliament building, and Anwar al-Sadat, the then speaker of the house, scurried to negotiate with them. In the film, Alexandria is the scene of fun and summer, but in reality, it was also the scene of mass student protest. Alexandria University bristled with activism. During the occupation of Alexandria University, students held the governor hostage. Filming took place around the time of mass protest, yet there is no hint of it in the film, no sign that Nasser had, in fact, panicked and shut the universities from which these characters were meant to be graduating.

³⁸ Gordon, "Slaps Felt," 219.

³⁹ Quoted in Eric Pace, "A Bad Case of Confusion Called Cairo," *New York Times*, 22 December 1968.

For many, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* flouted emergent cinematic trends that emphasized neorealist modes of filmmaking and sociopolitical messaging. In an atmosphere of political introspection and political defeat, a big budget, private-sector dancing and singing beach romp seemed to fly in the face of film critics bitten by both the French New Wave bug and feelings of shocked defeat. Samir Farid's booklet *Sinima 69*, a collection of reviews on the year's top films, devotes two frosty sentences to the film, which he calls "an extension of the cheapest melodramatic films with which the Egyptian cinema has been suffering from its beginning until now."⁴⁰ Similarly, in 1972, Raymond William Baker duplicated the critical response to the film, questioning Husayn Kamal's "artistic integrity" and warning that *Abi fawq al-Shagara* "threatens to revive in full force the worst traditions of the Egyptian cinema—songs, dances, and vapid melodrama."⁴¹

However, to think of the film as detached from the traumas and rebellions brewing across the country is perhaps misguided.⁴² Underneath the stability, there is a string of tension and frustration that binds the film together, that sizzles as 'Adil slips into self-destruction. The film seesaws between shame and desire in nuanced ways as 'Adil attempts to reconcile his affection for Firdaws with his middle-class sensitivities. The film's lingering sense of shame bleeds into broader zones of humiliation and indignity, of emasculation and doubt. It oscillates between pleasure and shame, searching for a place to locate desire and joy in times of bleak defeat. The search is a familiar one, linked to the guilt, perhaps the discomfort, of feeling pleasure and sensuality in dark times, a feeling best captured, and with a direct reference to the film, in 1970 by leftist Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul in his lachrymose Naksa poem, *Death in Bed (al-Mawtu 'fi-l-Firashi)*: "Newspapers with red blood headlines and white pages / Walls and posters / Calling on us to watch—The father sitting up a tree / And the revolution, victorious."⁴³

Abi fawq al-Shagara's search for a place to situate pleasure in times of defeat perhaps mirrors our own historiographical myopia on the subject of the 1960s, and our neglect of the broader public response to the film, characterized by playfulness and a focus on its kisses. In interviews I conducted, people remembered the film through its kisses, recalling how viewers counted each kiss in the movie theater as a sort of group game. How do we write histories about fun and pleasure, when these feelings have been extracted from memories of the decade or rendered shameful in the face of defeat? Where do we place histories of pleasure and desire in a history devoted to telling stories of trauma and dictators? The shame palatable in 'Adil metastasizes beyond the screen, manifesting itself most forcefully in the tracts of film critics and commentators who lashed out at the production and the broader success of what they saw as frivolous films.⁴⁴

A Whirlpool of Frivolity

Only one year before *Abi fawq al-Shagara's* release in cinemas, a group of disenchanting filmmakers calling themselves the New Cinema Group lambasted the state of cinema in Egypt as "expansively decorative, unrealistic, drenched in light that only exists in how we imagine the heroes of *A Thousand and One Nights*." Jolted by the Naksa, they issued a manifesto, bemoaning the decrepit modes of filmmaking, of "unvarying artistic forms that have now become outdated, even laughable."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Samir Farid, *Sinima 69*, 39.

⁴¹ Raymond William Baker, "Egypt in Shadows: Films and the Political Order," *American Behavioral Scientist* 17, no. 3 (1974): 412.

⁴² Gordon, "Slaps Felt."

⁴³ Amal Dunqul, *al-'Amal al-Kamila* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2012), 189–94.

⁴⁴ For more on critical attitudes to frivolous or "vulgar" films, see Armbrust, *Mass Culture*; and Joel Gordon, "Class-Crossed Lovers: Popular Film and Social Change in Nasser's New Egypt," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 18, no. 4 (2001): 385–96.

⁴⁵ See translation of manifesto in Kay Dickinson, "The Naksa's New Cinema: New Cinema Group, 'Manifesto of New Cinema in Egypt' (1968)" in *Arab Film and Video Manifestos: Forty-Five Years of the Moving Image amid*

As Kay Dickinson argues, the manifesto formed part of a wider self-reckoning after the unexpected defeat of 1967.⁴⁶ The New Cinema Group attacked the “backward” conception of cinema that insulted the audience’s intelligence, calling out the cinema as “not of the moment.”⁴⁷ It also attacked the star system, an import from Hollywood. Stars were the primary commodity around which films were made, and “scenarios hold no artistic value, nor are they grounded in analyses of human reality.” According to the group, “the star becomes the most valuable component of the film, leading to an unbelievable hike in wages, while the ratio of funds allocated to true film work shrivels.”

In the years that followed, the state-run Marxist magazine *al-Tali’a* (The Vanguard) elaborated on this critique, applauding New Wave and Global South resistance films while bemoaning the state of Egyptian cinema. Ghali Shukri, in his article on “The Culture of 68,” opined that Husayn Kamal’s *al-Bustagi* (The Postman, 1968) was the only notable film recently released in an “an enormous whirlpool of frivolity and shallowness.” He jabbed the director Hassan al-Imam for “desecrating” Naguib Mahfouz’s “masterpiece” *Qasr al-Shawq* (*Palace of Desire*, 1967), and heaped shame on films and their silly titles: *A Very Funny World* (*Alam Mudhika Gidan*, 1968); *Very Crazy Youth* (*Shabab Mugnun Gidan*, 1967); *My Wife is Crazy, Crazy, Crazy* (*Marati Magnuna Magnuna, Magnuna*, 1968); and other “cheap films” that reminded him of the “wave of deterioration of the Egyptian cinema that occurred during the Second World War.”⁴⁸

Writing in May 1969, Samir Farid argued that Egyptian films had not sufficiently probed the question of the 1967 war, asking “When will we raise the camera in the face of the enemy?” He pointed to the 1966 Vietnamese film *Van Troi* as an example of a film made “in the battlefield.” The Vietnamese did not wait for victory before producing their art. *Van Troi* exhibited what Farid called “steadfastness, hardship, and a hope that does not die; all of which are happening in the occupied Arab lands, without filmmakers feeling any of them.”⁴⁹ In general, Samir Farid’s antagonism was toward cheap, nonsensical films, and a censorship board that allowed imperialist films like *The Mercenaries* (also titled *Dark of the Sun*) or *100 Rifles* to pass while “banning great international films and ripping apart excellent films because of a kiss here and a naked thigh there.”⁵⁰

Teenage Passion Pits and Audiences

Despite the jeremiads of horrified critics ashamed of frivolous films, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* and others like it that relied on salacious scenes, star-pull, and comedic slapstick trended riotously well at the box office. The film critiques cannot be seen as isolated from the broader debates about lowbrow and highbrow culture, of an eagerness by certain sections of the elite to educate and improve the tastes of audiences.⁵¹ The only slap relevant here, then, is the proverbial one, right across the face of the critics when *Abi fawq al-Shagara* enjoyed such a resounding success, even more stinging as audiences hooted and guffawed in the movie theater.

Other than the works of Walter Armbrust and Joel Gordon, the trend in recent literature on the 1960s often erases the pleasures that characterized the era, duplicating the tracks of *al-Tali’a* and focusing on the “resistance” films of the period. The reality was far more

Revolution, ed. Kay Dickinson (Cham: Springer International, 2018), 23–47. This was part of a wider push for a new cinema. See “Sinima al-Shabab wa Mahrajanuha,” *al-Tali’a*, October 1969, 110–11.

⁴⁶ Dickinson, “The Naksa’s New Cinema.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ghali Shukri, “Thaqafat 68,” *al-Tali’a*, December 1968, 83.

⁴⁹ Samir Farid, “Mata Narfa’ al-Kamira fi Wajh al-’Aduw,” *al-Tali’a*, May 1969, 132.

⁵⁰ Samir Farid, “Hulliwud fi-l-Ma’raka,” *al-Tali’a*, August 1969, 134; Jack Cardiff, dir., *The Mercenaries/Dark of the Sun*, US, UK, 1968; Tom Gries, dir., *100 Rifles*, US, 1969.

⁵¹ For more on the distinction between lowbrow and highbrow culture and the debates around taste, see Armbrust, *Mass Culture*, 165–220.

complex. Although the rise of public-sector film severely undercut private enterprise, private-sector films still outdid public-sector films in production and box office success. Between 1962 and 1966, private-sector films accounted for around 63 percent of local production.⁵² Directors had an eye on profit, embracing the adage that sex sells. The angry reviews did not emerge in a vacuum, but sprung from the nagging sense that audiences did not like or want to watch highly stylized political films. Audiences flowed into cinemas to be entertained, to go on dates, and to simply have fun.

Although public discourse often referred to “*gumhur al-sinima*” (the cinema audience), the audience was never monolithic. Gender, class, and age distinctions were ever present, and each film showing (often cinemas had between three to four shows per day) attracted a distinct audience. Critics often focused on young people when speaking about sex and cinema audiences. Box office receipts showed that “sex films” drew audiences “of a certain age.”⁵³ Foreign films, including sex films, films classified “adults only,” and private-sector productions, dominated the screens and attracted droves of young people to the cinema. It is “as if we were at a *mawlid* [a popular religious celebration or festival honoring a saint or religious figure] or on a bus,” Yahya Haqqi wrote in 1963 about the crowds at adults-only film sessions.⁵⁴ Underage teenagers snuck into adults-only cinema screenings regularly, with cinema proprietors rarely imposing restrictions.⁵⁵ Young audiences wanted to have fun, and were bored with predictable didactic endings and stylized propaganda. In a person-on-the-street interview in Cairo, one schoolgirl complained of Egyptian films having “the same story . . . the girl errs, then gets married in the end.”⁵⁶

The appeal of sex films points to a different sensual experience at the cinema, a place of coming of age and pleasure. During certain screenings, the theater was filled with laughter and catcalls during intimate scenes. One American who visited in 1965 recalls that “an Egyptian movie house during a slapstick hit like *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is reminiscent of the bleachers at Ebbets Field during an old-fashioned donnybrook between the Dodgers and the Giants. Let a bathing beauty appear and there are wild ribald comments at the sight of her bare legs and shoulders. Students who camp in the front rows will interrupt tender moments of a romance film trying to outdo each other with artificial kisses and popping sounds.”⁵⁷

In a 1969 roundtable with cinema practitioners at *al-Hilal* (The Crescent), many said they felt restrained not only by censors but also by audiences when attempting to make meaningful films about sex. The director Hassan al-Imam, often accused of making shallow films that traded on sex and women’s bodies, grumbled that censors and distribution companies impeded his ability to explore sex in serious ways. He also saw audiences as an obstacle to serious films, expressing annoyance at young men catcalling at cinemas during sex scenes. Al-Imam even recalled hearing “strange expressions and sounds” during the love scenes of one particular film. For al-Imam, young cinemagoers did not have “viewing manners” (*adab al-mushāhada*). ‘Atif Salim also heard “revolting sounds” coming from young people during a sex scene. Salim proposed awareness-raising films for youth first, and “then in stages we will be able to make films that deal with the problems of sex.”⁵⁸

⁵² Muhammad al-‘Ashri, *Iqtisadiyyat Sina’at al-Sinima fi Misr* (Cairo: Dar al-Hana li-l-Taba’a, 1967), 355.

⁵³ Majda al-Khatib, “Madha Yurid al-Nas min al-Sinima,” *al-Kawakib*, 5 March 1968, 17.

⁵⁴ Yahya Haqqi, “Li-l-Kibar Faqat,” *al-Masa*, 18 February 1963, 8.

⁵⁵ Interview (Zoom) with Egyptian male, b. 1952, 23 April 2020, Cairo and London. Many of the interviews I conducted were during the COVID-19 lockdowns; therefore most were done through Zoom and telephone calls.

⁵⁶ Al-Khatib, “Madha Yurid al-Nas,” 17.

⁵⁷ “Hollywood Movies Are Top Box Office in Egypt: Nasser Sees Most New Films on His Screen at Home—Theater Prices Low,” *New York Times*, 7 November 1965, 132. The “bleachers at Ebbets Field” refers to the cheap seats at a baseball stadium in Brooklyn.

⁵⁸ Nadwat al-Hilal, “al-Shabab wa-l-Jins wa-l-film al-Misri,” *al-Hilal*, special issue on “Sinima wa-l-Shabab,” 1 January 1969, 14–29.

The state-sponsored Cinema Club (*Nadi al-Sinima*), which met regularly to watch films and discuss them, often showed foreign films filled with sex scenes. But the tensions between critical aspirations and audience response lurked in the background. Although the intention of the club was to “elevate the tastes” of its members and discuss globally significant films from around the world, observers bemoaned that sometimes its members, especially students, came for the sex scenes only.⁵⁹

In the memories of many I spoke to, much of the noise came from teenage boys. One Egyptian man (b.1952) remembered that young men and boys dominated the cinema hall.⁶⁰ The presence of rowdy teenage boys at certain sessions no doubt annoyed other audience members. One Egyptian woman remembered that teenage boys were routinely thrown out of screenings she attended.⁶¹ Many women I spoke to about their moviegoing experiences often remembered going with family, older siblings, or neighbors, and the necessity of being chaperoned. One Egyptian male remembered that sexual harassment sometimes occurred at the cinema.⁶² Although the cinema afforded many a space for exploration, it was by no means a utopia. There was public disgust with harassment behavior. In July 1966, *al-Musawwar* published a short investigative piece titled: “A Girl Standing by Herself in Front of the Cinema: What Will Happen to Her?”⁶³ The magazine recounted harassment and unwanted advances by men driving or walking past. The journalist was astounded that “these types of people still exist in our society, especially in the context of rising social awareness.” He demanded that, like sick people, they be treated and a solution be found.

Despite the somewhat condescending views of directors and the occurrence of harassment, audiences were, for the most part, having fun and experiencing some sort of coming-of-age ritual at the cinema. The theater afforded a semiprivate space to go on dates. Although many narratives critical of audiences had a decidedly classist element to them, in interviews I conducted with mainly middle- to upper-class Egyptians, many spoke of cinemas as places for dates, romance, or simply watching sex scenes. One Egyptian man (b. 1952) remembered that going to the cinema was “a way of seeing the naughty films.”⁶⁴ Young audiences also experienced real-life romance at the movies. The same interviewee remembered that the Odeon Cinema in downtown Cairo, famous for screening Soviet films, was actually a popular place for teenagers of all classes; not because they flocked to see Russian cinema, but rather because these films were so *unpopular* they provided the perfect location—a dark empty movie theater—for young couples to smooch. The idea of teenagers ignoring Soviet propaganda in favor of fun and intimacy at the movie theater provides the perfect metaphor for attempts to bring elements of fun and sexiness back to the dreary 1960s, and is illustrative of the sensual experience of cinema-going in the 1960s.

“Both This Country and the World Are Changing”

Abi fawq al-Shagara was released at a time in which the cinema was one of the main leisure activities in the country. Moviegoing and the cultivation of a film culture were part of the broader cultural vision of Nasserist Egypt. Despite the strength of the teenage market,

⁵⁹ ‘Abd al-Mun’im Sa’d, *al-Sinima al-Misriyya fi Mawsim 1967–1968* (Cairo: Sharikat al-Qawmi li-l-Tawzi’, 1968), 108. Film scholar Nagi Fawzi, a former member of the club, remembers that many young people attended the club’s screenings for the sex scenes but argued that, even if their intentions did not align with the club’s visions, the club still had the opportunity to teach them something; Nagi Fawzi, History of the Cinema Club, public lecture, 4 June 2022, Cairo.

⁶⁰ Interview (Zoom), 23 April 2020, Cairo and London.

⁶¹ Interview (telephone), 3 December 2020, Cairo.

⁶² Interview (Zoom), 23 April 2020, Cairo and London.

⁶³ ‘Abd al-Nur Khalil, “Fata Wahida Taqif Amam al-Sinima,” *al-Musawwar*, 15 July 1966, 16–17.

⁶⁴ Interview (Zoom), 23 April 2020, Cairo and London.

cinemas continued, especially at certain showings, to be places for middle-class leisure. The state subsidized not only production but a growing cinema and exhibition infrastructure, taking films, both local and foreign, to remote areas and sponsoring film lectures in the various state-run cultural palaces.⁶⁵ The Ministry of Culture openly supported private-sector films and funded the construction of movie theaters.⁶⁶ Although the state apparatus leaned into the educational benefits of cinema, such as the organization of film screenings around the country and screenings for children, they also provided spaces and support for the cultivation of cinematic cultures that did not align with edifying values.⁶⁷ Although critics complained that *Abi fawq al-Shagara* was a cheap melodrama, for example, it won the award for best production by the Ministry of Culture, with Nadia Lutfi winning the prize of best actress for her role in the film.⁶⁸

The state, far from the ever-grim institution banning films and nationalizing studios, facilitated a diversity of film cultures that was in line with broader social shifts in attitudes about dating, romance, sex, and gender relations.⁶⁹ In an interview with the author Iman Mirsal, Nadia Lutfi contemplated the situation of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the context of her friend 'Inayat al-Zayat's divorce struggle: "We were all revolutionaries (*thawriyyāt*) and we were in a period of transition."⁷⁰ Lutfi captures a particular moment of change and rapture, in which conversations about sex, divorce, and female liberation filled the air, and changing gender roles, pushed for by women activists, were becoming a focus for the state modernization project.⁷¹ "We were modern and experimental," remembers author Ahdaf Soueif of the 1960s generation. "We believed in Art and Science. We cared passionately for Freedom and Social Justice."⁷²

The image of the new urban middle-class woman saturated the press, and during the 1960s and early 1970s was especially plugged into a global conversation about the body and the sexual revolution. Literature explored the new modern lives of women.⁷³ And Arabic language semi-pornographic "sex-education" magazines streamed into the country.⁷⁴ Debates thickened about divorce rights, and the *bayt al-ta'a* law, which allowed police to forcibly return women to their husbands, was abolished by executive order in 1967.⁷⁵ Newspapers backed the creation of a new system of freedom for women, and rebuked older religious figures for being out of touch with the times.⁷⁶ In 1969, Nawal El-Sa'dawi raised eyebrows with her new book *al-Mar'a wa-l-Jins* (Women and Sex), in which she

⁶⁵ Sa'd, *al-Sinima al-Misriyya*, 96–122.

⁶⁶ "Tharwat 'Ukasha wa-l-Baltagi Yaftatihin Dar Sinima Sphinx," *al-Ahram*, 16 July 1970, 10. A week after its opening, the Sphinx screened *For Love of Ivy* (1968) starring Sidney Portier; see advertisement in *al-Ahram*, 27 July 1970, 2.

⁶⁷ Sa'd, *al-Sinima al-Misriyya*, 96–122.

⁶⁸ "Jawa'iz al-Sinima," *Alwan Jadida*, 29 June 1969, 11–13.

⁶⁹ In multiple studies Egyptian women have argued that that the Nasser period expanded social and political opportunities. See, for example, Nadjie Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66–74.

⁷⁰ Iman Marsil, *Fi Athar 'Inayat al-Zayyat* (Cairo: al-Kutub Khan li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2019), 48.

⁷¹ Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁷² Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 5.

⁷³ Examples include Sikina al-Sadat, "Kallam 'an al-Hubb," *al-Musawwar*, 22 October 1965, 22–24. See also 'Inayat al-Zayyat, *al-Hubb wa-l-Samt* (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-'Arabi li-l-'Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1967); and Ihsan Kamal, "A Jailhouse of My Own," trans. Wadida Wassef, in *Arabic Short Stories*, ed. Mahmoud Manzalaoui (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985), 304–16.

⁷⁴ *Al-Jins* magazine, which circulated in the late 1960s and 1970s, blended soft porn and sex education. Yara Nahla, "Magallat al-Ibahiyya al-Munqarida," *al-Modon*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2017/3/9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9>.

⁷⁵ Sikina al-Sadat, "al-Mara' wa Bayt al-Ta'a," *al-Musawwar*, 10 March 1967, 36–37.

⁷⁶ *Al-Musawwar* launched a campaign against the new personal status law proposed in 1967. The law was proposed by a committee of older shaykhs headed by Shaykh Farj al-Sanhuri. On its front cover, *al-Musawwar* (21 April 1967) declared "The older generation, those over 70, will not monopolize the right to legislate our lives."



Figure 7. “Sira’ Rahib ‘ala ‘arsh al-Siks bayna Su‘ad Husni wa Nagla’ Fathi,” *al-Shabaka*, 8 January 1967, 18–19.

condemned patriarchal notions of honor and virginity. Although authorities quickly banned the book for its taboo-breaking themes, students secretly circulated copies on campuses.⁷⁷

Nasser, the father figure seemingly hovering over 1960s history, did not crusade against changing values.⁷⁸ When in 1968 conservative voices in al-Azhar demanded he ban the miniskirt amid what an AP-Reuters journalist called “a mini-skirt revolution,” Nasser laughed, “If a law were enacted banning this dress, policemen would be able to stop every girl walking down the street. Who should impose such a law?” The journalist observed: “Replying to an angry shaykh at the Arab Socialist Union’s national congress called to debate student unrest, Nasser, a 50-year-old grandfather, reminded him firmly, ‘Both this country and the world at large are changing.’”⁷⁹

The cinematic experience was not limited to the cinema hall. In popular glossy magazines and journals, discussion flourished about the bounds of premarital love, dating, and public and cinematic displays of affection, and movie stars were the perfect icons of this new trend. Sex was a hot topic, and juicy gossip a feature of the tabloid press. *Al-Shabaka* (The Network), a Lebanese magazine popular in Egypt, brazen for routinely featuring bikini-clad models and movie actresses on its front covers, routinely featured articles with playful titles: “A Dire Struggle between Su‘ad Husni and Nagla’ Fathi for the Sex Throne” (Fig. 7); “Nagwa Fu‘ad Bathes in Lettuce”; “A Miniskirt at the Petrol Station”; and “Nude Photo Gangs.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Nawal al-Sa‘dawi, “Nawal al-Sa‘dawi Hawl Kitab Imra’a wa-l-Jins,” YouTube video, 19 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBZELE34Ee4>. The university and the workplace become socially acceptable sites of courtship and romance; Sharon Maftsir, “Emotional Change: Romantic Love and the University in Postcolonial Egypt,” *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 3 (2019): 831–59.

⁷⁸ This seems to be different from places like Tunisia, where President Habib Bourguiba disapproved of the miniskirt. See Amy Aisen Kallander, “Miniskirts and ‘Beatniks’: Gender Roles, National Development, and Morals in 1960s Tunisia,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 291–313.

⁷⁹ “Nasser Ends Mini-Skirt Strife,” *Canberra Times*, 17 December 1968, 16.

⁸⁰ “Sira’ Rahib ‘ala ‘Arsh al-Siks Bayna Su‘ad Husni wa Nagla’ Fathi,” *al-Shabaka*, 8 January 1967, 18–19; “Hammam bi-l-Khas li Nagwa Fu‘ad,” *al-Shabaka*, 22 June 1967, 8; “Mini Jib fi Mahattat Banzin,” *al-Shabaka*, 22 June 1967, 9; ‘Isabat al-Suwwar al-‘Ariyya,’ *al-Shabaka*, 22 June 1967, 56–57.

Lebanese magazines in Egypt were especially bold in their cover images and content. One 1970 issue of the *Alf Layla Wa Layla* (1001 Nights) magazine featured seminude images of actresses, dancers, and models, and even a feature article about Beirut's upcoming striptease festival held at the infamous Crazy Horse Saloon.⁸¹

The cinematic kiss offered good material for content, remaining a recognizable motif in questions of on-screen intimacy and playfully invoked to raise questions about gender and sexuality. The rising Egyptian star Zizi Badrawi, *al-Shabaka* magazine swooned in 1969, had "the most delicious lips for the cinematic kiss." A three-page feature, heavy on film stills and light on content, applauded Badrawi for her execution of the kissing scenes in a film she was shooting in Lebanon. "Zizi will return to Cairo," *al-Shabaka* predicted, "where many film contracts and cinematic kisses await her."⁸² *Dunya al-Fann* (The World of Art), with a seminude actress on its cover, featured a dramatically titled article "The Cinematic Kiss is Forbidden, Forbidden, Forbidden," in which an Azhari shaykh was asked about the permissibility of screen kisses in Islam.⁸³ His answer was a straight "No," to which the journalist cheekily responds, "Even if it's a work kiss (*qubla wazifiyya*)?" In the context of the magazine, the feature was a tease, playing on and poking fun at conservatives like the shaykh. The article also includes a large image of actors Rushdi Abaza and Su'ad Husni kissing; the same issue included another article titled "Sex Invades Western Cinema."⁸⁴ *Ruz al-Yusuf* also teased the boundaries of the screen kiss during Ramadan, invoking the precarious position of actors balancing their virtuous public images and their screen personas. In one cartoon, a director tells two actors about to perform a screen kiss: "Don't swallow, or else you'll break your fast!"⁸⁵

But it was not all tantalizing celebrity gossip, cartoons, and slapdash journalism. Just a month before *Abi fawq al-Shagara's* release, *al-Hilal*, a more intellectual cultural magazine, ran an entire edition on cinema and youth, and included a roundtable of cinema practitioners discussing sex in films.⁸⁶ The issue sought various voices on the matter, and openly discussed issues of desire, sex, and homosexuality on the screen. In *al-Kawakib* Muhammad Khan, who would later become a famous director, wrote in from London, where he was studying, to discuss the Free Cinema moment, and predicted that "just as sex and nudity flourished in the 1960s, they will not only continue in the 1970s, but take on a bolder style." He continued, "My opinion . . . is that young [film students] do not need anyone to teach them how people remove their clothes and make love. Despite this they are still very interested in 'studying' people's relationships through sex. And from here we see the rise of homosexual scenes of both sexes that are very common and honest."⁸⁷

Sixties Film Programming

Abi fawq al-Shagara was certainly not unique in its exploration of new ideas about the parameters of sexuality and intimacy on screen. Egyptian films experimented with new styles and pushed socially acceptable boundaries as the treatment of sex and youth exploded onto the screen. Directors depicted women as having sexual desire and enjoying their sex lives. At the same time as *Abi fawq al-Shagara* was in theaters, a number of other cinemas exhibited equally racy if not racier films. The 1968 Lebanese-Egyptian film *Nar al-Hubb* (The Fire of Love), starring Su'ad Husni, Halim's rumored girlfriend, depicted extended sex and kissing scenes.

Egyptian filmmakers also used the kiss in playful ways, pushing comedic stories forward with kissing errors, illusions of kissing, and dreams of kissing. In 1964 *Li-l-Rigal Faqat* (For

⁸¹ "Ba'd Arba'ina Yawman Beirut Tantakhib Malikat al-Stibtiz," *Alf Layla wa Layla*, 16 April 1970, 34–36.

⁸² "Ashha Shafatayn li-l-Qubla al-Sinima'iyya," *al-Shabaka*, 15 September 1969, 20–22.

⁸³ "Al-Qubla al-Sinima'iyya Haram, Haram, Haram," *Dunya al-Fann*, 12 November 1970, 44–45.

⁸⁴ "Al-Jins Yaghzu al-Sinima al-Gharbiyya," *Dunya al-Fann*, 12 November 1970, 38–39.

⁸⁵ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 4 December 1967, 33.

⁸⁶ *Al-Hilal*, 1 January 1969.

⁸⁷ Muhammad Khan, "Ra's al-Mal Amriki wa-l-Jins Mustamir," *al-Kawakib*, 19 May 1970, 28–29.



Figure 8. *I'tirafat Gawz* (A Husband's Confessions, 1964).

Men Only) used cross-dressing women, alluding to same-sex kisses for comedic value.⁸⁸ That same year *I'tirafat Gawz* (A Husband's Confessions), starring comedic duo Fu'ad al-Muhandis and Shwaykar, used the kiss as both central motif and character. The film unfolds after the male protagonist ('Adil) confesses to dreaming of kissing his neighbor and wife's best friend Busa (whose name means "kiss"). The script blurs and plays on the kiss, the noun, and Busa, the name. During the dream, 'Adil pleads for a "busa" to which Busa, played by Egypt's Marilyn Monroe, Hind Rustum, asks, "Busa the name, or the . . ." (Fig. 8).

The majority of films screened in Egyptian cinemas during the 1960s were actually foreign films. During second half the 1960s, at least 80 percent, sometimes more, of films screened came from abroad.⁸⁹ In 1965, Egyptian films represented only 10.3 percent of screened films. Hollywood films dominated, amounting to, by some estimates, more than 60 percent of total films shown.⁹⁰ Nasser himself admitted to enjoying American feature films at his home cinema: "What I like are cowboy pictures and musicals. I do not like not like dramas and heavy films."⁹¹ Egyptian audiences and critics were, therefore, plugged into a global debate and a global experience of the sexy sixties that has often been ignored. Ann-Margret's "sex comedy, with its manic hormone-fueled stamina," *The Swinger*, for example, showed at the Rivoli in November 1967.⁹² Around the same time, the Qasr al-Nil movie theater also ran adults-only screenings of the 1967 American film *The Graduate* starring Dustin Hoffman. In 1968, Metro cinema in Cairo exhibited Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*, with queues to the shows stretching across the main downtown boulevard (Fig. 9).⁹³

Social Role of the Cinema

It is precisely their dominance and popularity that propelled such a fierce attack on so-called frivolous or sex films. Foreign films "have become all sex" complained one female shop assistant in Zamalek in a 1968 person-on-the-street interview. "Films today are nothing but

⁸⁸ The title, *For Men Only*, plays on the "adults only" film classification popular at the time. For a good examination of the film, see Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 153–56.

⁸⁹ Gehan Rachtly and Khalil Sabat, "Importation of Films for Cinema and Television in Egypt," *Communication and Society*, 1980, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000043411>.

⁹⁰ "Hollywood Movies Are Top Box-Office in Egypt," *New York Times*, 7 November 1965, 132.

⁹¹ Robert St. John, *The Boss: The Story of Gamal Abdel Nasser* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), 231.

⁹² Advertisement for *The Swinger*, *al-Ahram*, 20 November 1967, 2; John DiLeo, *Ten Movies at a Time: A 350-Film Journey through Hollywood and America, 1930–1970* (East Brunswick, NJ: Hansen, 2007).

⁹³ Nadia Kamil, *al-Muwluda* (al-Karma l-il-Nashr: Cairo, 2018), 249. Although censors often cut scenes they deemed too sexually explicit, *Blow-Up* was not cut and prompted debate; Ahmad Khalid Tawfiq, *Aflam al-Hafiza al-Zarqa'* (Cairo: Kayan li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2017), 113.



Figure 9. Advertisement for *Blow-Up*, showing at Metro Cinema, Cairo. *Al-Ahram*, 16 January 1968, 4.



Figure 10. Two directors: “Since foreign films are the successful ones, what do you say we make foreign films, and forget about Arabic ones!!” Su’ad Zuhir, “Li-l-Fann Faqat,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 21 November 1966, 37.

naked people,” grumbled a male cafe worker.⁹⁴ In 1969, *al-Musawwar*’s Fikri Abaza (in his column *Kilmata al-Haq*, Word of Truth) lashed out at “audacious, naked, exposed” films being shown during Ramadan.⁹⁵

As Egyptian films pushed the limits of the permissible, calls for censorship, bans, and limits increased. *Al-Kawakib*, a magazine dedicated to cinema news, even platformed calls by the famous Indian director and film star Raj Kapoor for an agreement between India and Egypt to “protect audiences from the wave of Western sex films.”⁹⁶ American films continued to dominate screen time, much to the dismay of critics and Egyptian production companies (Fig. 10). *Ruz al-Yusuf* magazine described the local cinema market “as drowning in frivolous foreign films and the corruption and deception of the audience.”

⁹⁴ Al-Khatib, “Madha Yurid al-Nas min al-Sinima,” 17.

⁹⁵ Fikri Abaza, “Manazir Mu’dhiya,” *al-Musawwar*, 28 November 1969, 52.

⁹⁶ Fumil Labib, “Matlub Itifaqiya bayna Misr wa-l-Hind,” *al-Kawakib*, 9 November 1970, 34–35.

One playwright, Sa'ad al-Din Wahba, called for "liberating Egyptian tastes from American films."⁹⁷

Cinema critics and practitioners agreed that films—the "art of youth"—could feature intimate scenes as long as they had an edifying value. Critics admonished hedonist portrayals of on-screen intimacy for profit. 'Abd al-Rahim Sidqi approved of a "clean reference to sex if the need arises, but not films that with sole purpose of profit . . . showcase the charms of the body . . . that has no effect except to incite unconstrained desire, the various consequences of which include the transformation of sex into a mere vice."⁹⁸

Although most critics distinguished between a screen kiss of the approved type and sex scenes of the profitable variety, others wanted kisses banned completely. Film director Husayn Sidqi, who can be described as a cine-evangelist priding himself on fighting society's vices, admitted in an interview that his objectives included "purifying the cinema from things that provoke the instincts . . . such as the kiss."⁹⁹ According to Sidqi, the kiss was shameful and forbidden. "Then how would you signify love?" asked the bemused interviewer. "Through a look . . . or a touch on the hand," Sidqi responded.¹⁰⁰

At the end of the 1960s, there was no real consensus about the issue of intimacy on the screen. Profit-driven distributors and producers pulled in one direction and socially conscious critics in another. Films tantalized most and horrified some. Some audiences (it seems mostly teenage boys) cheered kissing scenes at some movie theaters; others grumbled that sex films were getting out of hand. Cinemas continued to be places of middle-class-sanctioned fun but also offered teenagers spaces to push social boundaries around behavior and romance. What is clear is that the 1960s were characterized by a vibrancy, a revolt, an exploration of sex and intimacy in new ways and a cultural shift around gender norms that invited Egypt into the annals of a global narrative of the "sexy sixties." But perhaps more than this, it represented a broader mood that was part and parcel of the larger Nasserist project, of middle-class aspirations and new understandings of the place of intimacy in people's lives. With less censorship, adults-only restrictions, and the flourishing of sex films, cinemas became spaces of sociality and permissibility, even if at times audiences did not subscribe to critical tastes. As various views on on-screen intimacy collided and converged, what is clear is that the cinema, as a space and a mode of representation, became a pivot around which a generation experienced leisure and negotiated issues of gender and sexuality.

Postscript: Kissing, Nostalgia, and Politics of Despair

I went to the cinema one night; during the newsreel, Nasser was cheered wildly, but Sadat inspired only silence, save for some random catcalls and contemptuous whistling from the young.¹⁰¹

The sexy sixties marched defiantly, albeit despairingly, into the 1970s. Nasser had died, and the cultural infrastructure of his era began its long descent into ruin. Austerity measures meant little disposable income to attend the cinema, and the mass production of television

⁹⁷ Su'ad Zuhir, "Li-l-Fann Faqat," *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 21 November, 1966, 36–37.

⁹⁸ 'Abd al-Rahman Sidqi, "Hal Hunaka Khatar 'Amm min Ta'thir al-Sinima 'ala al-Shabat wa-l-Shabab?" 1 January 1969, *al-Hilal*, 12–13.

⁹⁹ Jalil al-Bindari, "Husayn Sidqi yaqul: Ishtaghtu bi-l-Sinima li-Uthiraha min al-Qubla," *al-Kawakib*, 13 August 1963, 14.

¹⁰⁰ For excellent study on Husayn Sidqi see Rahma Bavelaar, "Anti-Colonial Masculinity, the Catholic Film Center and the Screening of Religious Difference in 1950s Egypt: The Multiple Lives of Husayn Sidqi's Night of Power in, *Cinema in the Arab World: New Histories, New Approaches*, eds. Ifdal Elsaket, Daniel Biltreyst, and Philippe Meers (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 93–120.

¹⁰¹ Edward R. F. Sheehan, "The Cairenes Still Cheer Nasser, Who Runs Egypt?" *New York Times Magazine*, 29 November 1970, 242.

sets meant more and more people stayed home for leisure. In time, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, families in particular stopped going to the movies as a unit. The state slowly withdrew from cultural production, and the official discourse and policy reflected a more conservative attitude toward leisure and the role of the citizen in public.¹⁰²

Despite its accelerating misfortunes, the cinema and the debates around film production continued to highlight key shifts in broader attitudes toward social changes, but a sense of despair had crept into the background. The shift in attitudes was perhaps best epitomized by the actor Ahmad Ramzi's defense of hippies on Egyptian state TV in the early 1970s.¹⁰³ In the TV interview, Ramzi drew on his popular on-screen image as a bad boy (often played alongside Halim). Sporting an unbuttoned shirt and long hair, he puffed on his cigarette and told the interviewer (who thought he looked a little like Charles Manson): "I think they [the hippies] have a point . . . they want to live in their natural states . . . they see the world moving to calamity, so they say what's the point in making any effort. World politics is a mess. So they want to live in nature." The interview took place on the set of *Gunun al-Shabab* (The Madness of Youth, 1972), a cautionary film about wayward youth. Ramzi, the "lord of the hippies," gathers around him young Egyptians, including an openly gay woman who plays a lead role, in bouts of drug and sex parties. *Gunun al-Shabab* horrified authorities, who issued a ban on the film for offending "Eastern values" with its, amongst other things, homosexual overtones, a set piece with the words "sex without love" embalmed on the wall, and lines like "I don't believe in marriage."¹⁰⁴

In the years that followed, Egyptian films became racier, exploring sex and romance in new ways. The public sector crumbled and the private sector burst back on the scene, audacious and unrestrained. The 1970s saw a proliferation of films of lingering kissing and sex scenes. Examples included *Sayyidat al-Aqmar al-Sawwda'* (Woman of the Black Moons, 1971) and *Dhikri Laylat Hubb* (Memories of a Night of Love, 1973). The 1970 public-sector film *al-Sarab* (The Mirage), a psychosexual drama about the adverse effects of "over-mothering," included scenes of sex and masturbation and was approved by the censors for adults only. The 1973 film *al-'Atifa wa-l-Gasad* (Tenderness and the Body) depicted the world of high-end prostitutes. A year later *al-Ahdan al-Dafi'a* (Warm Embraces, 1974) defended the rights of divorced women to love and marry again, depicting a sexual relationship outside of marriage in a nonjudgmental way, and *Ayna 'Aqli* (Where is My Mind), a loose adaptation of Hitchcock's *Gaslight*, explored a man's psychological battle as he reckoned with his wife's sexual past.

As salacious films thrilled audiences, critics recoiled. Salah Abu Sayf "sold himself to the devil," wrote the film critic Ra'uf Tawfiq in 1973 about the esteemed director's new film, *Hamman al-Malatili* (Malatili's Bathhouse).¹⁰⁵ The film, which featured lingering sex and kissing scenes and dealt with themes of adultery, homosexuality, and drugs, disappointed critics as a profit-driven romp unworthy of the great director. Abu Sayf, "has become a businessman with a wandering eye," Ra'uf Tawfiq continued "with one eye on the third-class audience, trying to please it, and one eye on intellectuals, attempting to say to them 'I am here.' Yet Salah Abu Sayf's commercial scales tipped significantly toward

¹⁰² Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008), 18. For changing cultural and social norms in the 1970s, see Relli Shechter, *The Rise of the Egyptian Middle Class: Socio-Economic Mobility and Public Discontent from Nasser to Sadat* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Aaron Rock-Singer, *Practicing Islam in Egypt: Print Media and Islamic Revival* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰³ "Sinima al-Qahira: Liqa' ma' al-Fannan Ahmad Ramzi wa-Kawalis Film *Gunun al-Shabab*," YouTube video, accessed April 28, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1gBuUg-rk>.

¹⁰⁴ I'tidal Mumtaz, *Mudhakkirat Raqibat Sinima* (Cairo: al-Hai'a al-Misriyya al-'amma lil-Kitab, 1985), 204–8.

¹⁰⁵ Ra'uf Tawfiq, "Salah Abu Sayf fi-l-Hammam," in *Salah Abu Sayf wa-l-Nuqqad: Arba'un Filman Tu'arrikh li-l-Sinima al-Misriyya*, ed. Ahmad Yusuf (Cairo: Abullu li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1992), 393. For a good discussion of the film, see Koen M. Van Eynde, "Framing the Closet: Gay Men in the Egyptian Cinema in the 1970s," in *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures: Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day*, ed. Aymon Kreil, Lucia Sorbera, and Serena Tolina (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 149–66.

the third-class audience (*gamahir al-tirsu*) as he stoked their primitive instincts.” The film critic Samir Farid agreed, describing the film as a “scandal” and as “overflowing” with the shrieks of commercialism.¹⁰⁶

Producers could not have cared less. They continued to see sex and promises of kissing as key to commercial success, and the 1976 film *al-'Ish al-Hadi'* (Calm Nest) even played on the idea. In one scene, depicting a film shoot on a beach, the producer, who also happened to be the lover of the actress, stops the shooting of a film after a kissing scene. The actress fumed: “What’s this? Let the boy kiss me! Or do you want the film to fail?”

Like *Abi Faw al-Shagara*, many of these films succumbed to a deep misogyny, offering lessons in moral propriety. Although we might feel empathy for the female characters in these films, their sexual transgressions are represented as unforgivable, and they are, more often than not, condemned to social or actual death. In many cases, directors simply kill off these female characters. Directors, all males, were committed to a conservative view of women’s behavior. Their use of kisses and sex, their use of sensuality, while hinting of change, ultimately crumbled into a condemnation of women who stepped outside the boundaries of female respectability. The kisses straddled two opposing ideas, normalizing female pleasure and love, and then using it to uphold patriarchal notions of dating.

Although the trend continued in the 1980s and 1990s, especially with the rise of superstars like Nadia al-Gindi, who took on roles of dancers engaged in spy operations, it was palpably different from preceding decades. Instead of a context of experimentation, of pushing the boundaries of social acceptability, of a state that cultivated spaces for cultural events, the films emerged at a time of manufactured hysteria around sex orgies and scandals, an increasingly withdrawn state, and rising cultural conservatism.¹⁰⁷ The films fed into and benefited from a landscape of sensationalist news, with items about the “moral police” confiscating films at the Cairo Film Festival, news of actresses employing black magic to lure men into their beds, and “crime of the week” scandals like “group sex parties in Heliopolis” filling the tabloids.¹⁰⁸ It was in this context that many of the old cinemas around the country fell into disrepair and disrepute. One former employee of a cinema in downtown Cairo remembered that by the 1990s the cinema had become a refuge for teenage boys to smoke and get stoned.¹⁰⁹ Older theaters and films were no longer sites of middle-class sanctioned fun.

The Revival of Anti-Kissers

These days, if [you] see a kiss at the cinema, the world shakes. The one sitting next to you says, “How can you do such a thing!” A censor [here], a frightening person [there]. You feel people piling onto you. “Haram!” [they say]. They’ve scared us.¹¹⁰

Three decades after *Abi fawq al-Shagara* splashed its way into cult-film status, the kiss faded from view, but not from discussion. The film’s cult status is sustained by sporadic media

¹⁰⁶ Samir Farid, “Sinima Fadiha Na’am, wa Lakan Limadha?” *Jaridat al-Jumhuriyya*, 30 July 1973 in Yusuf “Salah Abu Sayf,” 398.

¹⁰⁷ This needs to be seen in the wider context of a battle between censorship and freedom of expression raging in Egypt at this time. Yasir Sha’ban, a novelist whose book was banned for including “pornographic” scenes, had already humorously anticipated the reaction in his book, writing, “I will become the talk of the town. I will cause a lot of clamour. Even those who do not read will read me. It will be great, smashing, wild. The important thing is to be part of the frenzy before it’s over.” See Samia Mehrez, *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Muhammad Jamal al-Din and Lina Mazlum, “al-Sihr al-Aswad fi Firash al-Fannanat wa La’ibi al-Kura,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 20 November 1995, 52–53; Nabil Abu Zayd, “Shurtat al-Adab Tusadir al-Aflam,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 11 December 1995, 68–69; “Jarimat al-Isbu’, Haft Jins Jama’i fi Misr al-Jadida,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 18 December 1995, 70–71.

¹⁰⁹ Conversation, 9 April 21, Bab al-Luq, Cairo.

¹¹⁰ ‘Aida Riyad in “Hiwar ma’a Suna’ film *Balash Tubusni*,” YouTube video, Elfasla, accessed 20 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFZwCncX20>. ‘Aida Riyad is a veteran actress who starred in *Balash Tubusni*.

references to its record number of kisses. The film's ban from state television added to its allure as a forbidden delight.

But alongside this continued fascination with the kiss, a reactionary anti-kissing trend brewed. The late 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of "clean cinema," in which depictions of sex and desire became more rigid. In the words of Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "an incessant stream of 'repentant' artists struck Egypt like an earthquake."¹¹¹ At different points in the past two decades, high-profile actresses had announced their refusal to be kissed. Ghada 'Abd al-Razziq explained that the lips "are a place limited to a husband." Nelly Karim abstained from screen kisses in deference to her family. Another actress named Nelly blamed her kissing scenes on youthful heedlessness, refusing them when she became older, and Abir Sabri plainly labeled kissing scenes *haram*.¹¹²

The profoundly gendered nature of who kisses and who does not kiss was glaringly obvious. Male actors confessed to double standards, but remained unapologetic. Comic superstar 'Adil Imam, who had engaged in on-screen kissing, forbade his daughter outright from entering the acting profession because of potential kissing scenes. Likewise, Sa'id Salih said he would allow his daughter to act but only in "respectable" roles, with no kissing. When questioned about his own roles, he quickly jabbed: "I kiss, but I am free [to do so]." In a television interview in the late 2000s, Ahmad al-Saqqa, another popular actor, refused the idea of a female family member engaging in kissing scenes; "I'm a narrow-minded man," he shrugged. He laid the blame directly on the audience: "They are different to how they were in the 1950s and the 1960s."¹¹³

The 1993 comedy *al-Mansi* (The Forgotten) depicts the audience of a film festival as a mob of horny men. "These two days are the Cinema Festival," one character says, "and with these festival films, there are no cuts or edits, and the women are naked, oh boy!" In a now famous scene, men gather at a cinema ticket booth as one character, played by 'Adil Imam, asks of another, played by Muhammad Hinaydi, "Is this film a story or a series of spectacles?" (*al-film da qissa wala manāzir*). The answer is, spectacles: "five spectacles, three in lingerie and two in the nude." Upon hearing this Imam's friend crowd-surfs to the ticket window. Once they enter the cinema hall, the audience is mostly men. One man sits next to Imam, and, unable to contain his excitement asks, "Tell me, will it be thighs or breasts?" The ensuing film turns out not to have the promised spectacles. Imam and his friend protest, "No one is going to take their clothes off!" Imam points to Hinaydi as having duped them all. The crowd attacks Hinaydi.

The advent of clean cinema and with it the notion that "respectable" actresses do not kiss costars alarmed the more "liberal-minded." Critics hissed at 'Adil Imam's double standards regarding his daughter, even calling him a "terrorist" for his views that kissing should only be included if necessary.¹¹⁴ In 2002, the Lebanese magazine *al-Adab* (Literary Magazine) published an issue on censorship, emblazoning their front cover with an image of actors kissing, with a red X on the lips (Fig. 11).¹¹⁵ The image is a film still from the 1928 film *Qubla fi-l-Sahra*

¹¹¹ Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "'Repentant' Artists in Egypt: Debating Gender, Performing Arts and Religion," *Contemporary Islam* 2, no. 3 (2008): 191–210.

¹¹² "Fannanat Rafadna al-Qubulat fi-l-Tamthil," *Fi-l fan*, <https://www.filfan.com/galleries/24273>, 29 July 2019 (accessed 10 May 2023); "Musarha Hurra, Ghada 'Abd al-Razziq: Mish bahib al-bus wa ma bahibish fath al-Susta w-al-taf'is fi-l-aflam" YouTube video, TeN TV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ep9Dko40Ew (accessed 10 May 2023); "Wahid min al-Nas, al-Fannana Nilli, Rafad al-Qubulat, 'al-Bus', fi-l Sinima ba'd al-Murahqa," YouTube video, *Al Hayah TV Network*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCjOzuFJ5oU> (accessed 10 May 2023); 'Abir Sabri: al-Qubulat fi-l Aflam Haram, *al-Shorouk News*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cda-te=06052020&id=7725c601-2092-41b1-aefc-d37467ffd250> (accessed 10 May 2023).

¹¹³ "Ahmad Saqqa wa Hani Salama wa Adil Imam wa Sa'id Salih Yarfudun al-Tamthil li Banatihim bi Sabab al-Qubulat," YouTube video, Rooka20000, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frG8jLdvRF0> (accessed 10 May 2023).

¹¹⁴ "Adil Imam: Arfud Ihtiraf Ibnati al-Tamthil Khawfan min al-Taqlil," *alwatanvoice*, 27 June 2010, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2010/06/27/150652.html> (accessed 10 May 2023).

¹¹⁵ Hassan 'Attiya, "al-Raqaba 'ala al-Ibda' al-Fanni," *al-Adab*, November/December 2002, 47–52.



Figure 11. *Al-Adab*, November/December 2002.

under which lay the question: “Who cuts the Egyptian cinema’s most beautiful kisses?” In one of the articles, Husayn ‘Attiya claims that the flourishing “spirit of revolutionary change,” which “had pushed women to remove the hijab and to struggle to enter university,” had in recent years been stalled by a combination of changes in Egypt and influences from outside the country. “Money is the primary social mover.” ‘Attiya complains that “half the population are devoid of thinking” and that “dance scenes are removed from old films, and the censors cut the most famous and the finest of kisses in the Egyptian cinema, between ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Lubna ‘Abd al-Aziz.”¹¹⁶ Critics often bundled their pro-kissing stance together with attacks on Egypt’s shift toward a more Gulf-inspired form of conservative Islam. The motif continued to animate discussion about what it means to be modern, and what art meant in Egypt in an increasingly polarized context. In 1999, *Ruz al-Yusuf* used the kiss as a gateway to discuss artistic expression in a context of rising social conservatism.¹¹⁷

As the fight raged between the pro- and anti-kiss factions, *Abi fawq al-Shagara* was never far from the debate. The film was even at the center of a controversy in 2013 around a purported attempt by the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood to delete its kisses. In this political context and the wider debates about Islam’s role in society, the kiss again became a linchpin for wider cultural battles centered around freedom of expression. Video and dance artists raced to defend the screen kiss. Inspired by the last scene in Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), Lara Al-Sennawi knitted together Egyptian film kisses in a short film that was screened as part of the TransDance Festival in 2013. The film, titled *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso (Tribute to Classical Egyptian Cinema)*, included an abstract that made its position clear: “In the midst of a growing social and religious oppression in Egypt, something as simple as an on-screen kiss has become taboo. This is a ‘short trip down memory lane’ to a time when love was not frowned upon and on-screen kisses were greeted with applause.” Al-Sennawi explained in an interview that the film

was a way of responding to the Muslim Brothers who were in power at that time and who were trying to censor love scenes in Egyptian films. . . . Film classics are often

¹¹⁶ The author is referring to *al-Wisada al-Khaliya* (The Empty Pillow; directed by Salah Abu Sayf, 1957).

¹¹⁷ Tariq al-Shinnawi, “Qublat al-Fannanat wa Hikayat al-Shaykh Abu al-‘Ayun,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 16 July 1999, 55–57. Throughout the 1990s, *Ruz al-Yusuf*, a state-run magazine, routinely horrified and titillated readers with stories of sexual scandals.

shown on television. Children often watch them with their parents. There is no immoral sense in them. It is quite normal to express love in film and in society.¹¹⁸

Adham Hafiz, the dance artist who ran the festival, elaborated on the importance of Al-Sennawi's film. For him, "the sight of the kissing actors produces questions on memory, identity, fear and desires." He asks: "Can we present this in Egypt now? What happens when a collage of kisses is screened in an Arab capital, almost a century after the production of those kissing scenes? What did we forget, what were we told to forget, what do we care to remember?"¹¹⁹

Hafiz's queries about memory and desire provide a nuanced entry point for investigating the politics of remembering the kiss. On-screen intimacy has always been, as I have demonstrated, a topic of debate, and continued to be so even after the Muslim Brotherhood were removed from the political scene. In 2018, for example, the film *Balash Tubusni* (Kiss Me Not) dealt head-on with the issue of the screen kiss, poking fun at the rising trend of "repentant" actresses who refused to perform intimate scenes.

Balash Tubusni revolves around Tamir, a film director struggling to convince an actress, Fagr, previously known for her "seduction" roles, to follow the script and kiss her costar. When during a kissing scene the call to prayer breaks out, Fagr declares it a "sign from God" and "repents" from her seductive roles. The film cleverly patches together a mosaic of visual images to satirize the contradictions at play in the production and consumption of kissing scenes. Scenes from old Egyptian films play a key role in lampooning the new clean cinema trend and the ever-changing and confusing boundaries around what is and is not forbidden. In one scene, Fagr flits from gushing over Hind Rustum, Egypt's Marilyn Monroe ("I like Hind Rustum, and want to be like her . . . Hind Rustum used to perform seductive scenes, and wore swimming suits and lingerie and everything and people loved her and still love her and watch her") to declaring respect for tradition ("At the end of the day, we are an Eastern society, we have our own traditions and ways. What happens abroad cannot happen here. I can perform seduction, but within limits. . . . Bikini, no! I can't wear a bikini. But I'll wear a one-piece"). Scenes from older Egyptian films, including scenes with Hind Rustum, are used to dramatize new attitudes and lampoon the "shifting winds" and contradictions that Fagr represents.

The film attempts to dissolve the shame around kissing scenes by placing two superstar directors, Muhammad Khan and Khayri Bishara, in cameo roles to inject the film with humor and old-school directorial tips. "Art is art!" declares Khan. "Is a kiss shameful?" Bishara likewise intones, "A kiss is like eating and drinking, and the air we breathe. There's nothing wrong with it. It's an expression of love." Tamir's mother in the film, of the same generation as the superstar directors, appeals to the past and more reasonable attitudes toward kissing scenes, "Why are people so upset about a kiss? Those same people who protest a kiss are very happy when they watch a scene of a man hitting his wife. The kiss is lovely, and romantic, and a blessing. People need to be kissed." His mother also links the cinematic kiss to her own sexual pleasure, by recounting her first "film kiss" (*busit aflam*):

When I was young, we lived downtown. I used to pass by the cinemas and look at the film posters. . . . One day I saw a large poster of Su'ad Husni, [advertising] the film *Khalli Balak Min Zuzu*. . . . I mustered up the courage and finally saw the film. Later when I got engaged to Tamir's father, I asked him, "Have you seen *Khalli Balak min Zuzu*?" He said no. . . . When we got married, I insisted that he see the film. So I made some food, lit

¹¹⁸ al-Sennawi quoted in Ramsay Burt, *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 185–86.

¹¹⁹ Hafiz quoted in Burt, *Ungoverning Dance*, 186. See also the interview with Adham Hafiz in "The Personal and the Political All at Once: Adham Hafez in conversation with Suzy Halajian," *Ibraaz*, 25 February 2016, <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/182> (accessed 10 May 2023).

some candles, and rented the film from the nearby video club. We sat and watched the film, then the kissing scene between Husayn Fahmi and Su'ad Hosni came on. Oh, what a kiss! (*kanit hittat busa*). That was the first time in my life I was given a film kiss.

The film is successful in satirizing clean cinema's contradictions, and especially pointing to the hypocrisy of accepting violence against women's bodies, but it misses an opportunity to question the problematic nostalgia in which that satire is situated.¹²⁰ The film shows no respect for Fagr's choice, nor does it take seriously the ruthless social judgment that actresses are disproportionately subjected to, whether they kiss or do not kiss. *Balash Tubusni* discounts women's agency and does not interrogate the wider commercial culture that sacrifices actresses to the currents of morality and the broader misogyny that besets women in the film industry. Ultimately the film celebrates liberal attitudes to intimate scenes that in reality have only commercially benefited film companies and only socially benefited men. In this sense, the film mistakes the commodification of women for their liberation. There are hints of sympathy for Fagr, but these are overshadowed by the overall film's obsession with attacking "repentant" artists and its broader liberal angst about the neo-Islamization of the public sphere.

Simply blaming the rise of Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s (and the power of petrodollars that often is linked to it) downplays factors that are closer to home. A focus on Gulf capital lets directors off the hook, and ultimately obscures the fact that the films themselves leave much to be desired. The female characters who transgressed sexually were not upheld as the ideal versions of femininity. They were used to lure in audiences with promises of salacious scenes, but were ultimately thrown under the bus by the film's end. It might be argued that the anti-radical films of the 1960s and 1970s, despite the plentitude of kisses, paved the road for the emergence of the clean cinema discourse of the 1990s.

As I have shown in this article, reactions to kisses and intimate scenes, even in their heyday in the 1960s, were always complicated. The deployment of kisses became associated for many critics with commercial interests and teenage rowdiness and provoked larger debates about audience tastes, lowbrow and highbrow culture, and the quality of films. At the same time, audiences were drawn to intimate scenes, not with awestruck romance as the nostalgics might imagine, but with teenage energy, fun, and loud catcalls. In this type of analysis, the cinema emerges not simply as a collection of film texts to be studied, but as a site of contestation and sociality, where multiple ideas and experiences collided and converged. No doubt, we must tread lightly lest we reinforce nostalgic imaginings of the 1960s as a decade of cultural bliss. It was not, nor were the so-called sexy sixties experienced evenly across the country. There is much work to be done on cinema experiences and perceptions outside the city centers and the urban middle class. But equally, we must be careful not to ignore narratives of leisure and pleasure because they seem to be incongruous with dominant narratives of the period. For many, going to the movies with friends, counting screen kisses, sneaking into adult-only features to watch sex films, and the animated debate around audience tastes formed part of an entire generation's experience of leisure and were very much a part of the 1960s story.

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¹²⁰ Salma Tarzi investigates the violence against women in films in her excellent project. "Yatamana'na Wahuna al-Raghibat," For more information see: <https://www.arabculturefund.org/ar/Projects/6510>.

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