Article

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El Sett (Marwan Hamed, Egypt, 2025) Sanitized Cultural Memory in Mainstream Arab Cinema

PART I: INTRODUCTION

One of the most anticipated and controversial films to hit Arab screens last year was a contemporary cinematic look at Egypt's most iconic and celebrated musical artist, the singer Oum Koulthoum. Directed by Marwan Hamed—himself a highly respected Egyptian filmmaker over the last two decades—*El Sett* (2025) left local and regional audiences deeply divided. Viewers clashed over how this iconic figure was portrayed and how she was reintroduced to a new generation largely unfamiliar with her life, her art, and the historical era in which her national and cultural impact peaked.

Few cultural figures in the modern Arab world embody so profoundly the intertwinement of artistic practice with social presence, national engagement, and active participation in anti-colonial struggle as does Oum Koulthoum. Emerging from the heart of Egypt's early-twentieth-century cultural renaissance (*al-Nahda*) and reaching the height of her artistic and national resonance during the Nasser period, she became not only "the voice of the nation," but a central symbolic articulation of Arab musical expression and a deep cultural reservoir shared by the peoples of Egypt and the wider Arab world. During the second phase of her

career—marked by regularized concert performances, intensified public visibility, and explicit support for Gamal Abdel Nasser's project of national liberation, independence, and pan-Arab unity—Oum Koulthoum's positioning came to embody a form of cultural sovereignty. Her artistic authority was fundamentally inseparable from the ideological and populist currents that defined the Arab region during the 1950s and 1960s.

Yet for broad segments of younger Arab generations today, awareness of this wider historical context has steadily eroded, collapsing into a constellation of scattered anecdotes: a handful of patriotic anthems widely accessible on the internet, a few occasionally cited, high-profile benefit concerts supporting the Egyptian military after the 1967 defeat, and a generalized reverence stripped of its political depth. This contemporary memory remains largely disconnected from the broader cultural-renaissance project within which her artistic and national roles took shape. What is increasingly obscured is the wider political and ideological horizon that conditioned her status—specifically, her explicit alignment with anti-imperialist, pro-Palestinian, and anti-Zionist sentiment, her public interventions during moments of national crisis, and her symbolic embeddedness in Nasserist imaginaries of cultural, political, and national sovereignty. It is precisely this historical field that makes this biographical film so densely charged and ideologically consequential.

Beyond the widespread public dissatisfaction that accompanied the film's release—including popular criticism of the casting of Mona Zaki in the lead role, and some academic objections concerning historical inaccuracies and problematic narrative reconstructions—a more structural issue quickly emerged: the matrix of financing, production, and institutional support within which the film was generated. The film was financed, produced, and widely marketed by a coalition of corporate entities working in partnership with Saudi cultural institutions, most notably "Riyadh Season" and the General Entertainment Authority. Although the actual execution of the film—including direction, screenwriting, technical craftsmanship, and acting—was carried out almost entirely by Egyptian professionals in cooperation with local production houses, the final work was widely received as a reinterpretation of an iconic Egyptian cultural figure refracted through an external institutional vision. In a regional moment defined by the growing influence of Gulf-centered cultural industries over Arab cinema, festival circuits, and media narratives, this production backdrop raises urgent questions regarding the intellectual, artistic, and political stakes embedded in the film. A biographical work about Oum Koulthoum produced under such material conditions necessarily prompts critical inquiry: What version of the icon is being reconstructed for a contemporary audience, and what kind of hegemonic framework informs and is informed by such a version?

Despite the filmmakers' insistence that the work aims merely to explore the "personal" and previously unexamined dimensions of the artist's life, public reception and critical interventions—especially from historians, musicologists, and

Egyptian specialists—consistently pointed to the film's reliance on fragmented, undocumented, and historically problematic material. These anxieties intensified with the assignment of the screenplay to Ahmed Mourad. Despite his commercial success, Mourad's narrative style has faced extensive criticism for its reliance on generic templates and schematic character construction rather than sustained historical research. Furthermore, his openly skeptical stance toward the political project of the Nasser era raises serious questions about how the screenplay handles Oum Koulthoum's political commitments, and how it reshapes the contours of her public persona. For an artist whose life and trajectory were organically intertwined with the sociopolitical struggles of her era, such narrative strategies risk not only artistic simplification but also the production of a structurally detached and politically flattened reconstruction of collective memory.

From this broader perspective, *El Sett* cannot be approached merely as a standard biographical film. It must be understood as an ideological intervention embedded in a regional moment undergoing profound historical transformation. Its conditions of production and circulation—operating within a cultural economy increasingly dominated by Gulf-based centers—situate the text within a wider, systemic process of reconfiguring how Arab history is remembered, narrated, and symbolically reconstructed. When the subject of such an intervention is an icon like Oum Koulthoum—whose artistic authority and symbolic power were historically inseparable from anti-colonial national-liberation projects and mass political mobilization—the implications of this narrative reconstruction acquire heightened cultural and political weight. Accordingly, this article examines *El Sett* as a critical case study in the contemporary production, financialization, and management of cultural memory. In doing so, it raises several central inquiries: Which dominant narratives does the film prioritize and validate? Which historical frameworks and alternative memories does it exclude or systematically displace? And how do its specific aesthetic and formal strategies intersect with the institutional and ideological logic that increasingly governs the production, circulation networks, and thematic horizons of contemporary Arab cinema?

PART II: CONTROVERSY AND FIERCE DEBATE

Consequently, the controversy surrounding the film, and the defensive popular reaction in Egypt in particular, cannot be reduced to an emotional rejection of a biographical depiction or an uncritical attachment to a beloved cultural icon. Rather, these reactions reflected a deeper social anxiety over what many perceived as the symbolic restructuring of one of Egypt's most deeply rooted national, anti-imperialist figures, now reframed within a cultural

apparatus increasingly determined by Saudi-backed capital and media power. In this sense, *El Sett* has become one of the most contentious Arab films of recent years, not solely because of its formal or narrative choices, but because of what it signifies within a rapidly shifting regional cultural economy. A critical sampling of the debates that took place within Egyptian and Arab media maps the precise nature of this polarization.

According to BBC News Arabic (2025), critics noted that *El Sett* succeeds in portraying a humanized, grounded depiction of the legendary singer, stripping away the aura of sacredness that traditionally surrounds her to present her first and foremost as a human being with flaws and shortcomings. The broadcaster added that the film depicts her as an ordinary person who experiences loneliness—leading her to take up smoking—and as a woman fiercely protective of the wealth she painstakingly amassed, driven by a deep-seated fear of returning to the extreme poverty she endured during her early life.

This humanizing gesture, however, directly generated intense friction in the local sphere. Writing for *Al-Ahram*, M. Abdel-Nabi (2025) observes that the release of the promotional trailer alone transformed *El Sett* into a matter of urgent public debate in Egypt, sparking a massive divide. While supporters viewed the film as a necessary and bold artistic endeavor, opponents considered it a violation of societal red lines concerning a national icon of Oum Koulthoum's stature. Abdel-Nabi (2025) noted that the film topped trending lists on Twitter and Google in Egypt, drawing thousands of outraged comments arguing that the movie failed to deliver its message and included highly controversial scenes lacking dramatic justification. Furthermore, this intense online friction—which generated over two million views regarding Oum Koulthoum's name—led a younger generation of fans to defend her legacy, creating an online phenomenon akin to an "Oum Koulthoum Ultras" who widely shared archival videos of her interviews and meetings with band members to counter the film's assertion that the legendary singer was merely stingy and authoritarian.

The debate quickly expanded across national borders. As S. Boumezber (2025) reports in *Tadamsa News*, the December 2025 release of the film transcended being a mere cinematic event, becoming a major artistic and economic trend across Egypt and several Arab nations. Backed by a massive budget and unprecedented support, the film—starring Mona Zaki in a highly debated performance—reignited broader discussions about whether biographical epics can successfully compete against the action movies that currently dominate the market. Boumezber (2025) notes that the film's premiere in Algeria, held concurrently with its release in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, drew significant crowds to locations like the "Zenith" hall in Constantine and "Garden City" in Algiers. In attendance were high-profile officials, including the Algerian Minister of Culture and Arts, Malika Bendouda, alongside prominent cinematic and media figures. The ongoing controversy surrounding the film, Boumezber (2025) argues, reflects genuine artistic challenges identified by both critics and audiences. While supporters praised Marwan Hamed's artistic boldness in eschewing a traditional,

chronological biographical format in favor of focusing on pivotal, hidden moments of the icon's life away from the spotlight, detractors argued that the film struggled to handle the sheer historical weight of her persona, noting that this non-linear approach ultimately alienated and confused viewers who expected a conventional narrative.

This dilemma regarding historical representation was similarly framed by Najla Abu Al-Naja (2025) in *Independent Arabia*, who noted that the release of *El Sett* re-energized public discourse surrounding art and the ongoing dilemma of portraying national, historical, and artistic symbols. Specifically, it questions whether dramatic works have the right to reconstruct an icon's image by focusing on their human side—complete with flaws and mistakes—alongside their legendary greatness. Abu Al-Naja (2025) observes that evaluating this discourse is highly complex, as both sides present valid points within their arguments, though both tend to lean toward extremes—either through hyper-criticism or excessive praise. Opponents of the film accuse it of falsifying historical facts and attempting to dismantle Oum Koulthoum's legendary status, while supporters strongly defend it on the grounds of absolute artistic freedom.

For her part, Aya Al-Shazly (2025) writing for *Veto Gate* reiterated that the biographical film has reopened one of the oldest debates in Arab drama: the boundary and balance between historical accuracy and artistic vision when dealing with icons who hold an extraordinary place in the collective consciousness. She notes that the film's theatrical release followed just weeks after the October 2025 debut of the play *Oum Koulthoum: Daybeen fi Sawt El Sett* (*Oum Koulthoum: Infatuated by the Lady's Voice*). Together, these works ignited fierce battles among critics and audiences alike, with the film facing severe backlash and explicit accusations of "tarnishing national symbols," bringing a deeper conversation regarding the boundaries and regulations governing dramatized biographies back to the forefront.

Conversely, Dalia Maher (2025) in the London-based *Asharq Al-Awsat* describes how the film successfully garnered praise from film critics even as it sparked intense battles on social media. From a critical perspective, the film was commended because it avoided a purely positive or angelic depiction of Oum Koulthoum, choosing instead to integrate authentic snapshots of her life and artistic journey alongside her personal shortcomings. Specifically, it explored her complex attitudes toward marriage, motherhood, and money, while raising questions about her stubbornness and quick temper. Maher (2025) describes how the film's narrative delves into the singer's critical personal and professional relationships, including those with poet Ahmed Rami, Sherif Pasha Sabri, journalist Mohamed Al-Tabei, and composer Mahmoud Al-Sherif, as well as her late-stage marriage to Dr. Hassan El-Hafnawi. Furthermore, she notes that the film captured her emotional vulnerability through moving scenes—such as her health struggles and the iconic eyeglasses and handkerchief that defined her public image—which brought audience members to tears. Lastly, *El Sett* addressed her navigation of shifting political regimes, highlighting her performances for both King Farouk and President Gamal Abdel Nasser

(where she sang "Egypt, Which Is in My Mind"), ultimately depicting her profound reconciliation with her audience after a period of absence.

PART III: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY FRAMEWORK OF THE FILM

In a region undergoing continuous geopolitical upheaval, marked by intensifying structural conflicts involving local, regional, and international forces, the release of *El Sett* cannot be interpreted as a solitary cinematic event. The film emerged amid multiple unresolved regional crises, characterized by the escalation of military aggression and expansionist policies in the Levant, alongside accelerating projects of geopolitical fragmentation across the Arab world. These transformations coincide with a broader shift in the regional political economy, wherein Gulf states increasingly leverage their financial architecture to drive neoliberal integration and align with transnational economic agendas. Concurrently, the region has witnessed the consolidation of new cultural, media, and institutional realignments, rendering *El Sett* an especially diagnostic cultural artifact. Through it, one can observe contemporary contestations over collective Arab memory—specifically regarding which institutional structures dominate the narration of history, and whose ideological perspective establishes the parameters for cultural production.

Within this context, the film needs to be analyzed within the broader historical trajectory of expanding Gulf—and specifically Saudi—institutional influence over Arab media networks, cinematic industries, and the production of regional symbolic meaning. It is crucial to emphasize that this regime of cultural soft power does not operate primarily through overt state censorship or explicit political diktat. Rather, it functions via a structural dynamic that systematically reorganizes production incentives, distribution pathways, and regional economies of prestige and recognition. Most critically, this financial apparatus reconfigures the terrain of collective memory, re-coding historical legacies of cultural autonomy, political struggle, and anti-imperialist consciousness into symbolic forms that are ideologically softened, stripped of historical specificity, and seamlessly repackaged for rapid circulation within regional entertainment markets.

These operations unfold in tandem with broader structural realignments: the entrenchment of post-colonial corporate formations of power and the deeper incorporation of Arab cultural industries into the financial circuits of transnational corporations. Within this configuration, material history is systematically detached from its grounding in concrete political and class conflict, and re-presented to the spectator as a highly curated, consumable repertoire of affective images that functions as an apparatus of symbolic reconciliation rather than a site of active ideological engagement (Higson 1993).

With the steady decline of state-subsidized cinema across traditional cultural hubs in the Arab world, Gulf-backed networks—operating through corporate production houses, streaming platforms, film markets, and international festivals—have consolidated monopoly control over

cinematic visibility and regional marketability. Although this new paradigm is frequently articulated through the aspirational discourses of professionalization, globalization, and industry development, it effectively narrows the permissible horizon of cinematic expression. It systematically privileges narratives that favor individualistic or ideologically safe trajectories fundamentally aligned with dominant political-economic interests.

The post-2013 Arab film landscape—in which *El Sett* operates—exhibits a distinct shift toward narrative homogenization and soft ambiguity. Moving away from the bold, symbolically dense engagements with collective memory that characterized earlier eras, contemporary filmmakers frequently navigate a state of post-2011 thematic disorientation. Oscillating between the celebration of newly opened creative spaces and disillusionment with the political outcomes of the uprisings, recent cinema often favors individualized, ostensibly "universal" themes—such as loss, migration, identity, and reconciliation—at the expense of historically grounded, controversial social realities. This ideological shift is directly tethered to structural transformations in the political economy of Arab cinema, chiefly driven by an increased reliance on European governmental and NGO funding combined with a massive influx of Gulf-based capital.

Over the last decade, increasingly monopolistic transnational networks spanning production, distribution, festivals, and criticism have consolidated, often operating with the backing of high-level political actors. A prime example is the Arab Cinema Center (ACC), founded in 2015 by MAD Solutions to integrate Arab cinema into global market circuits. Highlighting the intertwining of political authority and cultural production, the ACC's 2018 list of the industry's "most influential figures" prominently included Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other UAE and Saudi leaders. MAD Solutions itself acts as a powerful intermediary across major global festival circuits, complemented regionally by independent distribution initiatives like the UAE's Cinema Akil. Concurrently, even regionally based institutions like the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) exhibit a funding pattern that, despite promoting independent expression, privileges technically accomplished works that favor personal experience over politically sensitive themes, aligning with the structural limits imposed by the region's dominant social classes and diverse donor base.

This centralization of cultural production has further intensified through the dominance of Gulf capital over digital and television platforms, exemplified by the MBC network's Shahid platform, and its recent convergence with Western media conglomerates. In 2018, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), via the Saudi Research and Media Group (SRMG), invested $200 million in Penske Media Corporation, the parent company of crucial trade publications like *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, and *Deadline*. This partnership directly links influential Western entertainment journalism with the SRMG's extensive, state-tied Arabic media network (including *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Arab News*), signaling a structural shift in how Arab cinema is framed and critically evaluated

globally. Ultimately, the growing influence of Gulf-based institutions, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, introduces specific aesthetic preferences and sensibilities into the ecosystem. While these funding structures do not entirely determine artistic output, they establish a framework where textually flattened, ahistorical narratives are systematically selected, promoted, and validated across both regional and international media landscapes.

The structural result is a system of soft containment. Access to capital, international festival exposure, and critical legitimacy becomes increasingly contingent on alignment with these corporate-state matrices. Filmmakers who confront dominant historical narratives, foreground collective mobilization, or articulate anti-imperialist critiques face structural marginalization. Conversely, works that adhere to aesthetically polished or individual-centered biographical templates gain widespread circulation across both regional and Western platforms. Within such a landscape, *El Sett* emerges not merely as an isolated text, but as an expression of a political economy that constrains both the material conditions of production and the aesthetic strategies encouraged within contemporary Arab filmmaking.

The film appeared at a moment of particularly heightened friction within this shifting terrain, functioning as a screen onto which unresolved regional contradictions were projected. *El Sett* attempts to reintroduce Oum Koulthoum into a contemporary social environment largely disconnected from the socialist, anti-colonial, and pan-Arab forces that shaped her historical trajectory. Although Saudi influence over Arab cultural life has expanded steadily for over two decades through media ownership and entertainment capital, the public reaction to *El Sett* was unusually severe. This friction indicates that certain historical symbols remain deeply sensitive, highly contested zones within the map of regional memory.

Thus, the film is not an entertainment commodity isolated from its historical conditions of production, but a cultural product deeply embedded within specific institutional frameworks. Accordingly, this study combines a historical-materialist analysis of the film's political economy with a close formal reading of its cinematic techniques—treating narrative structure, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing not as neutral stylistic choices, but as ideological sites. Understood this way, the intense backlash that accompanied the film is not external to it, but an intrinsic element of the text's situated nature. It reveals both the limits of dominant cultural frameworks and the persistence of cinema as a contested arena, even amid widespread commodification and political exhaustion.

PART IV: IDEOLOGY AND THE MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL MEMORY

The overarching framework of *El Sett* establishes its ideological parameters through a systematic process of selective historical omission. Instead of treating history as a site of material struggle, social contradiction, and political tension, the film reconstructs the mid-twentieth-century milieu within which Oum Koulthoum operated as an aesthetically detached cultural tableau—one in which structural conflict is muted, displaced, or

rendered incidental. A defining manifestation of this strategy appears in the film's treatment of the 1952 Free Officers Revolution and the profound transformations it brought to her artistic, national, and personal trajectory. The film frames this monumental historical event primarily through a sequence of scenes centered on the burglary of her villa during the immediate post-revolutionary period, embedding the sequence within an atmosphere of domestic isolation, existential anxiety, and generalized fear. This symbolic reduction offers a highly privatized metaphor for her position after the overthrow of the monarchy. Such management of narrative texture functions as a diagnostic index of the conceptual logic structuring the text as a whole.

Yet this strategy of narrative containment is not unique to *El Sett*. In recent decades, Anglo-American biopics and global heritage cinema have systematically separated major artistic and intellectual figures from the socio-historical contradictions that conditioned their work. As industry termed "biopic pictures", films such as *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Elvis* (2022), *Frida* (2002), and *The Theory of Everything* (2014) consistently frame subjects as exceptional individual geniuses whose accomplishments transcend material conditions, institutional frictions, and collective social movements. Within these dominant narratives, structural conflict—whether manifested as class struggle, state ideology, organized resistance, or institutionalized systems of power—is systematically displaced by privatized and personal trauma, emotional devotion, innate genius, or psychological resilience. Culture is thus elevated above history, and artistic production is re-coded as an expression of transcendental creativity. In such frameworks, historical dialectics are suppressed in favor of an idealized myth that masks the material complexities of cultural production, reshaping even non-hegemonic art to a consumable and affect.

In *El Sett*, this operation is executed through a selective assemblage of historical and imagined moments drawn from Oum Koulthoum's life, stripped of the concrete relations of power that shaped her national and regional authority. By overdetermining scenes of personal devotion, psychological perseverance, and a generalized, abstract patriotic reverence, the film replaces lived historical struggle with a narrative of cultural unity that floats above temporal realities. Oum Koulthoum is thus transformed from a historically grounded subject—embedded within a matrix of complex social formations, ideological conflicts, and anti-imperialist mass mobilization during the 1950s and 1960s—into a self-contained icon whose significance appears to arise from domestic dilemmas, managerial shrewdness, and individual triumph over professional rivals. The dense dialectical links between this reconstructed persona and the broader cultural, social, political, and anti-colonial projects of her era are emptied of significance and relegated to the margins of the frame.

Historically, this narrative strategy reproduces a familiar ideological gesture: elevating the private sphere at the expense of the social, and privileging emotional identification over structural analysis. *El Sett* does not engage in overt historical negation; instead, it reorganizes history through

selective mechanisms of revelation and concealment, foregrounding un-controversial, celebratory elements while systematically suppressing the complex political dynamics that shaped her career—including her conscious, voluntary enlistment in national defense and her organic role within Egypt's state-sponsored cultural-political project during the Nasser period. In this sense, the film aligns with a broader trajectory in contemporary heritage cinema that seeks to neutralize socially and politically active artistic subjects by re-coding them as emblems of consensual, localized memory rather than as products of contested historical processes (Higson 1993).

The film's stated authorial attempt to "deconstruct the myth" of Oum Koulthoum crystallizes this logic. Although the text appears—at least superficially—to challenge the hagiographic representations of her as an untouchable figure of "national motherhood," it does not produce a dialectical reexamination of her private persona. Instead, it substitutes one framework for another, exchanging nationalist reverence for a postmodern skepticism and ironic detachment. Oum Koulthoum is re-coded as an anxious, somber, and perpetually precarious character, restricted by a framework of narrow personal ambition, professional survivalism, and a psychological fragility explicitly attributed to her subaltern social background. The film does not open interpretive space for a deeper engagement with her subjectivity; rather, it reduces her historical presence to a collection of scattered surface traits reminiscent of biographical gossip or digital media fragments.

What is presented as a dismantling of myth and a humanizing gesture ultimately reproduces a liberal logic of subject-formation—one in which historical experience is filtered exclusively through affect, individualist motivation, and deep interiority detached from the socio-political environment that endowed it with meaning. Innuendo and selectively extracted glimpses of her life—spanning from rural poverty to royal palaces, and from monarchical patronage to proximity to Nasser's political authority—become ideological substitutes that displace state-sanctioned sanctification without restoring materialist historical analysis. As a result, Oum Koulthoum's cultural weight is no longer understood as the product of a dialectical relationship between individual capacity, popular mobilization, national struggle, and state cultural policy. Instead, her significance is privatized and psychologized, rendered intelligible through a liberal-individualist narrative aligned with the market demands of dominant cinematic conventions.

This logic—the systematic suppression of the social in favor of the individual—serves as the organizing principle of the text. Through its narrative and aesthetic strategies, *El Sett* repeatedly replaces historical contradiction with psychological depth, collective struggle with individual affect, and material analysis with moral ambiguity. The film's apparent subtlety and emotional intimacy do not unsettle dominant assumptions but relocate them from the realm of history to that of isolated interiority.

Nowhere is this displacement more visible than in the film's minimization of Oum Koulthoum's specific artistic and

institutional distinctiveness. Her extraordinary vocal morphology, her precise command of classical Arabic musical performance, and the historical weight of the collaborative creative environments that shaped her art—including her relationships with the era's preeminent composers, poets, and musicians—are significantly diminished. These collective, institutional, and artistic dimensions, which were foundational to her sustained cultural resonance in Egypt and the wider Arab world during the twentieth century, are subordinated to a fragmented narrative organized around fragility, failure, and limitation. Instead, the film offers a carefully curated series of selective vignettes: her constrained childhood, her ambiguously framed interactions with the Nasserist state apparatus, her physical fall on the Olympia stage in Paris in 1967, and her physical frailty in her later years. Once detached from their dialectical contexts, these moments are reorganized into a psychological teleology driven by contingency rather than by meaningful historical processes. The cumulative effect is a reconstruction of her life as a metaphor for individual precarity rather than as a dynamic agent that shaped—and was shaped by—the exceptional cultural position she occupied.

This reductive methodology deepens further in the film's treatment of modern Egyptian history more broadly. *El Sett* offers no extended analytical engagement with the defining, structural events of the period spanning from the 1952 Revolution through Nasser's death in 1970: the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the Tripartite Aggression of 1956, state-directed cultural policy, the catastrophic 1967 defeat, her role in mobilizing popular and financial support for the state after the setback, her contributions to the War of Attrition, or her early symbolic support for the Palestinian armed resistance. These omissions are not narrative accidents; they are structural choices that detach her legacy from the material dynamics that gave it unprecedented historical resonance.

The ideological implications identified above are actively produced through Marwan Hamed's technical and aesthetic coordination. His mastery of cinematic language allows him to present a polished, coherent, and market-aligned reconstruction of history stripped of political depth. The tightly controlled mise-en-scène, refined cinematography, disciplined performances, and subdued narrative rhythm function not merely as neutral stylistic choices, but as the precise mechanisms through which an ideological smoothing is achieved. In this sense, *El Sett* exemplifies how technical sophistication and narrative discipline can operate as conditions for hegemonic closure. Stylistic elegance does not expose historical repression; it seals it—converting political complexity into consumable affect and aligning cultural memory with the expectations of dominant production circuits that increasingly privilege depoliticized intimacy over historical struggle.

PART V: FORM, STRUCTURE, AND IDEOLOGICAL GAPS

Marwan Hamed's emphasis on high production values and visual polishing frequently operates to transform the historical past into a pristine commodity for contemporary consumption, effectively softening the dialectical conflicts of history in

favor of a picturesque spectacle. A precise formal analysis is methodologically indispensable for understanding how *El Sett* embeds its conceptual reconstruction of memory within a broader contemporary cinematic sensibility—one that merges technical sophistication with a neutralized regime of remembrance, thereby converting historical contradiction into an affective commodity with global marketability. Without collapsing questions of form directly into political economy, the following analysis treats cinematic style as an intermediate register: a material site where ideological representations are made legible, aligned with transnational circuits of circulation, and calibrated to the economies of prestige increasingly shaping the horizons of contemporary Arab cinema.

The focus here is to trace how specific formal elements function as critical symptoms rather than neutral aesthetic choices. This shifts the analysis from a generalized narrative-thematic level to the concrete material components of filmmaking—mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, montage, and performance. This section proposes that Hamed's technical mastery in deploying classical and contemporary cinematic techniques does not merely coexist with the film's underlying tensions; rather, it operates as their central managerial mechanism, disciplining those contradictions and ultimately determining their scope of impact.

At the core of this formal system lies the concept of *décalage*: the structural gap between what the film appears to promise—historical engagement, critical intimacy, and a rupture from hagiographic mythmaking—and what its formal organization actually delivers. Rather than illuminating the real frictions among the artist, the woman, history, memory, and power, the film's stylistic system absorbs these tensions, converting political conflict into psychological nuance and narrative control. In this sense, style operates to secure the parameters of dominant assumptions, allowing the film to reconstruct the intertwined histories of a woman and a nation while systematically avoiding any sustained encounter with the material struggles that shaped both.

A. Direction and Mise-en-scène: Staging Ideology at the Level of the Scene

Hamed's directorial approach consistently constructs Oum Koulthoum as an isolated subject—emotionally withdrawn, alienated from sustained intimacy, and increasingly enclosed within her own interiority—through a highly controlled visual architecture. This tendency manifests most visibly in the mise-en-scène, where shot composition, scale, and spatial containment do not function as neutral aesthetic choices but as instruments of subject-formation. The boundaries of the frame repeatedly encircle or compress her presence, generating a persistent tension between grand public appearance and existential isolation.

This strategy is especially pronounced in scenes staged as public events or large-

scale spectacles. Oum Koulthoum is frequently positioned at the visual center of compositions featuring considerable depth of field, highlighting grand architectural expanses, dense crowds, and the sheer spectacle of performance. Yet this visual centrality is invariably paired with a profound sense of solitude. Whether in scenes depicting her childhood performances in provincial village gatherings, her appearances within the royal palace, the king's birthday celebration, or her iconic concert at the Olympia in Paris, she is framed as a solitary figure surrounded by vast expanses of negative space or by tightly packed bodies that never crystallize into collective intimacy. The structural result is a paradoxical image: presence without proximity, and mass popularity without communal connection. This transformation effectively recodes what were historically shared political-cultural experiences into visual metaphors of individual hardship under the alienation of fame.

This individualized subjectivity reaches its most concentrated expression in the nocturnal sequence depicting the break-in at her villa. Filmed largely with low-key lighting, the scene shrouds Oum Koulthoum in shadow, fragmenting her presence through darkness, narrow corridors, and obstructed sightlines while an intruder navigates her private domain. Visually, she is rendered not as a figure of authority or national control, but as a deeply vulnerable subject inside the very space meant to symbolize her socio-cultural ascent and material security. The villa—historically a marker of subaltern mobility and cultural sovereignty—is re-signified as a site of domestic threat rather than refuge.

These scenes do not constitute isolated psychological touches; rather, they form a cohesive spatial metaphor. Despite her massive popular stature, Oum Koulthoum is consistently framed as confined within her own iconicity. Her historically grounded capacity for mutual engagement with her audience—rooted in collective affect, performative brilliance, political resonance, and pan-Arab mobilization—is visually recoded as an ambiguous power; it is presented less as a dynamic cultural exchange and more as a condition of tragic entrapment. What was historically an organic, shared relationship between the performer and the public becomes, within the film's visual lexicon, a relationship defined by distance and separation.

Within this visual logic, the film effectively forecloses the possibility of authentically rendering Oum Koulthoum's national, social, and political presence—particularly her anti-imperialist commitments across Egypt and the wider Arab region. The opening shot, which depicts her physical collapse on the Olympia stage in Paris in the immediate wake of the 1967 defeat, operates as a teleological, pre-structuring device. It retroactively reshapes her entire life into a narrative of inevitable, linear decline. This formal choice strips her artistic and political trajectory of its historical openness, reconfiguring it into a single, tragic, and fatalistic arc.

By foregrounding the image of Oum Koulthoum as a fragile, broken human figure, the *mise-en-scène* invites viewers to read the film as an objective effort to "demythologize" her legacy. Yet this apparent dismantling conceals a deeper critical consequence: what

is being enclosed and neutralized is not the hagiographic myth in any critical sense, but rather the historical conditions that dialectically shaped her artistic practice as a collective, politically invested phenomenon. In this manner, the film's visual architecture reinforces a framework in which serious, committed artistic practices—and, by extension, broader cultural projects of resistance—appear excessive, pathologically isolating, and ultimately unsustainable. Through visual strategies of spatial containment, alienation, and fatalistic framing, the text separates Oum Koulthoum and her music from their material foundations, reinforcing a wider cultural impulse: the total evacuation of history in favor of individual psychology and aestheticized decline.

B. Cinematography: The Manipulation of Light and Space

With few exceptions, the vast majority of *El Sett*'s sequences are situated within interior spaces and treated through highly expressive, low-key lighting schemes. Even scenes ostensibly set outdoors—such as Oum Koulthoum's early travels on foot with her father and brother between their village and neighboring towns for rural performances—are consistently presented as nighttime journeys. A heavily emphasized scene stages this trek during a stormy, rain-drenched evening, highlighting severe physical hardship as the three figures navigate the elements in worn-out footwear. These spatial and temporal choices are not incidental; they systematically fold the external social world into tightly controlled, nocturnal environments, subordinating expansive historical context to atmospheric emotionality.

Although the film moves across a heterogeneous variety of locations—including provincial concert halls, casinos, the royal palace, recording studios, and Oum Koulthoum's bourgeois villa—the cinematography remains strikingly unified in its visual syntax. The camera depends heavily on medium shots and close-ups, with an extremely restricted deployment of wide or establishing shots that might otherwise situate the character within broader social matrices or legible historical environments. This visual economy reinforces the film's domestic insularity, framing her trajectory primarily in terms of an isolated interior experience rather than class relations or dialectical historical development.

This formal insulation, however, traps Marwan Hamed within an acute aesthetic contradiction that became central to the public and critical discomfort surrounding Mona Zaki's portrayal of the icon. The film's structural reliance on close-ups—specifically the persistent deployment of the facial close-up—inadvertently amplifies the physiognomic discrepancy between the actress and the historical figure she portrays. This physical disparity is further exacerbated by weak, inconsistent, and historically inaccurate prosthetic and makeup design.

While the close-up traditionally functions as a precise register of intimate disclosure intended to reveal unmediated psychological truth, in *El Sett*, the failure of look-alike realism produces a symptomatic rupture: instead of drawing the viewer seamlessly into the character's interiority, the flawed makeup destabilizes the suspension of disbelief, pulling the spectator out of the film's conceptual spell and exposing the ultimate artificiality of its intimate framework.

Despite these technical shortcomings, the cinematography remains highly effective at constructing a tightly controlled, affective visual field. The camera's persistent proximity, combined with high-contrast, expressionistic illumination and balanced compositions, maintains an intensified dramatic atmosphere while simultaneously foreclosing the viewer's access to structural relationships beyond the individual. The framing remains tightly bound to her reserved gestures, anxious demeanor, and restricted facial expressivity, directly reinforcing the film's underlying objective to depict her as an inward, withdrawn subject.

Within this formal system, cinematography enables one of the film's most pronounced structural adjustments: the visual dramatization of fate. Through the repeated use of chiaroscuro lighting, Oum Koulthoum is portrayed as a tragic figure emerging inevitably from darkness into a preordained greatness. Yet this symbolic inflation feeds into a teleological narrative logic wherein her rise appears solely as the product of individual will, strict self-discipline, and unwavering ambition. Critical relationships—with her family, her subaltern social milieu, her romantic partners, and various political authorities—appear visually not as historically conditioned dynamics, but merely as functional, instrumental stations along a linear path of individual ascent.

Thus, cinematography collaborates with narrative design in privatizing and moralizing historical mobility. Structural forces—such as class mobility, institutional mediation, state-directed cultural policies, and anti-imperialist mobilization—are displaced in favor of a visual rhetoric that celebrates personal determination and individual sacrifice. Within this framework, light does not illuminate history; it sanctifies ambition.

The excesses of this visual approach—its operatic intensity and stylistic displacement from biographical realism—do not serve a critical or alienating purpose. On the contrary, they function textually to compensate for the screenplay's thin, localized treatment of history by transferring the burden of narrative meaning entirely onto the visual register. Aesthetic declaration effectively replaces historical explanation. Greatness is announced through stylistic grandiosity rather than historically traced; fate is displayed as a visual spectacle rather than interrogated as a socio-political construct. By converting dialectical dynamism into static spectacle and material history into emotional texture, *El Sett* positions its visual rhetoric within a contemporary ideological preference for affective legibility, aesthetic polish, and individualized narratives of success over structural analysis or sociopolitical complexity.

C. Screenplay and Narrative Structure: The Logic of Repression

The conceptual framework of *El Sett* achieves its most structurally explicit expression in its screenplay and narrative architecture. Instead of establishing historical causality or tracing the material development of Oum Koulthoum's artistic and cultural trajectory, the script privileges a paradigm of fragmentation, omission, and temporal disruption. History is not presented as a dialectical process of conflict, synthesis and accumulation, but rather as a succession of loosely connected vignettes—isolated moments drawn predominantly from her private life and arranged within a repetitive, non-linear architecture of flashbacks and flashforwards.

This structural strategy does not merely condense or simplify historical chronologies; it actively represses them. Linear causality is systematically displaced by ahistorical juxtaposition, and organic development is replaced by episodic segmentation. The film moves rapidly across vast periods of her life through brief, self-contained scenes characterized by minimal dramatic arcs or sequential growth. Each narrative unit functions as an isolated fragment rather than as a component of a cohesive historical trajectory. This structural choice effectively blocks the accumulation of dramatic meaning and prevents the maturation of historical contradiction.

The film is built as a chain of impressionistic sketches drawn from disparate periods of her life: her childhood performances disguised as a boy, early encounters with elite aristocratic patrons and classical composers, domestic and familial tensions, professional contract negotiations, anxieties surrounding shifts in political regimes, her physical collapse at the Olympia, and, ultimately, her monumental state funeral. The critical issue is not the sheer quantity of these historical fragments, but their narrative function within the text. They are organized not with due attention to socio-political transformation or institutional mediation, but are instead flattened into impressionistic registers dominated by psychological states—fear, ambition, insecurity, and melancholy—at the expense of historical ones. Within this framework, Oum Koulthoum appears stripped of her own artistic and national agency. The fragmented screenplay fails to build a coherent dramatic arc capable of explaining her exceptional socio-cultural ascension.

This structural failure explains why the wave of public and critical backlash that followed the film's release—specifically from historians, musicologists, and cultural critics regarding historical inaccuracies, fabricated incidents, and undocumented events—is profoundly analytically significant. These textual deviations are not incidental errors or benign byproducts of artistic license; rather, they operate as symptoms of a deeper conceptual operation: the systemic substitution of historical verification with narrative convenience, and of material truth with affective plausibility. The screenplay does not simply misrepresent history; it exhibits a structural indifference to it in service of a contemporary aesthetic register.

Despite the filmmakers' claims that they sought to explore the "human" and "private" dimensions of her life, the script fails to

construct a compelling psychological interiority even on its own terms. The private sphere it designs remains thin and repetitive, while the decisive moments of her artistic and political development—particularly in the post-1952 era—are systematically evacuated. Her sustained, collaborative relationships with foundational figures such as Zakariya Ahmad, Riyad al-Sunbati, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Baligh Hamdi—collaborations that actively reshaped the morphology of modern Arab music and consolidated her regional authority—are minimized, erased, or reduced to superficial symbolic gestures instead of being treated as generative historical processes.

More revealing still is the script's marginalization of Oum Koulthoum's role as an active political actor. Her concrete engagement in the Egyptian national struggle, her systemic mobilization of popular and financial support across the Arab world following the 1967 defeat, her contributions to the War of Attrition, and her early support for the Palestinian national movement are mentioned only fleetingly, if at all. A particularly striking omission is the total absence of her collaboration with the progressive poet Salah Jahin and composer Kamal al-Tawil on "Wallāh Zamān Yā Silāḥī". This represented a historically defining moment in modern Egyptian history, occurring during the Tripartite Aggression in 1956, and the song was subsequently adopted as Egypt's national anthem for nearly two decades.

These narrative omissions produce profound consequences that radically destabilize the film's conclusion. They render the final sequence—her historic, mass public funeral—narratively and historically unintelligible to the spectator. After spending the preceding runtime constructing a persona characterized primarily by domestic withdrawal, emotional constriction, and existential crisis, the film's internal structural logic cannot account for the sheer magnitude of collective mourning it presents at its end. Collective impact is displayed without its corresponding collective history and political engagement is systematically psychologized into internalized guilt, personal ambition, or individual sorrow.

The result is a narrative closure that replaces historical causality with emotional spectacle, completing the film's broader maneuver: the total substitution of politics with interiority. On its deepest structural level, the screenplay advances an idealist causal logic wherein individualized emotional developments are treated as the primary motors of history. Thus, national mobilization, anti-imperialist struggle, and the institutional frameworks that historically sustained her central cultural role are erased—not through explicit denial, but through a soft neutralization, filtered through a psychologizing lens that drains them of political force. In this sense, the film's narrative structure does not merely fail to accurately represent her trajectory; it actively reorganizes it according to the logic of contemporary, market-aligned global cultural regimes.

D. Editing: Historical Causality vs. Emotional Continuity

Within the broader formal architecture of *El Sett*, editing serves as the primary structural mechanism through which

historical causality is systematically displaced in favor of emotional continuity. On the surface, the text's editing maintains a high degree of narrative clarity and fluid continuity despite rapid, non-linear shifts between flashbacks and flashforwards across disparate decades of Oum Koulthoum's life. Yet, this seamless coherence is achieved by privileging affective sutures over historical depth, repeatedly redirecting the spectator's attention away from the material context of her labor and toward individual vulnerability, internal psychological disruption, and expressive micro-gestures.

More broadly, the film relies on an elliptical editing syntax that leaps across selectively curated "pivotal moments," treating history as a series of isolated symbolic flashes rather than as an accumulation of collective labor, social conflict, and material contradiction. Even in sequence blocks where Oum Koulthoum apparently asserts artistic, institutional, or professional authority, these moments of empowerment are quickly fragmented by abrupt transitions that return her to a recurring frame of domestic frustration and internal uncertainty. A diagnostic example occurs in the sequence where she passes by the office of composer Mohamed Abdel Wahab after winning the fiercely contested Musicians Syndicate election. Staged within a montage that emphasizes backroom political maneuvering and immense pressure on her ensemble to secure their votes, the editing functions less as a vehicle for historical development and more as an apparatus for imposing a closed, highly individualized psychological state.

The film's editing logic reaches its clearest conceptual expression in its final sequence, where her triumphant determination on the Olympia stage in Paris—performing with immense resolve after a physical fall—is followed directly by historical documentary footage of her monumental public funeral. Through this abrupt juxtaposition, her artistic perseverance and symbolic triumph are immediately reframed within the absolute inevability of mortality, producing an emotional circuit that forecloses any possibility of historical or structural mediation. This editorial choice does not merely signify her physical death; it implicitly allegorizes the exhaustion—and historical closure—of an entire era of Egyptian modernity defined by national liberation, pan-Arab solidarity, and anti-colonial struggle.

By collapsing individual fate, historical consequence, and collective mourning into a single, unmediated emotional arc, the film bypasses any sustained engagement with the decades of artistic labor, political strategy, and institutional power through which her cultural authority actually accumulated. Most critically, the immense political weight of the 1967 Paris concert—which historically served as a radical pan-Arab fundraising initiative to rebuild the Egyptian military and mobilize popular resistance following the June defeat—is flattened by the montage. The editing systematically strips this event of its collective, anti-imperialist utility, treating it instead as an isolated theater of personal vulnerability and individual spiritual triumph.

Similar editing strategies recur throughout the text, reinforcing a thematic obsession with individual fragility and

metaphysical transcendence while systematically displacing dialectical development. In this context, editing operates not to offer historical explanation, but rather to construct and maintain a cohesive emotional thesis centered on Oum Koulthoum's interior turbulence. Thus, the filmmakers' stated intent to "deconstruct the myth" or reveal the "human" behind the icon falls into a profound structural contradiction. The narrative establishes no legible causal relationship between her personal vulnerability and her legendary socio-cultural stature; the precise moments capable of illuminating her structural, collective, or political significance are repeatedly severed by non-historical transitions. Ironically, the very material elements that could explain her historic ascension are recoded by the montage as emotional obstacles rather than as generative historical forces.

Consequently, decades of complex artistic collaboration, intense institutional negotiation, social engagement, and calculated political intervention are systematically compressed into stylized dialogue and a rhythmic montage that privileges private fragments over collective, material processes. Success appears textually inevitable yet historically inexplicable; genius emerges as a spontaneous, individualized personal force rather than the dialectical synthesis of material practice. With the exception of the Paris concert—which is treated as a spectacular, isolated anomaly rather than as an organic part of a continuous, politically conscious artistic practice—the film's conception of public presence remains structurally marginal, entirely stripped of the historical forces that sustained her place in popular and cultural memory.

Ultimately, the film's narrative rhythm becomes a formal symptom of its structural inability to contend with the material concept of struggle. The text cannot sustain scenes that depict the slow, grueling, and contradictory labor necessary to construct a form of stardom with Oum Koulthoum's cultural magnitude. Instead, the editing repeatedly leaps directly to outcomes: her celebrated, decades-long collaboration with Abdel Wahab is reduced to a single, climactic performative event, immediately followed by the cut to her state funeral. Musical performance replaces narrative analysis, and emotional catharsis displaces historical explanation. Editing thus functions not merely as a neutral stylistic device, but as a potent ideological mechanism: transforming history into affect, labor into spectacle, and political meaning into aesthetic resolution.

PART VI: CONCLUSION

Taken together, the formal strategies of *El Sett*—its fragmented narrative structure, affect-centered mise-en-scène, expressionistic cinematography, and accelerated montage built on ahistorical juxtaposition—compose a cohesive aesthetic system whose primary structural function is not historical inquiry, but narrative containment. Across its various stylistic levels, the film systematically substitutes historical explanation with emotional legibility, social process with psychological intimacy, and political contradiction with aesthetic resolution. The result is a polished cinematic reconstruction of Oum Koulthoum that is visually refined, emotionally

accessible, and globally readable, yet structurally incapable of supporting a materially grounded account of her artistic labor, collective agency, or historical significance.

Marwan Hamed

Marwan Hamed's technical mastery operates as an apparatus of neutralization, smoothing over the radical, anti-colonial nature of the historical period depicted within the frame. This aesthetic closure is neither incidental nor superficial. Rather, it aligns precisely with the prevailing cultural logic of the institutional networks that are increasingly reshaping contemporary Arab cinema—networks defined by the centrality of Gulf capital, festival-oriented circulation patterns, and transnational platforms whose corporate value systems foreground universal emotional appeal, localized heritage, and market-friendly narratives of individual success. Within this paradigm, history becomes legible only when stripped of structural conflict; politics is tolerated only as a benign, symbolic backdrop; and cultural icons are mobilized less as historically situated agents of anti-imperialist, nationalist, or class-based struggle than as inspirational figures detached from their material contexts.

Therefore, *El Sett* largely reconstructs a highly curated, picturesque, and deeply conservative version of the modern Egyptian national past. The film operates as a visual spectacle designed for passive consumption, creating a distancing effect wherein the viewer admires the formal "look" of the past rather than confronting the underlying contradictions within it. As such, the text transforms lived, material history into "heritage"—a packaged cultural product optimized for regional consumption and international export.

This aesthetic strategy diagnoses a broader cultural condition characterized by a diminished capacity to engage with history as a living, political force. Rather than analyzing or historicizing the past, contemporary cultural production increasingly turns toward a stylized pastiche, consuming formal gloss and aestheticized nostalgia in place of structural reality. Ultimately, *El Sett* does not resurrect history; it consumes its style, leaving behind a sterilized archive hollowed out of its revolutionary potential.

When applied to Oum Koulthoum herself, the film performs a strategic reconfiguration, introducing the artist to a contemporary Arab context by generating a stable, uncontroversial image that aligns smoothly with new regional power structures while softening her radical, anti-colonial, and Nasserist edge. In this light, the growing influence of Gulf cultural institutions has not produced overt, heavy-handed censorship, but a more subtle and precise reorganization of the aesthetic horizon of Arab cinema. Funding structures, co-production incentives, festival visibility, and regional distribution channels increasingly reward films that present the Arab past as consumable heritage rather than as contested history. Within such

a context, the formal choices of *El Sett*—its systemic preference for spectacle over process, and individual vulnerability over the material dialectics of social relations—become intelligible as adaptive strategies within a contemporary apparatus of cultural prestige that privileges melodramatic compression, aesthetic polish, and symbolic reconciliation.

In this regard, it is highly instructive to contrast the production dynamics of *El Sett* with the historical period that witnessed the production of the landmark 1999 Egyptian television serial, *Oum Kalthoum*. While the state-sponsored media apparatus of the Mubarak era fundamentally sought to ideologically demonize or distance itself from the socialist politics of the Nasser period, its state-media aesthetics remained distinctly tied to a nationalist project of writing both the social and biographical histories of contemporary Egypt. This radically contrasts with the corporate-backed frameworks of 2025. Whereas the 1999 television format still contended with the historical weight of institutions, political movements, and collective musical production, the contemporary corporate-backed model bypasses these structures entirely in favor of an atomized, transnational aesthetic.

Consequently, Oum Koulthoum—once inseparable from projects of national liberation and mass mobilization—is reframed as a universally appealing cultural figure severed from historical specificity. Her mid-century ascent as a symbol of Egypt's cultural renaissance, her organic entwinement with Nasserism, anti-imperialist politics, state cultural institutions, and popular struggle is drained of material substance and replaced with a liberal narrative of personal perseverance that aligns smoothly with a neoliberal cultural framework. What emerges is not a critical confrontation with myth but its profitable re-commodification: a national icon, historically charged with political and artistic urgency, repackaged as a globally exportable, aesthetically polished figure.

In this sense, *El Sett* embodies a broader transformation in Arab cultural production under Gulf centrality—where cinema increasingly functions not as a site of ideological contestation, but as a domain for managing entertainment commodities for rapid consumption. The film does not falsify history so much as neutralize it, translating structural conflict into emotional experience and replacing dialectical development with aesthetic rhythm. Its stylistic elegance therefore performs a precise function: neutralizing history, displacing the political from everyday collective life, and re-circulating cultural memory in a form aligned with the requirements of cross-border commodification. *El Sett* does not stand outside the dominant cultural realignments shaping the contemporary Arab moment; on the contrary, it represents one of their most refined and visible manifestations. Its aesthetic achievements must therefore be read not simply as evidence of cinematic craftsmanship, but as indicators of an emerging cultural value system—one in which the contours of Arab cinema are increasingly determined by the imperatives of Gulf capital, global networks of prestige, and a highly streamlined collective memory.

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