


REVIEW ESSAY

## The Politics of Stardom, Entertainment and Industry: New Studies in Egyptian Cinema History

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Hanan Hammad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022)

Deborah A. Starr, *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020)

Raphael Cormack, *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021)

Since at least the 1970s, Egyptian cinema has animated scholars of the Middle East; a by-product of a cultural turn in the discipline and broader interest in using film as a scholarly source. No doubt, Egypt's rich history of film production—often (and perhaps misleadingly) referred to as the “Hollywood on the Nile”—has encouraged scholars to use its films to examine broader political issues or capture the “mood” of a particular historical moment. Scholarship has mainly focused on films of the post-1952 era, often ones that reflect a definitive ideological bent or didactic message. The early period of cinema in Egypt, from the 1920s to 1940s, is much less studied. The perception of early Egyptian films as mere “imitations” of Hollywood and devoid of blatant political messaging contributed to consigning it to the dustbin of cinema history.

While mostly neglected, a handful of studies have investigated Egypt's early cinema. From the 1980s, a group of historians—including Ahmad al-Hadari and Farida Mar'ī—produced some of the most compelling scholarship on early cinema in Egypt, not only excavating and compiling a vast archive of early cinema artifacts, but also contributing to our understanding of the machinations of cinema in the early period. Later, Andrew Flibbert mapped out a detailed political economy of early cinema, and Walter Armbrust excited a generation of scholars to revisit Egypt's early media landscape. Despite the recognized significance of historical analysis, however, historians have played a relatively minor role in Egyptian cinema studies. Rare are detailed examinations of the exhibition, distribution, and media contexts, detailed analysis of films, constructions of stardom, or appreciation for the broader contexts that enabled cinema and celebrity cultures to flourish. That is, until recently.

In the past three years, two books have been published that take the early period of Egypt's cinema history seriously: Deborah Starr's *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* and Hanan Hammad's *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt*. These publications coincided with the release of Raphael Cormack's *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s*, which, while less interested in cinema, does provide context and background that sharpens our understanding of the rise of cinema in the early twentieth century. Read alongside each other, these books shed significant light on Egypt's early twentieth-century entertainment world, demystifying and unpacking the construction of

early stardom and celebrity, mapping out infrastructures of leisure and the technologies that enabled them, and showing how grounded the cinema and entertainment worlds were in their social, political, and cultural contexts. What is refreshing and exciting about each of these works is the scholarly precision with which the authors deal with their subjects, the alternative archives they delicately peel apart, the transnational networks of people and places they map out that defies sweeping narratives, and the historical context they bring to life.

Starr, Hammad, and Cormack use historic entertainment figures as entryways to grapple with questions of nationhood, transnationalism, gender, race and ethnicity, and religion. Cormack focuses on a constellation of starlets from the early twentieth century, Starr focuses on Togo Mizrahi, one of the most prolific film directors of the 1930s and 1940s, and Hammad centers her study on Layla Murad, the most famous star of her generation. Biography, as Hammad tells us, “can offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and others” (p. 6). By blending history and biography, these books shatter metanarratives and show how broader historical forces shaped their characters’ careers and life trajectories. In doing so, these books are not just biographies, but cultural histories of early twentieth-century Egypt, where ideas of gender, nation, and citizenship were still being negotiated and formulated.

We cannot understand the early film industry in Egypt without exploring the period before its rise. Raphael Cormack’s *Midnight in Cairo* sets this stage, exploring “Cairo’s modern, cosmopolitan nightlife, a scene that was enticing and seductive but also exploitative and dangerous” (p. 9). Cormack’s book, however, is not simply a background for the coming of cinema, but a significant contribution to our understanding of celebrity, gender, and class in the early twentieth century. Chapter by chapter, Cormack takes us into the thick of Cairo’s downtown area, Ezbekiyya, showing us how, over time, a group of women navigated an entertainment world against a backdrop of war, colonialism, and patriarchy, producing a corpus of music and performance that defined an era.

Cormack traces the intimate and professional lives of seven women that, while marginal to the official narratives of the period, reveal the nuances of gender and women’s rights discourses that might otherwise go unattended. Most studies of this early period focus on elite women’s writing—often radiating from the life of Huda Sha‘rawi and her coterie of French-speaking elite friends. Yet, as Cormack convincingly shows, the lives of women on the margins, especially female stars in the public eye, can reveal much of the machinations of patriarchy and class. With flair and literary finesse, *Midnight in Cairo* explores how these women’s lives straddled the forbidden and the permissive, highbrow and lowbrow cultures, and liberation and subjugation. Their lives are a window into society’s anxieties and aspirations, and their successes ebbed and flowed according to the historical and social context. The book tells deeply personal stories and, at times, moving stories of triumph and failure. It follows these women to the heights of stardom and into the pits of public obscurity.

Many of the stars featured in *Midnight in Cairo* traversed the fluid and complex parameters of sex and gender, resisting conventional understandings of womanhood, playing and teasing the boundaries of femininity and masculinity, and shocking and delighting their contemporaries. But even as they powerfully asserted themselves, they were still bound to a stubborn patriarchy and class system that preyed on their vulnerabilities. As Cormack writes of the stage and screen star Fatima Rushdi’s career: “It serves partly as a reminder that no matter how much public visibility women were gaining, and no matter how much power and independence they claimed to have, this was still a world run by men” (p. 170).

*Midnight in Cairo* is literary non-fiction, beautifully written, paced, and structured, a rare thing to behold in our field. Cormack may have shunned the prose of the academy but certainly maintained its rigor. Cormack is sensitive to the constructions of stardom and the way celebrity stories are told and retold, thus contributing to the burgeoning study of stardom in the Arab world. He also contributes to broader questions of methodology. *Midnight in Cairo* is meticulously researched, with Cormack drawing on an extensive

collection of magazines and memoirs. He reads these sources carefully and critically, demonstrating their richness in revealing attitudes about gender and sexuality and the concerns that animated the public's interest.

Economic depression and the emergence of a stuffy discourse on "high theater" meant that, by the 1930s, the world these women inhabited began to crumble. Cinema became the main leisure activity, and many of the women Cormack writes about "began to follow the audiences (and the cash) into the new film industry" (p. 243). Munira al-Mahdiyya, Umm Kulthum, Fatima Rushdi, and 'Aziza Amir ventured into cinema with varying success. But even as the cinema took over, Cormack reminds us that "it still owed something to its musical and theatrical history" (p. 244). As Cormack argues,

Long before moving to Studio Misr and the Mena Road, Egypt's stars learned their craft in Ezbekiyya. They had acted in its theatres, talked and drank in its bars and cafes, danced and sung in its cabarets. The new cinema still carried the old Egyptian entertainment industry in its DNA. (p. 244)

The characters in these books worked and lived at a time when definitions of nationhood were still in flux and, as such, their lives were characterized by a messiness that defied clear clarification. Cormack maps out the post-Ottoman network of entertainment in which people of various ethnicities converged and collided. When the cinema emerged, a sprinkling of trans-Mediterranean film collaborations was thus an understandable by-product. Aziza Amir, one of the cinema stars Cormack focuses on, for example, collaborated on a Turkish and Greek co-production. However, that film, *The Streets of Istanbul*, fell into relative obscurity in accounts of Egyptian cinema, perhaps because it did not conform to what later came to be regarded as an "Egyptian film."

While Cormack hints at the impact of changing political and social discourses on the entertainment world, Deborah Starr explicitly contends with questions of the "national" in early Egyptian cinema. When Togo Mizrahi, one of the most prolific directors of the 1930s and 1940s, began working in Alexandria, the question of what constituted a "national" film industry was a hot topic, and Mizrahi's life and work grappled with questions of identity, religion, and the national in unique ways. In the first major academic study on Mizrahi, Starr brings Mizrahi and his milieu to life, embedding him and his work in the contexts of the 1930s and 1940s.

In her book, Starr begins by presenting a background of Togo Mizrahi. This section is not just a launchpad for the rest of the book, but an essential contribution to the study of early cinema. Here, Starr lays bare the various institutional and structural mechanisms that enabled Mizrahi's entry into cinema and shaped his life. The 1930s and 1940s saw an explosion in film production, as the Egyptian film industry found lucrative markets locally and across the Arab world. World War II, turmoil in Palestine, and rising discontent at home provided the backdrop to this cinematic success and enabled the rise and circulation of more rigid definitions of nationalism, which particularly impacted foreign residents and minorities. Mizrahi—a Jewish Alexandrian with Italian nationality—was caught up in this changing world. Like many of his contemporaries, Mizrahi maintained capitulatory privileges and never held Egyptian nationality. In 1946, news broke that he helped make Zionist films. Perhaps for this and other reasons, Mizrahi occupied a fraught place in Egyptian cinema history and soon disappeared from more conventional studies of early cinema. *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* powerfully makes a case for reinserting him.

While Starr spends two chapters laying out the context—of production, exhibition, and industry—she is restricted by the paucity of primary documents. Togo Mizrahi, ever media shy, left us with very little information about his life. Starr does not, however, let the archival silence detract her. Mizrahi left an incredible corpus of films that Starr, drawing on her strength in literary studies, meticulously analyses to tease out issues of identity, nationalism, and politics in a tumultuous period of Egyptian history. Starr delicately

unravels what makes Togo Mizrahi's films—not merely cheap copies of Hollywood films—products of their time, their milieu, and their network of stars, personalities, and global and local performance traditions, not simply of an auteur. In other words, Starr deftly positions Mizrahi within the context of the rise of cinema in Egypt with a keen eye to how rising nationalism shaped the contours of the early cinema industry.

Starr's film analysis is precise and detailed, paying attention to dialogue, visual codes, and exhibition context. Her close reading of film texts and her engagement with performance and queer theories, as well as her sensitivity to Jewish-Egyptian history, makes for a compelling analysis that should be read by scholars of both early film history globally and those seeking an understanding of how one might read films in Egypt with a new perspective. Her detailed reading, for example, of Mizrahi's film *The Straight Road* is fascinating. She zooms in on brief shots of the Star of David, a directional sign bearing the distance to Palestine, and elements of the script and plot to argue that the film represented "Egyptian Jewish anxieties about the impact of Zionist efforts in British Mandatory Palestine on the Jewish future in Egypt" (p. 108). Whilst perhaps not central to the film at first glance, Starr convincingly argues that, given the context of World War II, the situation in Palestine, and Mizrahi's Jewishness, these codes could not have been mere coincidences.

Starr's major focus in the book is Mizrahi's representation of "pluralistic nationalism" (p. 3). Starr explores how Mizrahi played on and broadened conventional understandings of gender, sexuality, and nationality, ultimately representing a fluidity of identity that resisted categorization. Starr's analysis of Mizrahi's use of farce, humor, and masquerade is especially generative in this regard. For reasons not fully understood, however, Starr deploys the term "Levantine" to better reckon with Mizrahi's exploration of these fluid identities. By Levantine, Starr does not mean "Shami," commonly known as the Arabic equivalent and widely used in Egypt at the time. Starr specifically draws on Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff's theorization of "Levantine" as used in an Israeli academic context. During the 1950s and 1960s, in response to Ashkenazi Zionist fears of "Levantinization," Kahanoff, drawing on a conception of cosmopolitanism in her Egyptian birthplace, re-appropriated the term to critique the homogeneity of the Zionist nation-state project. Starr admits that the term is "intentionally and necessarily vague," and in no way suggests that the term "would have had currency in 1930s Egyptian film criticism – either among Egyptians or the resident minorities or foreigners" (p. 53–54). So, the question is, why use it?

Starr sees "Levantine" as a helpful way of capturing the unruliness and vagueness of "ethno-national and religious" identity and "the inherent performativity of crossing between and among cultures, languages, and communal groups" (p. 23). For Starr, the term helps sidestep the imperial and class implications of "cosmopolitanism" and the rigid boundaries of the nation-state that often frame discussions of this period. According to Starr, Mizrahi's films reflected a "Levantine cinematic idiom" (p. 53), which she argues has three main characteristics: an ethics of co-existence, a pluralist aesthetic, and a performativity of identity. These characteristics come together to critique Egypt's "masquerade of unity" (p. 22). But the question of what makes these characteristics specifically "Levantine" is not fully answered. Perhaps the decision to employ "Levantine" is a disciplinary one, generative in providing a fresh framing of the Jewish experience in Egypt and bringing disparate fields into conversation with each other. Still, its use remains curious from a historical perspective, as it risks lending itself to academic shoehorning of messy and fundamentally unique historical processes and somewhat displaces the Arabic rendition of the term, *Shami*, for a more theoretical understanding unfamiliar to the period and place it is describing.

While one of the most respected directors of his period, by the mid-1940s, personal and political forces came together to push Mizrahi out of Egypt. Personally, Mizrahi's Italian-born wife was not a fan of Egypt, and by the end of the Second World War, it seemed they were already planning to move to Italy permanently. Possible poor health and an economic downturn in the film industry may have influenced his decision to leave. But

by this time, the situation for Jews in Egypt was worsening, and accusations of Zionist collaboration abounded. As mentioned above, rumors circulated in 1946 that Mizrahi was working on Zionist films. He never made a film in Egypt after that.

In March 1952, months before the Free Officers' military takeover of the country, Mizrahi set sail for Italy. Yet, according to Starr, his influence lived on in many of the films produced in the region, even years after his departure from film production. Whatever one might argue about the disciplinary and theoretical choices in the analysis of his films, Starr's book is generative, opens up a wide range of questions, and convinces readers of Mizrahi's importance in the history of Egyptian cinema; one whose popularity continues until today.

Hammad's book *Unknown Past* intersects with and takes up the mantle where Starr left off. The book is a deep dive into the life, history, and memory of one of the most popular stars in Egyptian and Arab history: Layla Murad. Togo Mizrahi and Layla Murad's lives intersected—they worked together on five films and shared some of the same challenges of being of Jewish background in twentieth-century Egypt. While Mizrahi left Egypt before the coming of the Free Officers, Murad's career extended well into the 1950s, and her gender and unique personal entanglements shaped her life in distinct ways that illuminate structures of patriarchy, the cinema industry, and questions of national loyalty in a postcolonial context.

While Starr brings her literary studies finesse to her analysis of early cinema, Hammad brings a historian's touch. Hammad's background in historical research—her work on industrial sexualities and gender and sexual histories—shines through in the book. Using a corpus of gossip magazines, interviews, and memoirs, Hammad brilliantly maps out the networks of political and patriarchal power that enabled Layla Murad's rise and fall. Like any excellent biography, Hammad uses Layla Murad's "story as a prism through which to retell the history of Egyptian culture and politics, while examining the role of female stars and the double standards and social expectations they were subject to" (p. 3). *Unknown Past* is one of the best cultural histories of Egypt to emerge in the past decade.

Certainly, Layla Murad's life is fitting for exploring the history of twentieth-century Egypt. Murad rose to fame in the emerging film industry, her singing background an advantage as musicals dominated film production. She basked in the glories of the 1940s "golden era," sitting atop a star system beloved across the Middle East and beyond. Her love life and domestic troubles also provided juicy material for the gossip magazine industry and their ever-enraptured readership, illuminating popular ideas of gender, sex, and relationships. It was not until the late 1950s that Murad's fortunes took a turn for the worse. Her affair with a married military man, to whom she fell pregnant and had a secret child, exposed her precarity as a woman of Jewish background in a quickly changing landscape. Hammad picks apart these episodes delicately and slowly, steadily examining them from multiple angles and various perspectives, then zooming out to expose greater cultural and political patterns and forces at play.

While attentive to structural forces, Hammad does not negate Murad's agency. Murad was vulnerable in many ways, but she also continued to work in an industry that perpetuated patriarchal social structures (through, for example, its "virginity industry" productions) and starred in roles that gave credence to "male anxieties over women's sexuality in the age of women's liberation" (p. 71). Murad made choices and worked hard to achieve commercial and financial success. She was not a mere victim of tabloid media but understood its power, using it to shape her public persona and sustain interest in her film products and brand. In this way, Hammad's book (much like Cormack's) is also a profound investigation into the constructions of stardom and celebrity over time.

Whereas Starr ends more or less with Mizrahi's departure from Egypt (with a final chapter reflecting on his legacy), Hammad continues well into the 1950s, tracing Murad's entanglements with the military establishment and the new era of postcolonial nation-building. Like many other stars of the period, Murad quickly jumped on the revolutionary bandwagon, lending her voice and fame to legitimize the new political order. However, these



relationships came at a cost. Hammad employs the concept of the *shilla*, “a network of personal loyalties and a web of relationships,” to think through the entertainment world’s relationship with the military junta in the 1950s and 1960s and the way stars could fall victim to it (p. 188). In fine detail, she pieces together how personal favors and the personal interests of a clique of powerful men impacted the life of Layla Murad. Hammad’s interventions here mark an essential contribution to the broader question of celebrity endorsement that became a feature of political life in Egypt from 1952.

One of the central questions for Hammad is why Murad fell so rapidly from the limelight. Hammad convincingly argues that her relationship with a military man and her position as a single mother complicated her life and rendered her untouchable in the film industry. Hammad is clear, “the Nasserist state’s personal patronage networks brought an untimely end to Layla’s cinematic career” (p. 190). While politics may have played a role in her fading stardom, Layla perhaps also suffered from that other patriarchal blow that often hits female stars: ageism. By 1956, Layla was nearing 40, and many of her colleagues in the industry met similar fates. Slowly their names dropped from credits as a new corpus of stars rose to the top: Faten Hamama, Shadia, and Hind Rustom, to name a few. An exception is perhaps Tahia Carioca, who, despite her relationship with a Free Officer and imprisonment for suspected communism, continued to thrive in Egyptian cinema for reasons far beyond the parameters of this review.

But no doubt, and as Hammad shows, Murad’s challenges were also uniquely tied to her Jewishness and her status as the single mother of a child the father refused to acknowledge, a particularly precarious position for any woman to have in the Egyptian legal system. Even after she converted to Islam, Layla Murad’s Jewishness was a point of fascination and allure, but it also hung over her career and life as a potential accusation. No other actress of her caliber had to deal with continued questions of national loyalty. In the months after the Free Officers came to power, rumors circulated that she had visited and donated money to Israel. Without any evidence, the Syrian government banned Murad’s films and songs. This ban was a significant blow considering Syria and Lebanon generated almost twenty percent of the Egyptian film market in the Arab world. While investigations by the Egyptian intelligence apparatus resulted in her exoneration, the rumor resulted in lost film opportunities and exposed the fragility of celebrityhood. The rumor also reveals how Layla Murad became a vessel through which critics and states like Syria made claims about Arabness and loyalty alongside domestic and international point scoring.

Hammad does not end the story with Layla Murad’s death but instead continues on to explore how Egyptians and others remember her. As Hammad shows, Layla Murad became a symbol upon which Egyptians pinned their anxieties and aspirations, constructed rosy pictures of past cosmopolitanism, or commented on national loyalty. As Hammad writes, “The ever-changing ways in which Egyptians tell Layla Murad’s story illuminate how Egyptians’ understanding of their identity has changed over time, partly owing to the prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab nationalism, and the Islamization of Egyptian society against the backdrop of state security and neoliberal policies” (p. 194).

To read *Unknown Past* is to swim in a glistering sea of historical sources, rumor, and gossip, and to historically engage with stories of romance and heartbreak and unpack broader political events and the politics of memory. Like Cormack, Hammad’s use of gossip magazines is a refreshing methodological approach that allows for a renewed appreciation of Layla Murad’s role in cinema history and illuminates ever-changing and ever-fragile ideas around gender, religion, nation, and memory.

In short, the three books reviewed here are the result of meticulous historical study and map out the production, distribution, exhibition, and discursive contexts of the early cinema and entertainment worlds in new and exciting ways. These books are particularly significant because they traverse the parameters of cinema studies to offer new insights into the role of cinema, filmmakers, and stardom in Egypt’s broader cultural and political history. In this way, these books are not just about entertainers; they are histories of gender, sexuality,

and identity in twentieth-century Egypt. Their interdisciplinary modes of analysis, their resistance to meta-narratives, and their unique use of sources make them essential reading for all Middle East historians and scholars and blueprints for how one might write about the twentieth century.

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