

Festival Review

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A Festival as Mirror: Notes on El Gouna Film Festival



To attend El Gouna is to witness a rare balance between refinement and resistance. Its serenity — the sea, the architecture, the carefully curated spaces — never dulls the urgency of its purpose. On the contrary, the calm amplifies the truth of what is shown.

This is perhaps the festival's greatest achievement: it embodies the paradox of our times. Beauty and brutality coexist; compassion and critique converge. In its programming, its conversations, and its silences, El Gouna reminds us that cinema, at its highest calling, is not an escape from the world but a return to it. Its motto, *Cinema for Humanity*, resonates throughout: a declaration that art must not merely entertain but awaken, connect, and heal.

Guided by an eminent advisory board that includes Youssra, Intishal Al-Timimi, Yousri Nasrallah, Hend Sabry, Tarak Ben Ammar, Abderrahmane Sissako, Forest Whitaker, Hiam Abbas, Marwan Hamed, Margarethe von Trotta, Mohamad Malas, and

Atiq Rahimi, the festival's vision is one of cosmopolitan dialogue and creative excellence. Under the artistic excellence of Marianne Khoury and stewardship of Amr Manzi and the dedicated programming team, El Gouna curates a selection that not only captures the year's finest films but also illuminates the shifting aesthetic and moral sensibilities of world cinema.

Indeed, a glance at its archives confirms an enviable record — nearly all the major prize-winners from Cannes, Venice, and Berlin have found their way into the GFF programme. But the festival's significance extends beyond its curatorial finesse. In the rapidly evolving cinematic landscape of the MENA region, El Gouna represents both a meeting ground and a mirror — a space where the pulse of Arab and African cinema beats in harmony with the broader rhythms of the global film movement.

At its core lies Cine Gouna, the industry platform that nurtures new voices

through mentorship, funding, and networking — a lifeline for young filmmakers seeking to bridge art and industry.

The festival's competitive sections are divided into three primary categories — Feature Narrative, Feature Documentary, and Short Film — each judged by international juries, in addition there are FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) and NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) awards.

FIPRESCI Jury and Competing Films



This year, I had the privilege of serving on the FIPRESCI Jury at the El Gouna Film Festival, alongside Pamela Cohn (USA) and Omnia Adel (Egypt). Our task was both humbling and invigorating: to evaluate debut feature films from Asia, Africa, and South America — works that often arrive without fanfare yet carry within them the trembling pulse of new cinema.

Seven films competed for the FIPRESCI Award: *Always*, *Where the Wind Comes From*, *Shadow Box*, *Happy Birthday*, *Love Imagined*, *Lucky Lu*, and *Fifty Meters*. Each, in its own way, sought to translate lived experience into cinematic language — the universal struggle to see, to feel, to exist through images. The Chinese documentary *Always*, directed by Deming Chen, was ultimately our unanimous choice.

My detailed report on the films in this section is already published in Fipresci International website and may be accessed through the following link : <https://fipresci.org/report/elgouna-2025-ramachandran/>

Egyptian and Regional Highlights

While the competition films reflected diverse geographies, the Egyptian selections in this edition of the El Gouna Film Festival stood out for their maturity and layered engagement with social and moral realities. They continue the evolving tradition of Egyptian cinema — oscillating between poetic realism and moral allegory — and remind us why the nation remains the emotional and aesthetic centre of Arab filmmaking.

***My Father's Scent* — The Return of Memory**

Directed by Mohamed Siam, *My Father's Scent* is a meditation on death, inheritance, and the invisible threads that bind generations. The film unfolds through the eyes of a son after his father's passing — a premise deceptively simple yet charged with emotional density.

The narrative refuses melodrama; instead, it embraces silence, gesture, and atmosphere. The slow rhythm of domestic ritual build a sensory world where grief is experienced not through tears but through space.

Siam transforms his personal memory into a collective one — a cinema of mourning that also questions masculinity, lineage, and moral decay. The title, *My Father's Scent*, becomes a metaphor for the persistence of memory: the way the dead continue to breathe through our senses.

Omar Abou Douma's camera does not accuse or console; it observes. What emerges is a portrait of urban Egypt at once intimate and universal — a place where the ghosts of fathers still guide the moral imagination of sons.

***The Settlement* — The Moral Labyrinth**

Mahmoud Rashad's *The Settlement* storms the moral landscape of modern Egypt. The film's premise becomes a stark allegory of social compromise and corruption.

Rashad's visual grammar is taut and claustrophobic: dimly lit interiors and handheld cameras. It is a world where every gesture carries suspicion, every pause conceals calculation. The dialogue — brisk, sharp, and unsettlingly real — reveals how survival often demands complicity.

What gives *The Settlement* its depth is not merely its social critique but its moral ambivalence. No character is entirely innocent; everyone bargains — for money, for safety, for self-respect. Rashad turns the legal dispute into a metaphysical one: can justice ever exist without power?

This is Egyptian cinema at its most courageous — confronting the erosion of moral certainty without resorting to cynicism. It echoes the great realist tradition yet speaks with the urgency of the present.

A Regional Mosaic of Voices

Beyond Egypt, this year's Arab films formed a striking mosaic of experience — from Tunisia's restive youth to Palestine's enduring resistance. Collectively, they express a region in transition: wounded yet resilient, silenced yet eloquent in its imagery.

The Window on Palestine section, for instance, offered seven new short films that transcended reportage to become acts of

witness. Here, cinema becomes both an archive of pain and a gesture of survival — the moving image as a form of resistance against erasure.

This convergence of Egyptian introspection and Palestinian endurance signals a new direction in Arab cinema — one that unites personal memory and political urgency, realism and allegory. The result is a regional film culture alive with moral intelligence and aesthetic daring.

Thematic Underpinnings and the Spirit of the Festival

Every major film festival ultimately becomes a mirror — not only of global cinema but of the collective consciousness of its time. The El Gouna Film Festival, in this edition, revealed a pattern of preoccupations that transcended geography: the dislocation of identity, the fragility of belonging, the moral exhaustion of modern life, and the enduring power of memory.

Across the competing narratives — from the tense domestic silences of *My Father's Scent* to the moral corrosion of *The Settlement*, from the Palestinian fragments of resistance to the Lebanese exiles of *Tales of the Wounded Land* — one could trace a shared anxiety: the search for human meaning amid the ruins of certainty.

Exile and the Fractured Self

The idea of exile, both physical and psychological, ran like a subterranean current through many of the films. It was not always the exile of geography — the displacement of refugees or migrants — but often the exile of the soul, estranged from its moral and emotional home.

In one film after another, characters wandered through spaces that no longer

recognized them: ancestral homes turned into ruins, cities devouring their citizens, memories fading like old photographs. The cinematography often echoed this sense of estrangement — long, static shots of empty corridors, faces reflected in glass, the unending hum of distance.

Exile here is not a condition to be resolved; it is the essential modern state. And through it, Arab, African, Asian and Latin American cinema discovers a new idiom of introspection — a language of silence, fragmentation, and suspended time.

Youth and the Loss of Illusion

Equally resonant was the portrayal of youth — not as a symbol of optimism, but as a field of moral bewilderment. Young protagonists appeared caught between inherited values and an unrecognizable present, between faith and pragmatism, love and resignation.

In these narratives, rebellion no longer explodes into revolution; it flickers in gestures — a stolen glance, an unanswered message, a quiet refusal. The camera observes them with empathy but also distance, suggesting that the young are both witnesses and victims of a world they did not create.

This generational disquiet — neither cynical nor idealistic — gives cinema a contemporary pulse. It reflects a realism that is not documentary but existential, shaped by uncertainty and a yearning for coherence.

The Moral Imagination

Perhaps what binds these films most profoundly is their moral imagination. They are not didactic works; they do not preach. Rather, they confront viewers with the ambiguities of choice and the cost of conscience.

In a cinematic era often dominated by spectacle and distraction, these films return to the essence of storytelling: to reveal, without judgment, the invisible wars within the human heart. Whether set in Cairo, Ramallah, or Tunis, they explore the same question — what remains of humanity when systems collapse and certainties dissolve?

The festival's motto, *Cinema for Humanity*, finds its truest expression here — not as a slogan, but as a living inquiry. Each film becomes a conversation with the self, each image a small rebellion against indifference.

Documentary Section – The Eye That Listens

If narrative cinema invites empathy through imagination, documentary cinema at El Gouna summons truth through witness. This year's Feature Documentary Competition and special programs like *Window on Palestine* reaffirmed the festival's ethical core: the belief that to record is to remember, and to remember is a political act.

What distinguished this section was not reportage or urgency alone, but a remarkable refinement of form. The documentaries were less about illustrating reality than about *composing* it — through rhythm, sound, and image. They expanded the grammar of non-fiction, transforming testimony into art.

Across these works — Palestinian, Egyptian, and international — one sensed a renewed faith in documentary as moral inquiry. The filmmakers did not seek closure or clarity; they sought *presence*. The image became a site of encounter, the soundscape a terrain of feeling.

In an era when truth itself seems negotiable, these films restore the

documentary's ancient promise: to look, to listen, and to endure. They remind us that cinema, at its most honest, is not about answers but about attention.

Window on Palestine — Fragments of Existence

The seven short films presented under *Window on Palestine* formed, together, a mosaic of endurance. Each work carried a pulse of immediacy, as if filmed in the trembling interval between danger and defiance.

The filmmakers, most of them young, did not attempt grand narratives. Instead, they carved small spaces of intimacy amid destruction: a child drawing on a broken wall, a mother's voice echoing through an empty corridor, a kite rising against the surveillance sky.

The power of these films lies in their restraint. They refuse sentimentality and spectacle; they invite the viewer into proximity — to stand quietly beside those who live under siege. The camera becomes a moral witness, neither saviour nor intruder.

In this sense, *Window on Palestine* transcends its role as a festival section; it becomes a cinematic conscience. It reminds us that the act of filming, in such circumstances, is itself a form of resistance — the creation of memory against erasure.

Beyond Competition – Reflections and Reverberations

The non-competitive sections of the El Gouna Film Festival offered a space for discovery and contemplation — a parallel cinema of sensibility rather than spectacle. Here, the curation was guided less by hierarchy than by conversation: between generations, between forms, between the lived and the imagined.

Screenings under Special Presentations and Cinema for Humanity extended the festival's central belief — that art attains meaning only when it returns to the human. Films that travelled from distant cultures found a new context here, in dialogue with audiences whose own histories of struggle and resilience shaped their reception. In such moments, the theatre ceased to be a venue; it became a civic forum, where seeing was also a form of solidarity.

Workshops and masterclasses deepened this ethos. They gathered emerging filmmakers from across the Arab world and Africa, nurturing them not through prescription but through shared experience. The discussions on new narrative forms, funding challenges, and the evolving ethics of representation reflected the same humility and seriousness that the best films embodied.

At the heart of these exchanges lay an unspoken understanding: that cinema, when practiced with integrity, becomes both art and argument — a way of thinking in images, a dialogue with the invisible.

Cairo Station – A Living Installation

One of the most striking sections of the eighth edition of the El Gouna Film Festival was *Cairo Station – A Living Installation*. As its name suggests, it was a vibrant artistic recreation of Cairo's iconic Ramses Railway Station, immortalized in Youssef Chahine's 1958 classic *Cairo Station (Bab el Hadid)*.

The installation brought to life not only the visual and architectural texture of the original film but also its sociocultural pulse — the ebb and flow of ordinary people, the chaos and rhythm of city life. It reminded visitors that Egyptian cinema's golden age was also deeply rooted in the everyday

experiences of its people. The recreation thus functioned both as a nostalgic homage and an immersive artistic dialogue between past and present Egypt — a living intersection of cinema, memory, and cultural identity.

FIPRESCI at 100

The International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI), founded in 1930, marks its centenary this year. To celebrate this milestone, the El Gouna Film Festival organized a special symposium titled *Hundred Years of FIPRESCI and the Future of Film Criticism*.

The session revisited the historical role of film criticism — from the early days of cinephilia and journalistic commentary to the rise of academic discourse and online criticism — and examined how digital transformation and global political shifts are reshaping the critic's role today.

As a member of the FIPRESCI jury at El Gouna, I could sense how this centenary moment was being treated not merely as a commemoration of the past but as a reassessment of the future — of how critics must continue to defend the integrity of cinema as an art form amid commercial, algorithmic, and ideological pressures.

El Gouna, with its internationalist spirit and inclusive programming, provided an apt space for that reflection. FIPRESCI's continuing engagement with festivals like this ensures that the dialogue between cinema and criticism remains alive and evolving.

A Festival of Substance and Spirit

The El Gouna Film Festival has, within a relatively short span, positioned itself as one

of the most vital film events in the Arab world. Beyond glamour, it has maintained a serious engagement with the social and aesthetic questions that define contemporary cinema.

This year's edition — with its well-curated retrospectives, Arab and international competition sections, and powerful special programmes — reflected a rare balance of artistic sophistication and social conscience. The atmosphere was both festive and reflective, where art, politics, and humanity intersected with grace and conviction.

From the vivid reimagination of *Cairo Station* to the haunting realism of *Window on Palestine*, and the introspective depth of the FIPRESCI symposium, the festival reaffirmed cinema's enduring role as a cultural bridge — between nations, between generations, and between art and life itself.

As the lights dimmed on the closing night, one felt that El Gouna had not merely screened films — it had staged a meditation on seeing itself. The festival reaffirmed the vitality of cinema as a shared moral space, where memory resists erasure and imagination become an act of care.

For the critic, the juror, and the spectator alike, this was the enduring impression: that every image carries a heartbeat, every frame a responsibility.

El Gouna, in that sense, continues to stand not merely as a film festival, but as a luminous metaphor — a reminder that *cinema for humanity* is not a slogan, but a continuing human necessity.