

The Yacoubian Building (عمارة يعقوبيان , 'Imārat Ya'qūbiān, 2006)

Thomas Demmelhuber

dir. Marwan Hamed; prod. Imad Adeb; screenplay Wahid Hamed; photography Sameh Selim; music Khaled Hammad. 35 mm, color, 1.85:1 anamorphic, 172 mins. Good News, distrib. Good News 4 films.

The Yacoubian Building is based on the eponymous novel by Egyptian writer, dentist, and political activist Alaa Al Aswany, who played a critical role as an intellectual during the Arab uprisings in 2011. His bestselling novel was published in 2002 at the time of a closed political order and a highly regulated society under the autocratic regime of



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

President Hosni Mubarak. This led some observers to speculate that the novel (and four years later the film) must have accidentally passed Mubarak's rigid government censors. Others hinted at changes in the Egyptian regime with emerging business elites in the media and entertainment sector becoming more influential in the 2000s and thus creating new spaces for contentious politics that allowed for some limited criticism of the regime. The novel had a tremendous impact on an already thriving period in Egyptian poetry and fiction of the 2000s. Meanwhile, there is a broad consensus that both the novel and the film offered a boost or even inspiration for the political uprisings in 2011, which used the unifying slogan »The people want the fall of the regime« and culminated in the breakdown of the Mubarak regime. The initial public debate after the film's release in 2006 was substantial: More than one hundred parliamentarians criticized the film, saying it was »spreading obscenity and debauchery, which is totally against Egyptian moral values« (»Egyptian MPs«). Nonetheless, *The Yacoubian Building* broke box office records in Egyptian cinemas right from the start after its premier at the 56th Berlin International Film Festival.

The film—with the cast featuring some of the most prominent Egyptian actors (e.g. Adel Emam and Yousra)—depicts and deconstructs modern Egyptian society since the revolution of the »Free Officers« in 1952 and the founding of the republic soon after.

The film is set in downtown Cairo (Wust al-Balad) in the early 1990s. An apartment building near Talaat Harb Square serves as a microcosm of contemporary Egypt and is the place in which most of the film's characters either live or work. This splendid house that has lost much of its former glory is placed at the center of a sentimental discourse and its nostalgic praise for Egypt's history in the early 20th century. It depicts the brightness of colonial architecture and the allegedly beautiful era of the Pashas that was eventually brought to an abrupt end by the free officers' revolution in 1952. The apartment block »Yacoubian Building« functions as a fine-grained mirror of Egyptian society with all its different strata, (in-)formal modes of interaction (such as patronage or clientelism), and religious stereotypes (e.g. *vis-à-vis* the Coptic minority). Although the sub-plots hardly correlate, they all revolve around a shared reference point as they deal with the shameless exploitation of power and examine corruption, torture, and sexual abuse as well as other issues, such as homosexuality, that are usually taboos in cultural productions of a patriarchal and hierarchical society.

It is intriguing that the melodramatic attribution is a central feature in international reviews of the film, e.g. that it is »overlong and schematic; episodic and melodramatic« (Stehlik). The film is indeed rich in (unfulfilled) romance and longing, stereotypical characters, and emotional suffering. The story of the young doorman's son Taha el Shazli (Mohamed Emam) is a case in point: He was not admitted to the police academy due to his social background, radicalized himself by joining Islamist extremists, and turned out to be a terrorist in order to retaliate his own hardship of torture in police custody. The film also includes numerous melodramatic scenes with the singer Christine (Yousra) as confidant and former love of Zaki Pasha el Dessouki (the main character representing the old cosmopolitan elite, played by Adel Emam), performing songs like Édith Piaf's »La Vie en Rose« on the piano, reminiscent of the allegedly *Belle Époque* of Egyptian-European entanglements.

Yet can this exaggerated depiction of societal characters, interactions, and schemes successfully appeal to the emotions of the audience? It probably depends on which audience (for example Arabic or non-Arabic) and sub-plot one refers to. Kate Daniels argues that the film with its stance on romance, emotional hardship, and stock characters »appears to have been made, at least aesthetically, with Western audiences firmly in mind« (109). Maria Golia is also rather critical in her review stressing that a melodrama »subtracts gravity from its subjects and individuality from its characters for the sake of contrast, and to place the viewer at a comfortable and entertaining distance.« It is precisely this comfortable distance that does not exist in *The Yacoubian Building* for an Egyptian audience. Despite the fictional plot playing in a historical setting of the early 1990s, the film presents the profile of a political and social reality in a surveillance state that remains highly relevant to and valid for Egyptian viewers. It shows the extreme and uncompromising dichotomies and cleavages of a society that accepts the exploitation of the poor and the stifling of a shrinking middle class by the rapidly increasing business elites alongside a traditionally privileged class. Apart from that, autocratic regimes do not only define limited spaces of political debate. They also try to set the »rules of the game« in all spheres of society, thus affecting the whole setup of social relationships. At this point, melodramatic devices can be an intended and effective artistic tool to bypass or undermine political censorship and reservations based on religious norms and values as the novel (2002) and later the film (2006) show impressively. Yet, there are also limits for writers and artists who cross these implicit

limits of political and social critique. In the aftermath of the political upheavals since 2011 and the restoration of autocratic rule, Alaa Al Aswany left Egypt in 2019 and has been in exile abroad ever since.

References

- Daniels, Kate. 2008. »Film Review: *The Yacoubian Building* (2006): Director Marwan Hamad, 172 mins.« *Global Media and Communication* 4 (1): 107-11.
- »Egyptian MPs Round on Gay Film.« *The Guardian*, July 5, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jul/05/news1>.
- Golia, Maria. 2006. »Review: Golia on *The Yacoubian Building*.« *The Arabist*, August 7, 2006. <https://arabist.net/blog/2006/8/7/review-golia-on-the-yacoubian-building.html>.
- Stehlik, Milos. 2011. »Milos Stehlik Reviews the Egyptian Film *The Yacoubian Building*.« *WBEZ Chicago*, February 11, 2011. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/milos-stehlik-reviews-the-egyptian-film-the-yacoubian-building/5d51cc07-b7cd-48f1-9eda-f8b9b-b75c954>.

