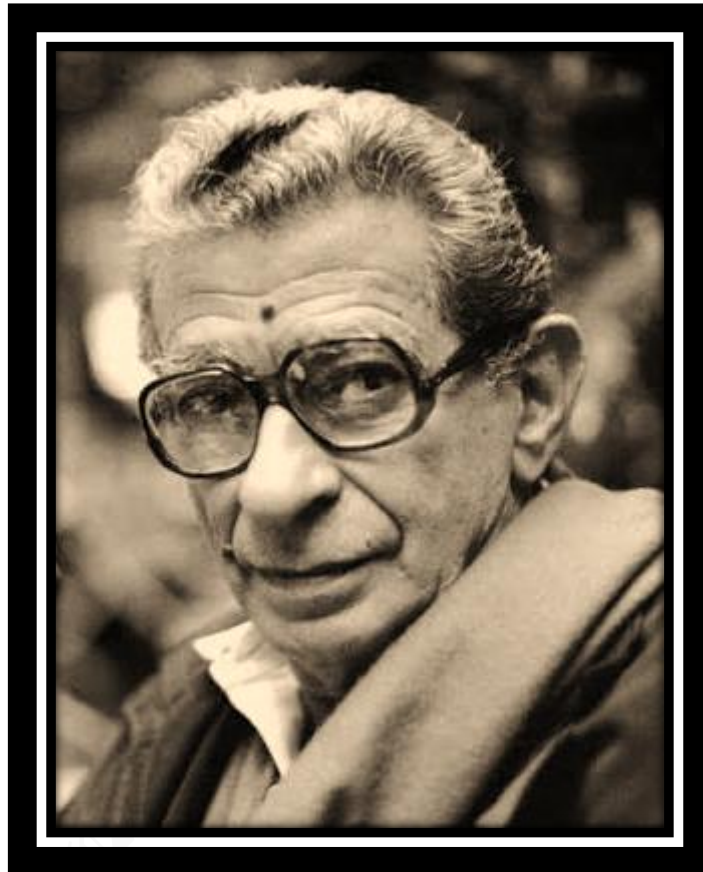


Tribute

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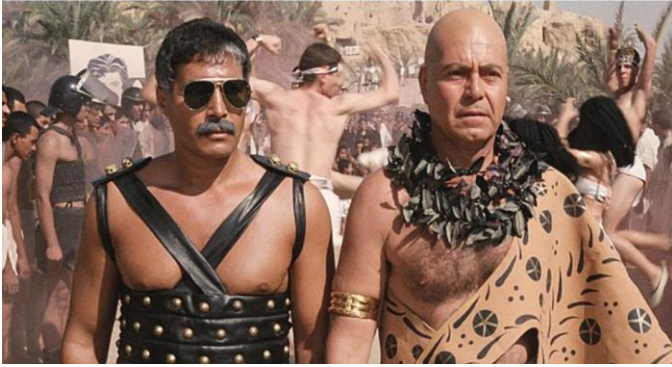
***I Don't Write Scripts, I Write Films:*
Remembering Youssef Chahine**



If Egyptian cinema were to be defined through a single master filmmaker, there would be little room for doubt: Youssef Chahine. A director of an extensive body of feature films and documentaries, Chahine was not merely a filmmaker but also a penetrating social critic and a rigorous cultural investigator. His cinema constitutes an ongoing exploration of the historical, political, and cultural complexities of the Arab world. In this sense, Chahine's films function as cinematic testimonies—both validations and living documents—of Arab cultural experience.

Each of Youssef Chahine's films emerges as a dense confluence of social, political, and historical forces. Beyond their immediate narrative meanings, his works reveal the boundless possibilities of cinema as a medium—unfolding through layers of allusion, metaphor, and imaginative exploration.

Youssef Chahine, remembered as the last torchbearer of the still-unrealized dream of Arab unity, carried this political vision through his cinema with an enduring and defiant optimism.



Alexandria Again and Forever (1990) is the third film in Youssef Chahine's semi-autobiographical Alexandria quartet. It follows *Alexandria... Why?* (1978) and *An Egyptian Story* (1982), and precedes *Alexandria... New York* (2004). The film belongs to the tradition of self-reflexive cinema, recalling Fellini's *8½* (1963) in its exploration of authorship, creativity, and crisis. Chahine appears on screen as Yehia Eskandari, a filmmaker suffering from a creative paralysis triggered by a confrontation with his alter ego, a young actor named Amar.

This crisis, however, is not merely personal. It is simultaneously historical, archaeological, cinematic, sexual, and political. Yehia harbors a homosexual desire for Amar, and when this intimate bond is disrupted by separation, the familiar world around him becomes suddenly estranged. Confronted with this rupture, Yehia turns inward and resolves to re-examine his own films, treating his cinematic past as both memory and evidence. The situation is layered and complex, yet Chahine's characteristic style—marked by humor, fluidity, and rhythmic spontaneity—draws the viewer effortlessly into the narrative.

When questioned by a representative of the production company about why he does not write a script, Yehia responds: "*I don't write scripts; I write films.*" This declaration

encapsulates Chahine's cinematic philosophy. The film's striking visual compositions frequently suggest that Yehia is filming the movie within his own mind, collapsing the boundaries between memory, imagination, and the act of filmmaking itself.

The first of Youssef Chahine's autobiographical films, *Alexandria... Why?* (1978), revisits his adolescence in Alexandria in 1942, a period marked by the terror of Nazi expansion during the Second World War. The young Yehia (played by Chahine himself) is passionately drawn to art and literature, with a particular fascination for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He is equally immersed in theatre, music, dance, and cinema. The film interweaves multiple narrative strands, allowing seemingly minor stories to acquire profound political and emotional significance.

One such narrative centers on a love affair between Sarah, a wealthy Egyptian Jewish woman, and Ibrahim, an ordinary Egyptian; both are committed communists. Their names—Sarah and Ibrahim—inevitably echo biblical figures, adding symbolic depth to the story. During the war, Sarah's family flees to South Africa, fearing Nazi persecution, and she leaves while pregnant. When she returns after the war, Ibrahim is imprisoned for his political activism, his "crime" being that of a communist dissident. Another forbidden love unfolds between Sarah and a British soldier who is at once anti-imperialist, nationalist, and part of the colonial military apparatus—a contradiction that the film deliberately exposes.

What makes *Alexandria... Why?* especially compelling is the way it brings into dialogue the diverse religions, ethnicities, and

political ideologies that shaped Egyptian society at the time. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam coexist alongside Arabs, Greeks, Italians, and Europeans. Competing ideological forces—Islamism, communism, secular anti-imperialist nationalism, and Zionism—are all woven into the narrative. Sarah's brother, David, ultimately leaves for Palestine to join the Zionist movement, further underscoring the film's engagement with the historical fractures and ideological tensions of the era.



In *An Egyptian Story* (*Hadouta Masriya*, 1982), Yehia reappears as a celebrated and internationally recognized Egyptian filmmaker, portrayed by actor Nour El-Sherif. The narrative unfolds as Yehia, a heavy smoker, is hospitalized for heart surgery, using this medical crisis as a frame for an introspective exploration of memory, guilt, desire, and artistic responsibility. One of the film's central concerns is the systematic neglect and marginalization faced by Arab filmmakers within Hollywood, a process the film implicitly links to the cultural and political influence of Zionism in Western media institutions.

A notable highlight of the film is the presence of the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, whose iconic song “*Enta Omri*” appears as a powerful cultural and emotional reference, reinforcing the film's

engagement with Arab cultural memory and artistic heritage.

The opening passages refer to a scene from the third film in the *Alexandria* series, *Alexandria... Still and Forever* (1990), which portrays the struggle of Egyptian film actors for democratic rights in the face of state repression. When Youssef Chahine appeared on international platforms with his films, he was never content to confine himself to purely aesthetic discussions. Instead, he spoke forcefully and at length on issues concerning Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, the wider Arab world, Islam, democracy, Western racism, imperialism, and the freedom of expression, thought, and creativity. An extensive interview with Chahine, conducted by the renowned Palestinian thinker and educator Joseph Massad in New York in 1998, was later published by the University of California Press for the Institute for Palestine Studies, further attesting to Chahine's role as both a filmmaker and a public intellectual.

One of the most striking scenes in *Alexandria Again and Forever* unfolds inside a subterranean tomb—resembling a pyramid chamber or the Valley of the Kings—where the body of Alexander the Great is displayed inside a transparent, modern fibre-glass freezer. The image is unmistakably surreal and immediately recalls the spectacle of mummified bodies arranged for tourist consumption. In this imagined scene, Alexander is played by Amar. Yet this moment does not “take place” in any conventional cinematic sense: Amar himself is confused, the script remains unwritten, and the film has not even entered production. What we witness, therefore, is a scene from a film that has not been shot, drawn from a

script that does not exist—an image generated entirely within the director’s imagination, or perhaps within his dream.

The image also evokes a historical absence: despite the discovery of countless mummies, Alexander’s body has never been recovered through archaeological excavation. Chahine transforms this historical void into a cinematic and emotional presence. Yehia, the director-character, lies on his back before the corpse/mummy of Alexander—played by Amar, who is simultaneously his lover and his alter ego—as if paying homage. The moment is tender and intimate, charged with a quiet, unmistakable homoeroticism. It reads as a deeply affective gesture, a visual articulation of homosexual longing and devotion.

This intimacy is abruptly shattered. From above, the voice of the assistant director is heard shouting a warning: the tips of a drilling machine, boring through the earth, are descending into the tomb. “Move!” they cry. Yehia awakens from his dream and leaps up. The drill pierces through the fibre-glass casing and plunges into Amar’s body, which lies beneath, pretending to be a corpse. What follows is a shocking rupture of illusion: blood begins to ooze from the wound. The image collapses the boundaries between dream and reality, history and fantasy, cinema and violence—transforming desire, memory, and myth into a brutal confrontation with the present.

This scene—where history and reality, archaeological excavation and cinematic imagination, love and heartbreak, sacrifice and death converge—felt like a rare and extraordinary moment in world cinema. Its impact was intensified by my own experience of visiting archaeological sites in Egypt. The

fictional *mise-en-scène* clearly echoed the tomb chambers we had encountered in Luxor and Saqqara. That familiarity transformed the sequence from a purely cinematic construction into an uncanny overlap between lived experience and imagined cinema, where the material remains of history and the fragile body of desire seemed to occupy the same space.

Youssef Chahine’s film career, spanning more than five decades, was marked by continual controversy, censorship, and unexpected artistic turns. Born in Alexandria in 1926 to a Lebanese father and a Greek mother, Chahine was raised in a Catholic family. However, when asked about his religion in adulthood, his response was unequivocal: “Egyptian.” Equally significant is the fact that Chahine grew up in a deeply cosmopolitan environment, speaking five languages at home. This multilingual and multicultural upbringing shaped his worldview and creative sensibility. Thus, although firmly rooted in Egypt, Chahine’s cinema was guided by an internationalism that resisted narrow, exclusionary identities and decisively shaped him as a filmmaker.

Youssef Chahine was a master filmmaker who moved with remarkable ease across the major genres of world cinema, including the musical, comedy, political thriller, folk narrative, historical epic, social protest film, documentary, and psychological drama. He was equally skilled at blending multiple genres within a single film, creating hybrid cinematic forms that expanded the expressive possibilities of the medium. Trained in acting at the Pasadena Playhouse in California, Chahine was also an accomplished actor. Moreover, he played a

crucial role in introducing and shaping several major performers in Arab cinema. Most notably, he launched the career of Omar Sharif, who made his screen debut in *The Blazing Sun* (*Siraa' fi al-Wadi*, 1954), directed by Chahine. Sharif subsequently went on to act in American, British, French, and Italian films, becoming widely regarded as the first Arab and Egyptian actor to achieve international stardom in Hollywood. His most celebrated films include *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Genghis Khan*, and *Monsieur Ibrahim*.

Youssef Chahine was a filmmaker with deeply committed political convictions. His film *Al Ard* (*The Land*, 1969) offers a powerful and uncompromising portrayal of the exploitation of peasants under colonial and semi-feudal structures. *Jamila, the Algerian* (1958) foregrounds the revolutionary leadership of Jamila Bouhired in the Algerian struggle against French imperialism. The political significance of Chahine's intervention becomes especially clear when we recall that Jamila remains a marginal figure in the canonical film *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). By contrast, Chahine's film forcefully asserts the central role played by women fighters in the Algerian Revolution of 1954. Notably, *Jamila, the Algerian* was banned in Algeria for several decades, a fact that underscores both its radical political stance and its enduring power to unsettle official historical narratives.

Youssef Chahine is one of the most significant filmmakers to emerge from the Arab world, whose reputation extends across Asia, Africa, and Europe. In recognition of his lifelong contribution to cinema, he was

awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 50th Cannes Film Festival in 1997. His films have been nominated multiple times for major international honors, including the Palme d'Or, the Grand Prix, and *Un Certain Regard*. *Alexandria... Why?* won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1979, and many of his works have received awards at prestigious film festivals worldwide. Notably, twelve of Chahine's films were included in the list of the 100 greatest films of world cinema published by the Cairo International Film Festival, underscoring his enduring artistic and cultural influence.

Youssef Chahine consistently reinterpreted history and legend through the political and cultural lens of his own time. Rather than allowing historical narratives to degenerate into mere celebratory hymns, he transformed them into dynamic cultural expressions of Arab nationalism. His epic *Al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn* (*Saladin the Victorious*, 1963) stands as a powerful example of this approach. Unlike most of Chahine's films, which typically run between ninety minutes and two hours, this work extends to three hours and six minutes, underscoring its epic ambition and ideological weight. The film's continuing relevance is heightened by the fact that Hollywood's representations of Arab history have often been divisive, stereotypical, and profoundly ahistorical. Against this backdrop, Chahine's *Saladin* emerges as a deliberate counter-narrative, reclaiming historical memory from imperialist distortion and reasserting Arab dignity and political agency.

The political significance of *Saladin the Victorious* is shaped by the ideological

confrontation between Zionist imperialism and its most sustained and collective form of resistance—Arab nationalism. Youssef Chahine deliberately links this contemporary political reality to the historical figure of Saladin, the Kurdish leader who rose to become Sultan of Egypt and Syria in the twelfth century and the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty. By foregrounding this historical continuity, Chahine transforms Saladin into a symbolic precursor of modern anti-imperialist leadership. The director's choice of the film's title, *Al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*, is particularly significant, as it explicitly invokes Gamal Abdel Nasser, under whose leadership Egypt asserted its republican identity and political independence on the global stage. Through this association, Chahine situates the medieval epic firmly within the ideological framework of Nasserist pan-Arabism, using cinema as a medium to articulate historical memory, political resistance, and collective identity.

Saladin the Victorious stands as one of the rare cinematic works to examine and interpret the Crusades from an Arab perspective. The screenplay was co-written by Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab writer to have received the Nobel Prize in Literature, lending the film significant literary and intellectual weight. While Chahine's *Saladin* can be read as a strategic and sophisticated response to Western cinematic representations of the Crusades, its ambitions extend well beyond mere counter-narrative. Chahine's deeper intention lies in initiating a discursive engagement with cultural and religious histories, interrogating how these pasts are constructed, mobilized, and

reimagined within contemporary political contexts.



Youssef Chahine's 1958 film *Cairo Station*—also known as *Iron Gate* (*Bab al-Hadid*)—is set entirely within Cairo Railway Station, one of the busiest transport hubs in the world. Trains arrive and depart almost every minute, and the station is perpetually crowded with tens of thousands of passengers, workers, vendors, and transients. This intensely kinetic space becomes the film's central metaphor and social laboratory.

Into this environment arrives Qinawy, a young man of uncertain origin who appears mentally unstable and has a physical disability. The elderly owner of a small kiosk on the platform takes pity on him and offers him a job selling newspapers. Qinawy is portrayed by Youssef Chahine himself, a decision that lends the character an unsettling intimacy and emotional depth.

Qinawy develops an obsessive attraction to Hannuma, a striking young woman who illegally sells soft drinks on the station platforms. Hannuma, however, is in love with Abu Siri, a railway porter who is politically conscious and actively organizing workers in an effort to form a union. Through Abu Siri's character, the film introduces the emerging discourse of labor rights and collective struggle within post-revolutionary Egypt.

Cairo Station unfolds against the historical backdrop of the establishment of the Egyptian Republic following the overthrow of the monarchy and the retreat of imperial power. Remarkably, the film confronts—perhaps for the first time in Egyptian cinema—with such clarity and restraint, issues of working-class life, sexual repression, violence against women, and the psychological consequences of social marginalization. In doing so, *Cairo Station* demonstrates the crucial role of cinema in articulating and shaping the ideological contours of a post-revolutionary society.

I encountered a remarkable installation inspired by *Cairo Station* at the El Gouna Film Festival. At the center of the plaza stood a full-length railway carriage, transformed into an immersive cinematic space. Visitors were invited to sit inside the carriage and experience the horror, beauty, politics, and poetry that define Youssef Chahine's cinema. The installation was curated by Shereen Fargal with striking sensitivity and imagination.

Once seated inside the carriage, fragments from various Chahine films were projected onto a curtain directly in front of the audience. Simultaneously, additional scenes unfolded on screens positioned outside the windows on both sides of the carriage. This ingenious spatial arrangement created the illusion of movement, as if the train itself

were in motion. The experience dissolved the boundary between spectator and screen, producing the uncanny sensation that cinema itself had become a train—carrying history, memory, and imagination forward in time.

Youssef Chahine was a filmmaker of rare genius who refused to submit to the dominant cultural logic that measures a film's international value by its familiarity to the Anglo-Saxon world. For Chahine, the fact that Anglo-Saxon audiences might be unaware of the Arabs' long and profound civilizational history was not a deficiency to be corrected by self-exoticization, but a limitation of their own historical imagination.

He consistently rejected the tendency to treat Arab culture as folklore—something to be consumed through curiosity, spectacle, or anthropological distance. Instead, Chahine insisted on the political and ethical responsibility of cultural understanding. To possess political awareness, he argued, is to recognize and engage with the needs, intentions, hopes, and anxieties of others—not as abstractions, but as lived realities within a shared world.

Youssef Chahine was a towering cinematic genius who carried Egyptian cinema onto the world stage, transforming it into a vast architecture of images—pyramids built from people, their worlds, their contradictions, and their boundless imagination.

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