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# Nationalism and Otherness

## *The representation of Islamic fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema*

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on the representation of Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary Egyptian films. It aims to go beyond orientalism-based studies consumed with analysing the West's representation of, and thus power over, the East. The article problematizes discourses examining fundamentalism's role as the West's Other and the source of its identity by analysing the complicated political role that fundamentalism plays in Egypt as an 'Islamic' democracy. Islamic fundamentalism is explored as an Other in Egyptian cinema that is used as a tool for strengthening Egyptian national identity. The article thus reveals the cultural tensions and power struggles present within Egypt as a nation caught between modernity and extremism. The article's highlighting of the processes of Otherness within the 'East' itself reveals the limitation of the idea of an East/West dichotomy.

**KEYWORDS** *Arab cinema, Edward Said, Egypt, film, Islam, Islamism, national identity, orientalism*

### **Introduction: fundamentalism, representation and myth<sup>1</sup>**

The notion 'Arab' has become a synonym often for Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary culture, from films to social theory. The events of September 11, 2001, the War on Iraq and the conflict in Palestine have aided in linking Islamic fundamentalism with terrorism, and in turn positioning fundamentalism as an essential anti-western enemy. Islamic fundamentalism has been perceived and represented in the context of several myths based on an East/West binary. Perhaps most famously, Islamic fundamentalism has been invoked by theorists such as Samuel Huntington (1996) to indicate a clash between the cultures of the West and those of the East. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism has been conflated often with Islam and the Middle East in general. This stance has generated significant critiques of those perpetuating myths about Islam,



fundamentalism and the Middle East. Most notably, Fred Halliday (1995) has argued against the placing of Islam as a monolithic force poised against the West. He has criticized the construction of the West itself as a homogeneous entity that is necessarily oppositional to a threatening Islam. Halliday argues against stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs, pointing out their contradiction: the Muslim/Arab Other is at once sensual and hedonistic, militant and passive.

One of the most fertile arenas for such myths is Hollywood. Surveying Hollywood films over the last two-and-a-half decades, we find that several films often engage in representing Arabs as ruthless, faceless Islamic fundamentalist killers. Islamic fundamentalists are reduced to terrorists and therefore dehumanized. There is often no distinction between the notions 'Arab', 'Muslim' or 'Islamic fundamentalist'. This mythical Other is perceived usually as an 'enemy' in a battle of good versus evil, 'us against them'. Thus fundamentalism has been looked at as a symptom of the Otherness of the Arab world, rather than as a 'problem' within it. The other side of this construction is that of the United States as a nation. In contrast to the degeneracy of the Arab/Muslim/fundamentalist Other, in Hollywood the US stands superior, morally right and unbeatable.

There have been attempts at addressing this cinematic essentialism of the Arab/Muslim world and its representation. The most well-known work in this area is that of Jack Shaheen (1984, 1997, 2001), whose books analyse the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood as well as on American television. Shaheen's work is informed by a cultural imperialism perspective – as expressed by numerous scholars such as Schiller (1973), Smith (1987), Tomlinson (1991) and Tunstall (1977) – which locates the relationship of the West to the East as one of dominance. More recently, Sardar and Davies have referred to the representation of Muslims in Hollywood and American television programmes to discuss the position of the US as a 'hyperpower' (2003: vi) whose narratives export stereotypes about Others worldwide but whose alternative cultural products are submerged in this mainstream discourse.

Studies on the representation of Islam in western cinema have relied often on Said's (1978) discourse on orientalism as a theoretical basis. Said's discourse is useful for understanding the power relations between the Orient and the Occident. Said looks at orientalism as a multifaceted discourse characterized by four major ideas, which he calls 'dogmas of Orientalism'. First, there is an absolute and systematic difference between the Orient (irrational, undeveloped, inferior) and the West (rational, developed, superior). The West is not only defined as the diametrical opposite of the East, but also as its protector and its carer. Second, abstractions about the Orient are preferable to direct evidence. Orientalism has lumped the non-West into one large entity, disregarding the vast differences among non-western cultures in terms of religion, social structure and values, thereby creating a fictional monolithic Orient. Third, the Orient is



eternal, uniform, incapable of defining itself, therefore a generalized western vocabulary to describe the Orient is 'scientifically objective' (Said, 1978: 301). This is another way in which the West attempts to justify its hegemony over the East. Finally, the Orient is something to be feared or controlled. Said states that the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is that of domination and hegemony and it 'is hegemony . . . that gives Orientalism . . . durability and strength' (Said, 1978: 7).

While Said's work on Orientalism is useful for analysing western discourse on the East, one of its pitfalls is that denies the Orient's capability to represent itself and Others too. Halliday (1995) complements his critique of 'western' myths about 'Islam' with one of the myths generated by 'Islam' itself. Halliday argues that the Middle East is as much responsible for perpetuating myths as the 'West' is. Halliday warns about the existence of what he calls 'Eastoxification': 'the uncritical reproduction of myths about the region in the name of anti-imperialism' (1995: 214). The ability of the 'East' to produce discourse thus complicates Said's position on Orientalism, which he describes as being characterized by how 'the . . . [orientalist] *writes* about, whereas the [Oriental] is *written* about' (Said, 1978: 308; emphasis in original). 'Writing' refers to how it is the West that creates discourse about the East, not vice versa. Thus the Orient is constructed as a silent Other, an object that is incapable of defining or representing itself and therefore that is in need of western subjectivity. In line with Halliday's critique, this article aims to problematize Said's views on orientalism (and the massive body of work based on it) by presenting the argument that when the Orient itself takes part in the process of Othering, the Orient becomes more than 'almost a European invention' (Said, 1978: 1). Moreover, the article aims to highlight how the Orient's participation in Othering is a manifestation of the existence of power struggles *within* the East, which are often overlooked in arguments consumed by analysing the West's outlook on the Orient.

To achieve this, the article analyses the representation of Islamic fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema, the biggest cinema industry in the Middle East. Thus the article departs from familiar discourse on fundamentalism and its representation – discourse based on western representations – into analysing the position of fundamentalism in a cultural product or industry outside of the West. The article argues that Islamic fundamentalism in this cinema is used as a tool validating Egyptian national identity and agendas. This can be seen through Egyptian films' representation of Islamic fundamentalism as the Other. In this sense, the article aims at transcending notions of an East/West binary by illustrating how fundamentalism is not only an 'enemy' in the West, but also in the 'East'. Moreover, fundamentalism is a tool for strengthening national identity in Egyptian cinema, not just in Hollywood.

Benedict Anderson (1983) has stressed the centrality of the role of communicative space in the process of nation formation. Hobsbawm



(1990) adds to this argument that communication functions not only in the creation of a nation, but also in maintaining it. In this sense, cinema can be regarded as a space for the creation and maintenance of an Egyptian imagined community whose members perceive themselves as a coherent community with a secure shared identity and sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983). Islamic fundamentalism is made to stand outside this imagined community, at the same time consolidating its sense of belonging by being a common threat. Islamic fundamentalism, then, is an example of the tension between the cultural singularity invoked by Egyptian nationalism and the reality that the Egyptian nation is in fact plural and diverse (Hobsbawm, 1990). Egyptian cinema uses fundamentalism to validate the Egyptian national identity, an identity that assumes the superiority of the inside over the outside, the familiar over the different. As Balibar puts it, 'the construction of identity is not an imaginary process but a *processing of the imaginary*' (1995: 187, emphasis in original). And the 'idea of nation is inseparable from its narration' (Bennington, 1990: 132). Cinema, then, is an example of what Hobsbawm (1990) calls 'invented traditions': national myths and symbols that bind a nation together, yet that are an official rather than a populist creation. This article argues that Egyptian cinema only narrates the Egyptian government's story of the nation, where the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as an oppositional force has necessitated the validation of 'a felt need for a rooted, bounded, whole and authentic identity' (Morley and Robins, 1990: 19). It then highlights how Islamic fundamentalism is constructed as an artificial entity vis-à-vis the ideological construction of the Egyptian nation as natural. Thus, the representation of Islamic fundamentalism in this cinema seems to follow the classical view of Otherness as telling us more about 'us' than it does about 'them'.

The article uses the term 'Islamic fundamentalism' to refer to 'a diverse set of competing political opinions held within the Muslim community' (Ehteshami, 1997: 179). Despite the problematic nature of the term, its use here emanates from the fact that other terms (Islamists, extremists, fanatics, etc.) are no less damaging and also carry their own complications. Thus the article uses 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the political sense, to refer to groups that use Islam as a basis to achieve political power.

### **Islamic fundamentalism in the Egyptian context**

Ehteshami argues that during the post-colonial period, many Muslim states have been faced with economic and social problems that have required them to 'withdraw from the public sphere and in doing so' to create 'a political space that the Islamists have been quick to exploit and occupy' (1997: 188). The history of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt stretches as far back as 1928, when the Muslim Brotherhood was established. As well as aiming at moral, social and economic reform, the Muslim



Brotherhood aimed to eliminate the British (foreign) influence on Egypt and ultimately to establish a Muslim polity. This stance resulted in various clashes with the Egyptian government, with the Brotherhood's declaration of a *jihad* against foreign influence on Egypt in 1951 (Hiro, 1988) and its attempt to assassinate President Nasser in 1954. Nasser eventually executed the Brotherhood's leader, Sayyid Qutb, in 1966.

The following year, Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt regarded the Six Day War defeat as holy punishment; this defeat had drawn a mass of Egyptians also towards fundamentalism for solace (Hammoud, 1998). This resulted in a slight relaxation of government control over fundamentalists, culminating with Anwar Sadat's institutionalization of Islam as a source of legislation in 1971 after allowing fundamentalists to operate freely and publicly. However, this did not prevent the Islamic Liberation Group from trying to overthrow Sadat's regime in 1974. Consequently, Sadat refused to recognize any fundamentalist groups as political parties in the parliamentary poll in 1976. The Camp David Accords two years later catalysed further anti-Sadat sentiment (Ayubi, 1982) and Sadat's signing of a treaty with Israel in 1979 led to his assassination by another fundamentalist group, Tanzim al-Jihad, in 1981. President Mubarak continued with governmental non-recognition of the right of Islamic fundamentalist groups to political representation, which led to fundamentalist groups operating independently of the government in the 1990s. After an attack by fundamentalists on Coptic Christians in Asyut in 1992, Mubarak introduced the death penalty for membership of terrorist organizations. The bombing of the World Trade Center by supporters of the Egyptian sheikh, Omar Abdul Rahman, the following year led to Mubarak's labelling of fundamentalists as international terrorists (Faksh, 1997). The same year saw the release of the first Egyptian film representing Islamic fundamentalists, *Terrorism and Barbecue* (Sherif Arafa, 1993). Since 1993, the Egyptian government has used cinema as a tool for combating the spread of Islamic fundamentalism; seven Egyptian popular feature films have been produced that address the 'problem' of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt, which are discussed in this article.

### **Islamic fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema: the Other within**

If we are to accept that the nation is a construct of 'pastness' (Wallerstein, 1991), then the complication in the portrayal of Egypt in film is that it seems to advocate a selective memory of the nation's past. Egypt is unique in the Arab world because, perhaps more than other Arab countries, it has a complex identity. It combines Asian with African, Muslim with Pharaonic and Arab (Abdullah, 2000). None of those identities can be seen as the 'true' identity of Egypt, yet Egyptian nationalism is built upon a mixture of all of these identities, although in different proportions. Thus



while Islam may be considered by the majority of Egyptians to be their primary identification, the official discourse on Islam has tended to ignore the contribution of Islamic fundamentalist groups to the 'invention' of the Egyptian nation (rallying against the British in the 1920s) and, more generally, to marginalize the role of religion in Egyptian national identity. Balibar argues that when national identity begins to integrate religious identity, it ends up replacing it, forcing it to become 'nationalized' (1991: 95). This is because there is a conflict between nation and religion over the same principles that cement a religious community and a national one (for example, love, respect, sacrifice, fear). Balibar argues that national ideology transfers those principles from religious affiliation onto its 'ideal signifiers' (1991: 95) (such as the name of the nation; thus 'Egypt' would replace 'Islam'). Therefore it is understandable that a feeling of malaise may be generated among those minorities who still consider their only affiliation to be religion.

The analysis of the representation of fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema illustrates this tension in Egyptian national politics, where Egypt is caught between being moderately Islamic and fighting against a subversive and strong political force that is fundamentalism. Egypt as an official entity sees Islam as 'good', but so does it see other religions; it does not necessarily argue for East/West harmony but it calls for the appropriation of 'good' elements from the West. It supports modernity and condemns extremism while remaining in the realm of tradition.

Smith (1991) points out that usually nations are not invented (i.e. they do not just 'happen' ahistorically), but are a matter of reconstructing existing and arriving ethnic and religious groups. These factors complicate the existence of a modern Egyptian nation, pointing out the need to integrate minorities into the core. However, the films seem to prefer a selective integration, celebrating the nationalism of the Copts while portraying Islamic fundamentalists as intolerant of people from other religions. Although nationalist, Egypt's regime is not entirely secular, as it relies on Islam as one source of jurisdiction despite its large non-Muslim minority (Al-Ahsan, 1992). This use of Islam is an 'attempt to use traditional regulations as markers of communal identity and not as part of a broader program for instruments for the totalistic reconstruction of society' (Eisenstadt, 1999: 151). Eisenstadt sees this as one of the reasons behind the clashes between Islamic fundamentalists and the government. This is expressed in *The Terrorist* (Nader Galal, 1994), where the Islamic fundamentalist Ali's dream is to establish a purely fundamentalist state excluding any Christians or non-fundamentalist Muslim 'infidels'. *The Terrorist* puts this point across in a conversation between Ali and the Christian, Hani. Not knowing Hani's religion, Ali expresses his utopian views. When Ali later finds out that Hani is a Christian, he is shown to be shocked as he had always perceived Hani as a 'good' person. The film tries to deconstruct the fundamentalist ideal world and even collapse it. It focuses on



how the fundamentalists themselves construct ‘boundaries between the “pure” inside and the “polluted” outside, as well as their self-perception as the “elect”’; this is described by Eisenstadt as ‘utopian sectarianism’ (1999: 90). In this light, the fundamentalist identity can be seen as intolerant towards those who are different and thus fundamentalists are represented as a threat to national unity.

West argues that the propagation of essentialist notions of ‘homogeneous national communities’ and ‘positive images’ (1995: 161) is a means by which the authoritarian élite repress their heterogeneous populations. Thus nationalism, as advocated in the Egyptian films, is a form of hegemony. Balibar (1995) sees this hegemony as creating a conflict for the ‘non-national’, forcing them to make a choice between their competing belongings, thereby implying that those belongings cannot coexist. Balibar (1991) also argues that nationalism is an ideology built upon the symbolic difference between ourselves and foreigners, be they inside or outside. However, the concept of ‘nation’ as such is problematic, for it threatens to erase the pasts of those within it, forcing them to cling on to those pasts. By acting as a vehicle to strengthen national identity (alongside other vehicles such as ethnicity, language and religion), the films add to that threat by naturalizing the nation that they represent – in other words, by essentializing it.

The portrayal of fundamentalism in the films is in line with the way that Islamic fundamentalism is viewed by the Egyptian government as a threat to nationalism and democracy. For example, one film explicitly portrays the Egyptian government jailing Islamic fundamentalists; *Nasser: The Story of a Man, a Story of a Nation* (Anwar Kawadri, 1998) depicts the way in which President Nasser imprisoned his Islamic fundamentalist opponents in the 1950s after they conspired against him. The way that fundamentalists are treated at present is also represented in one of the films, *Birds of Darkness* (Sherif Arafa, 1995), which depicts the government’s arrest and imprisonment of an Islamic fundamentalist political activist. In such films, fundamentalists are contrasted with the image of the government, which is portrayed as being ‘good’. However, this does not negate the existence of government criticism; *Terrorism and Barbecue* criticizes the malfunctioning of government services. But at the same time the film subtly blames Islamic fundamentalists for this malfunctioning through the depiction of an Islamic fundamentalist civil servant, Rashad, who spends his day at the office praying instead of working. The representation of Islamic fundamentalists in Egyptian cinema can be analysed along the lines of several themes that have emerged from the films. These can be summarized as depicting both the internal (psychological distress, sexual repression) and external (corruption, terrorism) characteristics of the fundamentalist.



**Fundamentalism as artifice: moral and political corruption**

One way in which fundamentalists are portrayed is as corrupt and hypocritical. This hypocrisy can be seen on several levels. First, fundamentalists are portrayed as hypocritical in relation to the West. *Hello America* (Nader Galal, 2000) is a film that opposes American ideology by demonizing the US as a land of crime and immorality. The film represents the experience of a naive Egyptian man, Bikhit, who is lured out of Egypt by the chance to work in the US. However, his experiences in the US are so negative that he decides to go back home for good. For not only does Bikhit experience discrimination and witness racism, he also becomes involved in an incident illustrating America's indifference towards the Middle East. Bikhit gets a chance in the film to meet the American president and decides to utilize that opportunity to make him aware of the Palestine question. But the encounter turns out to be no more than a photo opportunity highlighting the president's 'interest' in and 'care' for the region. This leaves Bikhit in the hands of Egyptian Islamic fundamentalists residing comfortably in the US, who are quick to exploit every occurrence of political indifference in order to attract the Arab masses with statements such as 'America is the great Satan, it lies to its people'. The film then highlights America's corruption but surpasses it by showing that, while the fundamentalists overtly voice their opposition to this corruption, they covertly enjoy the economic and political benefits of this so-called enemy.

This hypocrisy is seen also in *The Other* (Youssef Chahine, 1999). The film revolves around a young Egyptian journalist, Hanan, who falls in love with a half-Egyptian, half-American man, Adam. Adam's mother, Margaret, is an American businesswoman who detests Egypt, yet is engaged in fraudulent business plans that would allow her economic control over the country. She is also obsessed with her son, to whom she turns to provide her with the love and attention that she lacks in her marriage. She opposes his marriage to Hanan and forms an unholy alliance with Hanan's brother, the Islamic fundamentalist Fat'hallah, who also opposes the relationship and promises Margaret to force the couple to divorce. Similarly, Fat'hallah's goal is to control Egypt through the establishment of an Islamic fundamentalist regime. Fat'hallah and Margaret are revealed to be partners, using the internet to communicate and conduct their personal deals as well as illegal arms and immigration deals. This contrasts with Fat'hallah the fundamentalist's preaching against the West.

Second, fundamentalists are shown to be hypocrites in the context of charity and morality. While they emphasize family values, *The Other* sees Fat'hallah setting a trap for his sister in order to separate her from her husband and 'sell' her to one of his friends. While the fundamentalists supposedly collect money from people for charity, we see them using this money to pay for their personal lawsuits in *Birds of Darkness* (Sherif Arafa, 1995), a film depicting Islamic fundamentalist spin-doctoring during the Egyptian parliamentary elections. The film shows the fundamentalists



using *zakat* (Muslim charity) money for the bail of a fundamentalist convicted of corruption. While the fundamentalists preach morals and values, they steal money in *The Terrorist*. Ali, a fundamentalist terrorist hosted by a secular family after being run over by the daughter's car, raids the father's office with the justification that the father is an 'infidel' and takes a sum of money which the father – a medical doctor – had been saving to build a hospital in a needy village.

Third, fundamentalism is portrayed as being hypocritical in its participation in national politics (parliamentary elections). In *Birds of Darkness*, since the Islamic fundamentalists cannot run for parliamentary elections themselves, they back certain 'secular' candidates and exchange favours. The fundamentalist lawyer Ali supports the secular politician Rushdie Khayyal in his campaign and Khayyal wins only after this support. The film shows how Khayyal indulges in parties and women and marries his mistress in order to 'appear' moral in front of his fundamentalist supporters. Moreover, fundamentalists in this political context are both confused and manipulative. Several scenes in *Birds of Darkness* play on these themes. The film is critical of the government. When the secular lawyer Fat'hi is talking to his fundamentalist colleague Ali, he tells him: 'The government is smart. It has left you mosques. Lets you publish books. Hold interviews. All this to prove it is democratic.' However, the film begins with a disclaimer that it is entirely fiction. This self-censorship is linked with Egypt's reliance on a 30-year-long emergency law that allows the president to censor any form of expression prior to publication in the interest of 'national security' and also for arousing religious sensitivities ('Silence in the Nile', 1998).

The major fundamentalist figure in the film is the lawyer, Ali. The film mentions how Ali once tried to sue the Minister of Culture for allowing 'immoral' film posters to be displayed in the streets. Fat'hi, the liberal lawyer, explains how Ali's stunt is merely to advertise the Muslim Brothers. Ali's character is smart, manipulative and calculating, in contrast to the fundamentalist majority in the film who are portrayed as stupid and having no will of their own. Fat'hi arrives at a fundamentalist gathering, walking inbetween two rows of bearded men dressed in white skullcaps and white *gallabiyyas*. He repeats, 'May God separate you', to which they respond 'Amen', parrot fashion, unable to tell right from wrong. The film thus demarcates two kinds of fundamentalists who are nevertheless equally condemned: 'true' fundamentalists, mere blind followers who cannot tell right from wrong; and 'fake' fundamentalists, who are in charge but there merely for economic and political power.

Those in charge are portrayed as putting on an act and not genuinely believing or practising what they overtly do. When Fat'hi first talks to Ali in the film, Ali speaks to him in classical Arabic. Fat'hi tells him to save that for lawsuits, after which Ali speaks in colloquial Arabic. When Fat'hi's client, Samira, a prostitute found innocent after Ali defends her case (a

favour done for Fat'hi, who chose Ali for the defence because the judge is pro-fundamentalist), tries to kiss Ali on the cheek and offers him food to thank him, he quickly responds with 'I take refuge in God' and refusing to eat 'haram' food. Fat'hi reminds him that she is innocent in the eyes of the law, implying that Ali has put his 'beliefs' on hold in his defence of Samira. We later find out that Ali turned to fundamentalism after being a communist because he realized the former would make him more money.

Thus, the world of fundamentalism is one of deceit and contradiction. Although they might be based on Egypt's experience of fundamentalists, the Egyptian films tend to make claims about them that essentialize their identity as an extreme Other. At the same time, the films essentialize the identity of Egypt as a homogeneous, anti-fundamentalist monolith. This raises the question of whose experience of fundamentalism is being depicted. The exclusionary stance that the films adopt suggests that the Egypt we see is the one constructed by the Egyptian government. Thus, despite the existence of government criticism, in the end the films, as in *Terrorism and Barbecue*, present the government's 'national story'.

### **Psychologizing fundamentalism: internal and external oppression**

Islamic fundamentalism is portrayed as one way of dealing with personal psychological crisis. *The Other* reveals how Fat'hi – who is now the fundamentalist Sheikh Fat'hallah – had slept with his sister while they were teenagers and how fundamentalism was the only way in which he could cope with his guilt (she, on the other hand, seems unfazed). The film thus psychologizes fundamentalism as a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. At the same time, it tends to portray fundamentalism as an unreasonable way of dealing with crisis. Fundamentalism is represented not as something emanating from the nature of the primitive Other, i.e. as a situation that one is born into, but as a state of 'becoming'.

This state of becoming can be seen in cases where the Egyptian films represent fundamentalists as terrorists. Terrorism in the films is linked with how the fundamentalists themselves are repressed and thus find refuge in killing. In contrast with the lawyer Ali in *Birds of Darkness*, who has clear political interests, the terrorists in *The Other* and *The Terrorist* have no definite political cause and act on mere personal interest. In *The Other* the fundamentalists are anarchists who do not hesitate to shoot at the Egyptian army or plant bombs in Cairo, killing innocent people. *The Terrorist* goes deeper into portraying the psychological aspects of the Islamic fundamentalist terrorist's life. The film shows how the fundamentalist's desire oscillates between being forbidden and being permissible.

In *The Terrorist*, the fundamentalist Ali is a man with sexual desires, just like everybody else. Ali's character is portrayed as being driven by his fantasies as opposed to his rational mind, and as being highly compliant



to his leader, Ahmad. Ahmad uses Ali's fantasies to lure him into conducting a terrorist act. Ahmad guarantees Ali a wife if he assassinates an anti-fundamentalist liberal government official, a promise that does not materialize. Ali is also convinced by his leader that the 'possession' of the women of 'infidels' is permissible. After Ali is run over by a woman whose non-fundamentalist Muslim family welcomes him into their home while he recovers, he does not hesitate to follow his leader's suggestion and makes a sexual move on the woman's sister, which she blatantly rejects.

Ali is torn between his religious commitment and his voyeurism. In one scene Ali walks down the street behind a woman wearing a tight dress. The camera displays Ali gazing at her bottom, which the camera then zooms in on, giving us Ali's perspective. The camera traces Ali's footsteps into his dark, barren apartment where he sits on a chest full of grenades reading a book about 'the torture and bliss of the grave'. Ali tries his best to cut himself off from worldly pleasures, but finds himself fantasizing about his sexy neighbour who he can hear singing and laughing. Ali peeps from his window at the woman, who wears a low-cut red dress and is on a lower floor in the building opposite him. Ali fantasizes about having sex with the woman – something that disturbs him and drives him to seek refuge in vigorous exercise and prayer.

A similar situation can be found in *Terrorism and Barbecue*. The film revolves around the story of an ordinary man, Ahmad, who goes to a government building for a normal bureaucratic transaction (to transfer his children to a school nearer their home), and in a comedy of errors finds himself involved in an armed anti-governmental protest. Two of the people who also find themselves involved in the protest by chance are a nameless call girl, who was present in the building because she was being questioned by the police on prostitution charges, and an Islamic fundamentalist civil servant, Rashad. The call girl plays a key role in the film, in that she is used to point out Rashad's moral dissolution. With eyes almost popping out at the call girl's breasts, Rashad 'advises' her to 'go back to the right path', saying 'all you need is a long dress and a veil and you will be virtuous'. The veil becomes the passport that will legitimize the fundamentalist's action on his desire. This desire remains forbidden otherwise and all the man can do is stare, causing the call girl to wonder, 'Is this look on your face that of an adviser? And how come you are not advising the rest of the people?'

Islamic fundamentalism is also portrayed as a threat to basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and religion. The opening sequences of two films illustrate this case. *The Terrorist* begins with fundamentalists destroying and burning the contents of a video shop. *Destiny* (Youssef Chahine, 1997), an historical epic about the life of the 12th-century Andalusian philosopher Averroes, also begins with the image of a man being tortured then burned at the stake, condemned a heretic for translating the work of Averroes. Averroes was known for his religious tolerance



and for interpreting the Koran philosophically. The film then moves to directly accusing Islamic fundamentalists of the torture and later portrays them burning Averroes' books. *The Terrorist's* burning of the video shop and *Destiny's* burning of Averroes' books remind us of the Egyptian fundamentalists' success in banning some of the Egyptian writer and Nobel Prizewinner Naguib Mahfouz's books – in particular, *Awlad Haritna* (*Children of our Neighbourhood*) (Moussalli, 1998). The book had been banned under Nasser's regime in 1959 for its allegorical suggestion that God is dead (Allen, 1994), while other works continue to be banned for themes considered offensive to the religious authorities. Islamic fundamentalists attacked Naguib Mahfouz and stabbed him in the neck in 1994 after Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, leader of the Islamic group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, issued a *fatwa* excommunicating him ('Silence in the Nile', 1998). *Destiny* allegorically portrays the fundamentalists killing the singer Marwan and their success in converting the caliph's son Abdullah to fundamentalism and away from the scenes of song and dance. The film's director Youssef Chahine has used Averroes as a portrayal of himself, as Chahine was attacked by fundamentalists after they accused his earlier film *The Emigrant* (1994) of being blasphemous. Chahine's message against the oppression of free expression exerted by fundamentalists is made even blunter in a sentence that appears on the screen just after the film ends: 'Ideas have wings, no one can stop their flight' (Privett, 2004).

### **Essentializing fundamentalism: fundamentalism and Egyptian nationalism**

The films establish the Egyptian nation as a norm through representing non-fundamentalist ordinary people engaging in various daily activities, from going to work to fighting with their spouses, while at the same time enjoying the pleasures of life such as music and alcohol. This norm is then contrasted with the lives of fundamentalists. We do see the fundamentalists performing everyday activities, but even those activities tend to be 'different'. While the 'normal' Egyptian man has dinner with his wife and children (*Terrorism and Barbecue*), the fundamentalist man eats dinner with his four wives, with whom he communicates in a way that he would with animals, not speaking to them but shouting and gesturing at them (*The Terrorist*). While the 'normal' Egyptian woman is free to pursue any career she chooses (as long as it is 'moral'), her fundamentalist sister is confined to working as a secretary or a messenger (*The Terrorist, Birds of Darkness*). In other words, while the modern Egyptian woman is portrayed as being active in her choices, the fundamentalist woman is confined to executing orders made by her male superiors. The use of women here falls into the general view of women as symbols of the nation and the gauge that measures the nation's morality and modernity. By portraying Egyptian women as modern and independent (and not silent – the way



that Islamic fundamentalist women are portrayed) yet respectful of values, the message sent by the films is that about the Egyptian identity being as such. Islamic fundamentalists are used as tools to emphasize this moderate, non-corrupt identity.

This parallels Shapiro's view of films as 'identity stories' which form 'the basis for a nation's coherence' (1989: 47). Shapiro argues that by nature, identity stories must create a boundary between 'us' and 'them' and 'impose a model of identity/difference' (1989: 48). In other words this formulation, with its insistence on margins against centres, constructs difference as a prior condition of identity (Bennington, 1990). A complication of the above model occurs when the Other shares some of the characteristics of 'us'. In the case of Egyptian fundamentalists, the fact that they are Egyptian and Muslim living in the same society as the Egyptian 'us' perplexes their projected difference. Nationalism implies the existence of a social unit that governs itself; however, it is difficult to define this social unit, who is included within it and who is not (Birch, 1989). This is why national integration is a complex concept, namely when nations contain ethnic or other minorities. In this case, there is a danger that national integration can become a form of totalitarianism, which takes us to the point that, what with potential conflicts in the name of national integration, nationalism is in the end an ideal (Kedourie, 1961). Kedourie cites the Middle East as an example of an area where minorities were oppressed by their governments during the post-imperialist period even more than they were under the Ottoman Empire or British mandate. As he puts it, 'nationalism and liberalism, far from being twins, are really antagonistic principles' (Kedourie, 1961: 109).

Thus the films continue to try to demark the two sides, the 'national' and the 'fundamentalist'. This is represented linguistically, with the fundamentalists' communication portrayed as alien. Not only do fundamentalists speak in classical as opposed to colloquial Arabic, they also have their own system of greetings (involving mutual shoulder kissing) and their own greeting phrases (elaborate 'Islamic' greetings). They have a distinct mode of dress (long, white *gallabiyyas* and white skullcaps) and a distinct appearance (with all the men growing beards) (*Terrorism and Barbecue*, *The Terrorist*, *Destiny*, *The Other*). The only way in which this appearance is altered to look like 'ours' is when the fundamentalists want to blend into society in order to execute either a terrorist attack or achieve a political aim. The fundamentalist lawyer Ali in *Birds of Darkness* is bearded but wears a suit, which serves to add to his credibility in his political campaign; the terrorist Ali in *The Terrorist* goes further by shedding his beard and dress (much to his dismay) in order to disappear into society to assassinate an anti-fundamentalist government official.

The films' attempt at showing that the fundamentalists are utterly different recalls Shapiro's argument that 'the claim to distinctiveness has required an energetic denial of otherness within' (1989: 54). This denial is



part of the effort to preserve a national identity that simply does not recognize the fundamentalist's right to be represented. Still, the representation of Islamic fundamentalists in Egyptian cinema – from an Egyptian nationalist point of view – remains heavily reliant on 'metaphors' which attempt to 'fix' Egyptian culture as essentially anti-fundamentalist, thereby denying the dynamic nature of culture itself (Shapiro, 1999; Tehranian, 2000). Shapiro (1999: 112) argues that this 'alleged cultural unity' is one way in which the modern state seeks legitimacy.

## Conclusion

Egyptian cinema uses familiar, 'sensationalist stereotypes' that are 'meant to . . . reinforce a myopic vision of reality' (Esposito, 1999: 220) about Islamic fundamentalists. This 'set of visual signifiers' (Karim, 2000: 68) includes beards, white skullcaps and *gallabiyas* and *chador*-wearing women. The way in which Islamic fundamentalists are depicted as dressing, then, serves in particular to portray them 'as "medieval" in lifestyle and mentality' (Esposito, 1999: 220) in contrast to the civilized 'us'. This constructs fundamentalism as being essentially anti-modern (O'Hagan, 2000) in contrast with the films' portrayal of the Egyptian nation as progressive and modern. This is interesting when one considers that, in addition to their reliance on traditional symbols, fundamentalists utilize modern weapons (computers, guns, etc.) in their supposed fight against modernism (Agha, 2000).

Thus, Egyptian cinema seems to rely on clichés in its representations of 'us' and 'them'. In this sense this cinema can be said to be colonial towards Islamic fundamentalists, constructing the colonized (the fundamentalist) as a degenerate Other in order to justify Egypt's conquest of this figure. In its construction of the fundamentalist as Other, Egyptian cinema seems to project the fundamentalist image as 'a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible' (Bhabha, 1983: 21). This Other is treated using a variety of techniques. One is the reliance on the 'myth of historical origination – racial purity, cultural priority' (Bhabha, 1983: 26). Egyptian cinema presents the fundamentalists as alien and inferior to Egyptian culture, which in turn is imagined as being pure and uniform. The films also rely on the ideas of lack and difference in their portrayal of fundamentalists, the latter lacking 'our' morals and being essentially different from 'us'. At the same time, the cinema's representations of fundamentalists are paradoxical: the fundamentalist is 'mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar and manipulator' (Bhabha, 1983: 34).

In this sense, Egyptian cinema's portrayal of fundamentalists seems to parallel that of Hollywood. But the representation of Islamic fundamentalism in each cinema suggests the difficulty of establishing any concept of a global identity. Although the two cinemas and the two nations (the



US and Egypt) converge in their Othering of Islamic fundamentalists, in doing so they nevertheless resort to different, sometimes clashing, national experiences. This not only applies to the construction of Others, but also to the juxtaposition of Others with the national self. While each side strives to strengthen its national identity, each refers to separate and exclusive memories and collective pasts. Thus we can see that, despite the existence of a 'global' enemy, the nation is not dead. In fact, the existence of this enemy has strengthened the plurality of national identity in a global world (Smith, 1991). At the same time, seeing fundamentalism as an enemy suggests the limits in pluralism within the nation (Mouffe, 1995). Moreover, we can see that the confrontation between Islamic fundamentalism and nationalism stresses how the former is a global force while the latter, although a global phenomenon, is localized. Of course, even a global product such as fundamentalism is localized when given interpretations that are different from those employed by the producers, hence the need to look at fundamentalism in an historical context. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism as seen in the films is contradictory: it is both about emergent and disappearing peripheries, hegemonization and fragmentation, expansion and contraction (Friedman, 1994).

Having spoken about Islamic fundamentalists as defiled subalterns does not imply the necessity of reversing their status into a sanctified one. There is an equal danger in doing so; Chow argues that such a practice belongs to the same symbolic order as representing subalterns as defiled, in that it implies our own 'self-deception as the non-duped' (1994: 146), a desire on our part to seize control. Only when the subaltern speaks can this situation change. But, as Spivak says, 'If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more' (1990: 158).

Both Egyptian cinema and Hollywood use their Others to strengthen their respective national identities. In her analysis of the extremism of Pauline Hansen – the independent Australian MP for Oxley who is infamous for propagating a white, homogenous Australian identity – Ang warns that danger lies in any argument which is too essentializing. For Ang,

the national . . . is not to be defined in terms of 'identity' at all, but as a problematic process; the national is to be defined not in terms of the formulation of a positive, 'common culture' or 'cohesive community' but as the unending, day-to-day hard work of managing and negotiating differences. (2000: 9)

This is the climatic link between Hollywood and the Egyptian films. In their strong national parades, both tend to construct communities devoid of Others. This is where the two sides end up telling different versions of the same subjective 'truth' and where both East and West do not seem to be divided that much after all. Thus, the East tries to exclude a part of itself as an Other, while the West excludes it.



**Note**

1. A version of this article will appear in my forthcoming book *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (I.B. Tauris, 2006).

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