



**HAL**  
open science

# Misr Abroad: Trading Egyptian Films in Colonial Maghreb

Morgan Corriou

► **To cite this version:**

Morgan Corriou. Misr Abroad: Trading Egyptian Films in Colonial Maghreb. Ifdal Elsaket; Daniel Biltereyst; Philippe Meers. Cinema in the Arab World: New Histories, New Approaches, Bloomsbury, pp.27-45, 2023, World Cinema, 9781350163720. hal-04101795

**HAL Id: hal-04101795**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04101795v1>**

Submitted on 22 May 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **Misr Abroad**

### **Trading Egyptian Films in Colonial Maghreb**

Morgan Corriou

The history of the international circulation of films seems to reduce itself, after World War I, to a history of Hollywood exports, dominated by the question of cultural imperialism.<sup>1</sup> Cultural Studies and new cinema history have made it possible, however, to emphasize the diversity of spectatorship and the consumption of non-Hollywood films.<sup>2</sup> These practices cannot, of course, be detached from the particular conditions governing the international trade of non-dominant cinemas. While the development of a dynamic Egyptian film industry from the 1930s onwards have drawn much attention, the distribution of these films abroad remains less known. For many decades, however, Egyptian films were the only Arabic-language films available to North African and Middle Eastern audiences. The French colonial empire, in particular, represented an important export market and played a key role in the internationalization of Egyptian production. The political stakes of these screenings have been discussed in a few studies.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have highlighted the moral panic that seized the colonial administration and the strict control imposed on these films. But, even before the intervention of censorship, the distribution of Egyptian films faced a series of economic obstacles, partly erected by the French authorities. It is therefore important to consider not only the political but also the economic and social dimensions of this trade.

In this chapter, I will focus on the circulation of Egyptian films in the Maghreb from the turn of the 1930s until independence. Be it on the political, economic or cultural level, Egyptian

cinema represented for the Algerians, the Moroccans and the Tunisians an opportunity for cinematic independence in a repressive context that prevented the birth of national cinemas. While the predominance of foreign films on North African screens has been often dubbed as “Western neo-colonialism” and “imperialism of international money,”<sup>4</sup> these “South-South” circulations demonstrate the diverse cultural and/or political meanings of foreign films. The colonizers treated Egyptian cinema as both a dangerous and despised adversary, replacing Hollywood as the new nemesis of French cinema. For North African audiences, Egyptian films depicted a world that was both exotic and familiar and could shape pan-Arab or even national identity. From an economic standpoint, the trade of Egyptian films reflected the maintenance of cultural relations between Egypt and the Maghreb, as well as their colonial reconfiguration in the context of French occupation.

This study draws not only on the records of the colonial administration, trade journals, interviews and memoirs but also on hitherto underexplored sources such as printed lyrics and the private archives of the distributor Films Régence.<sup>5</sup> I wish indeed to emphasize the figure of the distributor, too often neglected in a history that, as highlighted by Jean-Marc Leveratto, tends to concentrate on the auteur’s sole competence and describe producers and distributors as mere “obstacles to the development of the Seventh Art.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The jewels of the Nile**

Egyptian cinema appeared on North African screens in the early 1930s.<sup>7</sup> In Tunis, *Unshuda al-Fu’ad* (*The Song of the Heart*, Mario Volpe, 1932) was the first Egyptian feature film to be exhibited. It played to full houses for four weeks, attracting the attention of the Direction de la Sûreté publique (Directorate for Public Security), dumbfounded.<sup>8</sup> Foreign films seemed to foster a plurality of identities and allegiances that for long had threatened France’s hegemony.<sup>9</sup> Even the very concept of foreign film could take on several meanings in a region

where Muslims, Jews, Italians, Spaniards, French coexisted. In the absence of a domestic cinema, there is little doubt that Egyptian films seemed more familiar to the majority Arab-speaking population than the French and American films dominating the screens.<sup>10</sup>

Songs, popularized by records and radio, played a fundamental role in the appeal of these films, as did the presence of stars with an international aura. The aesthetic value of these productions, however, was denied by the colonial administration, that strived to explain the infatuation of the colonized audiences in purely political terms. Indeed, these films combined Arab-Muslim culture and modernity, thereby contradicting colonial topoi on the alleged immobility of Muslim societies. Most of them gave a prosperous image of independent Egypt, which particularly annoyed French authorities.<sup>11</sup> The Maghrebi filmgoers certainly favoured a cinema that provided a sense of pride for Arab people. These films could also convey nationalist and pan-Arab demands and the screenings were occasionally the scene of political demonstrations.<sup>12</sup> But, the major appeal of these films was, first and foremost, the use of Arabic, which was largely absent from the media in the early 1930s. Although the spoken Egyptian was far from familiar to the first viewers, it nonetheless elicited a unifying feeling among the public as Arabic suffered the blows of the colonial power – to different degrees, whether in the Algerian departments or the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>13</sup>

The love of Maghrebi audiences for Egyptian cinema fuelled the anxieties of French authorities. Before World War II, these mainly focused on the presence of Italian or German investors and technicians, reactivating the classic fear of foreign agitators – another way of denying political autonomy to the colonized.<sup>14</sup> The issue at stake was actually the appropriation of the camera by Arab directors and the feeling of a loss of control. We thus note the concomitance between the development of Egyptian cinema and the rising power of a colonial discourse on the “native” public and its alleged characteristics.<sup>15</sup> The concern of the colonial administration fed on the demographics of Egyptian cinema’s audiences, described as

exclusively indigenous. Although the law imposed on Egyptian films to be subtitled in French, disdain largely seemed to prevail among European viewers. This rejection should undoubtedly be qualified, but the fact remains that the enthusiasm of North Africans for Egyptian films had been categorized by the authorities as a communal passion, excluding Europeans. The outraged reactions of colonial officials hid in the most hackneyed way a denial of universality towards non-Western cinemas. Some audiences clearly favored Egyptian cinema. This was particularly the case in areas where locals had little exposure to French, the language in which most films were shown in the Maghreb. The same applied to Muslim women, who were more restricted in their movements, and therefore in their cinema attendance.<sup>16</sup> But the opposition between a conservative and/or poorly educated public, avid for Egyptian films, and a modern and literate public that preferred American and European films proves to be largely false.<sup>17</sup> The film consumption of North African viewers actually appeared more diversified than that of European viewers.

While the authorities viewed the enthusiastic reception of Egyptian cinema as a symbol of backwardness and an act of mistrust towards the culture of the colonizer, testimonies indicate that the response to these films was more complex and varied than what French observers suggested: entertainment, Arab pride, opposition to colonialism, but also the dream of “Arab Western-ness” in the words of Massoud Hayoun were all opposed and mixed at the same time. The latter reports the comments of his grandmother, a Jewish Tunisian, born in 1929: “An Arabic film was good, Daida explained, if it could situate itself between Arabness and Westernness. A good Arabic film was in Arabic, introduced new Arabic-language songs, and mimicked what Daida described as the class and delicacy of a European film. Deference to Arabic social mores – particularly sexual prudence – were non-negotiables [sic] that faded too as time went on.”<sup>18</sup> Many Egyptian films de facto replicated the pattern of Hollywood musicals and could thus appear as both a gateway to a Western way of life and the catalyst for a pan-Arab identity.

The rarity of these films immediately transformed the screenings into events that won new audiences, especially a family audience.<sup>19</sup> But the distinctive feature of Egyptian cinema also lies in the outreach beyond its viewers. There was, indeed, a broader interest in the cultural dynamism in Egypt. Without even knowing whether the films were to be screened in *Afrique française du Nord* (AFN, French North Africa, the official name of the region during colonization), people closely scrutinized the news of shooting and releases in the press. Fashion was also inspired by the outfits of Egyptian stars. More importantly, songs, popularized by records, radio and printed lyrics,<sup>20</sup> helped bring Egyptian cinema beyond the closed circle of filmgoers. Thus, Egyptian films reached female and rural audiences who had little access to theatres. Undoubtedly, these significant intermedial practices contributed to the moral panic of the French authorities, who felt all the more a loss of control. This prompted a multitude of reports and projects on French Arabic-language production, which continued to multiply after the war, without much success.

The one-sided representation of Egyptian cinema audiences as a dissenting public accounted for the specific regulation of these films. The Blum-Byrnes agreements (28 May 1946) had established screen quota. These were quickly implemented in AFN, but instead of targeting Hollywood films they were distorted to counter the Egyptian film industry.<sup>21</sup> The status of the protectorates that allowed for relative local autonomy preserved the use of Arabic in Morocco and Tunisia and forced the authorities to grant more space to foreign films than in Algeria, considered as an integral part of France, where the Blum-Byrnes agreements were stringently applied. Yet, the obligation to subtitle or dub films in French particularly made an impression in Tunisia where the subtitling of films in Arabic wasn't mandatory.<sup>22</sup> With the *arrêté résidentiel* of 31 December 1946, the French authorities explicitly chose to treat Arabic as a foreign language. The aim here was to weaken the already poor position of Arabic on screens and to prevent cinemas from specializing in Egyptian films.<sup>23</sup> The colonial

administration was thus trying to protect French cinema, which, in many ways, seemed more foreign to Arab audiences than films from Egypt.<sup>24</sup>

Imposing quota proved to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to enforce and theatres specializing in Egyptian cinema soon expanded.<sup>25</sup> Distributors played an indirect role in the specialization of cinemas, by displaying a reluctance to rent out the French or American box-office hits to theaters showing Egyptian films, on the pretence that this would devalue their products.<sup>26</sup> Cinemas specializing in Egyptian films suffered from the overall stigmatization of indigenous audiences and their behaviour, deemed irrational and violent. Elizabeth Thompson has shown how hygienist rationales have been widely used to control public space in Morocco. In the European neighborhoods of Meknes, petitioners criticized the screening of Egyptian films on the grounds that their neighborhood was “transformed into a veritable garbage dump.”<sup>27</sup> These pressures actually aimed at restricting the circulation of Moroccan filmgoers in the city, a practice favored by the development of cinema attendance.

The exhibition of Egyptian cinema was also regulated by censorship. The issue of film control will only be briefly mentioned here, as several studies have already addressed the subject. Control appeared to be more severe in North Africa than in French West Africa, where the censors lacked arguments for banning Egyptian films and struggled with the language barrier.<sup>28</sup> Scenes calling for Arab union, attacks against the West and references to King Faruq or the Egyptian army were systematically cut out.<sup>29</sup> But the censorship of Egyptian films, like the whole process of film control, proved to be versatile and often counterproductive. In this respect, the famous *Gharam wa-intiqam* (*Love and Revenge*, 1944) by Yusuf Wahbi proves characteristic. The film was first authorized in Tunisia in 1946 and was enthusiastically applauded by nationalists.<sup>30</sup> It reappeared on screens a year later, this time with cuts, which infuriated the audience.<sup>31</sup> More than often, the censor had to conclude that films were “subject to interpretation by whoever wanted to interpret them” and that the demonstrations were

“determined more by the local atmosphere, the theatre, the region and its political climate than by the film itself.”<sup>32</sup> This, however, did not prevent Egyptian cinema from replacing the arch-enemy of French cinema, Hollywood, in colonial obsessions.<sup>33</sup>

### **The colonial economics of distribution**

Distribution channels established in a constrained political context, further complicated by the precariousness of the film industry in AFN. While foreign films almost systematically transited through metropolitan France, the increasing influx of Egyptian films raised the question of the cinematic independence of the Maghreb.

The scarcity of the product, which was far from being sufficient to supply the Egyptian domestic market, must be emphasized.<sup>34</sup> Distributors also had to adapt to the weakness of film exhibition in the Maghreb, particularly in rural areas. Films *Régence*, for instance, supplied 16mm films to the smallest exhibitors. The market, itself, was closely linked to religious festivities. Concerns about the shortage of Arabic films regularly arose at the time of Ramadan, with *ʿīd al-ḥajj* (the religious holiday after Ramadan) a crucial period for business.<sup>35</sup> Foreign films usually arrived to AFN from France, through Algiers. The historical experience of metropolitan distribution companies obviously contributed to imposing this Parisian stage, but the main motive was financial. By trading with metropolitan retailers, North African distributors avoided the cumbersome import-licensing process and the change of currency. Goods coming from French territory (here Algeria) benefited from reduced customs duties when entering the protectorates and, in the case of films, were even admitted duty free.<sup>36</sup> The currency issue was especially acute at the end of the Second World War, at a time when the French economy was in a very difficult position. Distributor Jacques Haïk, for instance, had to cancel a contract in 1945 because the Alexandria-based Brothers Behna production and



distribution company refused to be paid in francs. He then organized a system of barter of French and Egyptian reels.<sup>37</sup>

After the war, more distributors started to venture into the business. In the confusion that followed the liberation of Tunisia, Egyptian films were even smuggled in on military aircraft.<sup>38</sup> The automobile journey of the young law student Hamouda Chaabini through Libya and Lower Egypt at the beginning of the 1950s is just another illustration of the small-scale nature of this trade.<sup>39</sup> In Alexandria, the law student and his father, owner of the Ciné-Soir in Tunis, made contact with Behna Films, thanks to a middleman from the city of Sfax. The prices turned out to be too high, so they settled on a smaller producer and acquired the rights to three films for all of North Africa, together with the Agence tunisienne de films (Tunisian Film Agency).<sup>40</sup> Such examples demonstrate that exchanges could occur at a very small level (three films in this case). Friends and family networks served to build bridges between Egypt and the Maghreb. For even the most ambitious distributors, such as Edmond and Édouard Khayat, Greek-Orthodox Lebanese established in Tunisia, Egyptian films remained a rare commodity. In absolute figures, these were probably more present on French screens than on Tunisian screens.<sup>41</sup> An anecdote testifies to this shortage: with only two prints, the Khayat brothers managed to screen a film in six Tunis cinemas, with each screening giving rise to frantic reel races between the theatres.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, direct exchanges were far from being encouraged: Egyptian producers were discouraged from travelling to North Africa by the French embassy in Cairo,<sup>43</sup> and the allocation of foreign currency depended on the political approval of the colonial administration.<sup>44</sup> In spite of the geographical proximity, France remained the main gateway for Egyptian productions. Some technical arguments supported a financial reasoning: the North African studios did not have the necessary means to subtitle in French the reels coming from Egypt. Thus, the Parisian firm Francorexfilms, owned by the brothers André and Pierre

Bensimon, imported and subtitled films to be distributed in AFN by Mabrouka Films, a company born in Algiers in 1950, in which they also had interests.<sup>45</sup> Obviously, these obstacles concealed evident political interests.

The Egyptian film trade depended heavily on political fluctuations. The correspondence of Films Régence bears witness to the difficult conditions in which distributors operated, in constant battle with the French administration. Following the banning of French films in Egypt and in a context of exacerbated tensions around the Suez Canal, the importation of Egyptian films was prohibited from October 1956.<sup>46</sup> The restrictions eased somewhat at the end of 1959 and films purchased just before the Suez crisis were screened in metropolitan cinemas attended by North African workers. In Algeria, however, the *Délégation générale* stubbornly tried and multiplied the administrative quibbles in order to slow down the distribution of Egyptian films. Films Régence, on the verge of bankruptcy, protested against the irrationality of this type of backdoor censorship while phonograph records spread the voices banned on screens and the *Sections administratives spécialisées* (SAS), a civil and military program operating in rural areas, exhibited Egyptian films in the countryside.<sup>47</sup> The Algerian cinema bureau could hardly speak of economic retaliation, since the restrictions also concerned films already paid to Egypt and involved the non-renewal of screen certificates for old films.<sup>48</sup> The actual purpose of the blockade was rather to reduce the circulation of Egyptian films, which now only served as bait for French propaganda in the SAS.

While Egyptian films were often traded in precarious conditions and sometimes on a very small scale, the distribution was not limited to minor companies. The state-controlled *Actualités Françaises* itself distributed Egyptian films, which did not prevent the company from dealing with censors.<sup>49</sup> A few large firms expanded, as shown by the example of Films Régence, owned by Jacques Haïk (1893-1950).<sup>50</sup> This Tunisian Jew had become a famous producer, distributor and exhibitor in interwar Paris. Placed in forced residence by Vichy, he was allowed

to leave for Tunisia in 1941.<sup>51</sup> In July 1943, just a few weeks after the liberation of Tunis, he set up a joint venture company to distribute Egyptian films prevented from being released in the Maghreb because of the war. Was this merely a stopgap solution, at a time when his cinematic empire had been lost to “aryanisation” and France was still occupied? In any case, the former mogul dealt with the biggest production companies: Misr, Nahas, Behna and so on. As early as 1944, he began to covet the sub-Saharan market. Although he invested in Spanish Morocco and Libya, his activity remained essentially limited to the French colonial sphere.

A 1953 contract provides an overview of the expected distribution of profits: 30 per cent for Algeria, 30 per cent for Morocco, 25 per cent for Tunisia, 7.5 per cent for French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa and 7.5 per cent for metropolitan France.<sup>52</sup> As the business grew, Haïk launched three companies in 1947: Régence-Tunisie, Régence-Maroc and Régence-Algérie. Algiers remained, however, the bridgehead of Egyptian cinema in the Maghreb. It was registered as a *société anonyme* (public limited company), while Régence-Tunisie and Régence-Maroc hold the lower status of a *société anonyme à responsabilité limitée* (limited liability company). This structure ensured local anchorage, but the Maghrebi intermediaries seemed relatively few in number. The majority of the shareholders remained French, and decision-making still took place at the Parisian headquarters.<sup>53</sup>

### **The irresponsible businessmen<sup>54</sup>**

The latter point raises questions about the sociology of the Maghrebi networks of distributors and investors, as the various obstacles to the Egyptian film trade raised awareness about the limited role left to Muslims in the film industry, especially in post-war Morocco where the nationalist bourgeoisie launched campaigns to take over theatres.<sup>55</sup>

The Egyptian film trade in AFN was dominated before the war by a Greek-Orthodox Lebanese based in Casablanca, Théodore Khayat (born in 1905), nephew of the Baida brothers and concessionaire of the famous Baidaphon label.<sup>56</sup> For these newcomers, the record business constituted a gateway to film distribution as Egyptian cinema maintained close ties with the music industry. Distributors often negotiated the release of songs together with the film rights. As new companies emerged after the war, the distributors of Egyptian films remained Arab-speaking minorities, Lebanese Christians and North African Jews. Neither colonizer, nor colonized, “more or less hoodwinked, more or less beneficiaries”, these characters embody the “*métis* of colonization” as defined by Albert Memmi and, as such, often acted as cultural intermediaries between the Muslims and the French.<sup>57</sup> More and more Muslims were nonetheless getting involved in distribution in the years leading up to independence, like Abderrazak Slouma, head of Tunisia-Film, or Benzakour, manager of SEAM-Films in Morocco. Obviously, Egyptian cinema opened a breach in a business where Muslims were hitherto very little involved. Still, nationalist distributors as Benzakour, a supporter of the Istiqlal Party, had to deal with the constant interference by colonial officials.<sup>58</sup>

Aside from the distributors themselves, the financing of these companies needs to be examined more closely. We then note that Muslim investors were present at a very early stage. The first joint venture company created in 1943 by Jacques Haïk brought together a Tunisian Muslim, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Luz, an industrialist from Sfax, co-owner of the Majestic cinema in the same city, and a Tunisian Jew, Joseph Smadja, a businessman in Tunis.<sup>59</sup> This association contradicts the image of a segregated society but was not exceptional in the film industry. Diversity prevailed in the exhibition sector, and during the inter-war period we find several examples of partnerships between Tunisian Jews and Italians, some of them even known for their fascist sympathies.<sup>60</sup> The participation of a Muslim, however, was less common. The distribution of Egyptian cinema only attracted French settlers at a later stage: in 1944, several

prominent figures joined Haïk's company. Among these new members, we also note the presence of a Muslim dignitary, and no less than the minister of *ḥubūs*,<sup>61</sup> Mohamed Salah Mzali.<sup>62</sup> The presence of these personalities attests to the legitimacy that the Egyptian film trade was gradually gaining.

The issue of legitimacy is no small matter when one recalls the sarcasm that Egyptian cinema used to elicit in the cinephile community. Tahar Cheriaa, director of cinema at the Tunisian Ministry of Cultural Affairs between 1962 and 1969, has described the reservations raised by these films in post-war film clubs.<sup>63</sup> Jean-Marc Leveratto has strongly criticized the “cultural disqualification” of the distributor, commonly opposed in French scholarship to the figure of the auteur, whose occupation is solely considered in economic terms and, rarely, in terms of expertise. Yet, the “emergence of a skill” is also at stake, as distributors must establish tools to measure film quality.<sup>64</sup> These distributors had chosen to specialize in the cinema of one country, Egypt, conceived as a genre in itself. According to Leveratto, genre is “certainly a vague reality. But it is an effective tool to objectify the viewer's judgement, by identifying objects likely to attract him, by comparison with spectacular objects authenticated by experience.”<sup>65</sup> The example of Films Régence appears all the more singular as the company did not hesitate to invest directly in the production of Egyptian films from 1952 onwards, thanks to the close and friendly ties that the company had established with the Cairo-based actor, musician and producer Farid al-Atrash.<sup>66</sup> Films Régence's contract with the star demonstrates a clear will to reproduce its most popular films: “The titles of the films have not yet been decided, but they will, in any case, be interpreted by Farid El Atrash and will have at least the same quality as all his previous films (*Akhir Kedba* [*The Last Lie*, 1950], *Afrita Hanim* [*Little Miss Devil*, 1949] etc.)”; that is his enormous successes with the dancer Samia Gamal, flamboyant musicals spiced up with belly dancing.<sup>67</sup>

How exactly did these distributors view their audiences and their films? This point is difficult to assess because the traces left by distributors in the administrative archives stem mostly from negotiations with the colonial power. The distributors constantly tried to justify the need to screen films in Arabic, which was far from self-evident: “Algerian Muslims, with rare exceptions, are not capable of appreciating purely European cinema and their tastes, habits and morals lead them to a show combining song and dance, supporting a sentimental storyline,” states a report on “The problem of Arab film in Algeria” around 1960.<sup>68</sup> They thus attempted to define a specific audience by adopting the colonial stereotypes of the “native” public. “This liberal measure [the end of the blockade of Egyptian films] will not undermine the presence of France in Algeria, nor its culture, quite the contrary. It will bring to the cinema a clientele too primitive to value European films, which they will no doubt come to appreciate by virtue of a foreseeable evolution,” wrote Pierre Vercel,<sup>69</sup> the head of distribution at Films Régence. Vercel subscribed to a developmentalist vision then in vogue – one thinks of Daniel Lerner’s famous survey:<sup>70</sup> the love of Egyptian cinema was just a stage in a process of necessary modernization. Above all, distributors must reassure the colonial authorities. Vercel insists on the “purely entertaining” character of Egyptian films<sup>71</sup> and is quick to ensure that the films he distributes “never have a subversive or political nature.”<sup>72</sup> To what extent did these discourses reflect their own categories or those best able to engage the colonial administration?

In a note written around 1954, distributors were described as mere businessmen unaware of the “insidious propaganda” of their films.<sup>73</sup> Yet, Films Régence, which distributed *Gharam wa-intiqam* (*Love and Revenge*, 1944), could not pretend to ignore the demonstrations to which some films gave rise, leading to screening bans. It is actually difficult to decide on the naivety or cunning of these distributors. Régence pursued a pro-French line before independence. Asking for the support of the Syndicat des distributeurs indépendants in its negotiations with the colonial administration, Pierre Vercel recalled that the bankruptcy of Régence would leave

“the field clear for nationalist traders in Cairo, Beirut or Casablanca who are waiting for the impending collapse of our company and a possible change in the status of Algeria to take over the important Arab film market in North Africa.”<sup>74</sup> In an interview conducted by Nidam Abdi in 2003, Vercel stated that he was supportive of independence. The firm would even pay the revolutionary taxes in metropolitan France, under pressure from the National Liberation Front.<sup>75</sup> With independence achieved, the firm played the Algerian card in order to preserve its interests in the country, while pressure was strong to make the business fall into Algerian hands and Régence-Algérie was being blackmailed with screen certificates. Now, Vercel emphasized the struggle against the French administration to screen Egyptian films between 1956 and 1960 and, in a desperate letter alerting Ahmed Ben Bella about the situation, promised, once again, that none of his films were “of a political or tendentious nature.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Defending an Arab-speaking public sphere in the Maghreb**

The Maghrebi film market was characterized by a rather open model in comparison to the rest of the French colonial empire – Indochina or West Africa in particular. The distribution business was nevertheless a major site of interference by the colonial state. During the 1930s, France watched helplessly as Egyptian films arrived on screens, a business then monopolized by the Baida family, which operated on a pan-Arab scale. The post-war period witnessed the economic and political strategies of France to regain control of the Egyptian film trade, and reconfigure its circulation within a colonial framework. In this context, the economy of distribution appeared to be more dependent on political meddling than the exhibition sector.

As this chapter has shown, the political positioning of the distributors themselves often proved ambiguous, hovering as it did between a prudent neutrality beneficial for business and a more or less asserted nationalist commitment, in a context of colonial repression. These

distributors were not defending the right to see films in Arabic any less. In 1960, Films Régence thus pointed out the injustice suffered by North African spectators deprived of entertainment in their own language and denounced discrimination, referring to the “considerable mass of French-Muslim citizens who consider themselves unjustly disadvantaged compared to French citizens of European descent who, for their part, can see films of their choice without any limitation of origin.”<sup>77</sup>

In spite of political constraints, a few large firms managed to impose themselves, such as Régence, which established close ties with Egyptian studios. Haïk used his prestige and his skills as a major Parisian producer and distributor of Hollywood films to promote Egyptian cinema internationally. The firm also distributed the neorealist films of Salah Abu Seif and the 1958 *Bab al-Hadid (Cairo Station)* by Youssef Chahine.<sup>78</sup> While these films have been fervently analyzed at the Carthage Film Festival or in film clubs, and praised by local cinephiles as a model for the Maghrebi cinema to be, the intermediaries that were the distributors have been completely forgotten: they symbolize the industrial and commercial side of the seventh art. Yet, those businessmen were able to cross with ease, and intelligence indeed, the barriers too easily and falsely erected between *Afrita Hanim (Litte Miss Devil)* and *Bab al-Hadid*, between scorned belly dances and an esteemed neorealist cinema.

For Ramon Lobato, there is no doubt that distribution is the branch of the film industry that has been least theorised in cinema scholarship. He calls for moving beyond “familiar narratives of cinematic hegemony and resistance,” which have influenced many studies on distribution.<sup>79</sup> The case of Egyptian cinema allows us to challenge overly simplistic dichotomies. A real thorn in the side of colonial authorities, the Egyptian film trade participated in the expansion of an Arab-speaking public sphere at a time when language was under attack from the French occupying forces. The role of Jewish and Lebanese traders also demonstrates



the importance of pre-colonial economic structures. Yet, in the Maghreb, Egyptian cinema became part of a colonial economy, with Paris as its hub.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985) or Kerry Segrave, *American films abroad: Hollywood's domination of the world's movie screens from the 1890's to the present* (London: McFarland, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> See among other references, John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989); Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes (eds), *Hollywood Abroad: Audiences and Cultural Exchange* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004); Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Robert C. Allen (eds), *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (eds), *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Sébastien Denis, 'Cinéma et panarabisme en Algérie entre 1945 et 1962', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 226 (2007): 37-51; Morgan Corriou, 'Un nouveau loisir en situation coloniale : le cinéma dans la Tunisie du protectorat', PhD Diss., Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7, Paris, 2011; Odile Goerg, 'Les films arabes, une menace pour l'Empire ? La politique des films arabes à la veille des indépendances en Afrique Occidentale française', *Outre-mers* 100, no. 380-381 (2013): 287-312.

<sup>4</sup> "Néo-colonialisme occidental", "impérialisme du fric international." Tahar Cheriaa, 'Inventaire du cinéma en Tunisie en 1970', Tunis, 1970, fol. 18. Rapport pour le premier séminaire sur l'inventaire du cinéma dans les pays francophones, organisé du 20 au 24 novembre 1970 par l'Agence de coopération culturelle et technique à Dakar.

---

<sup>5</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Jean-Marie Bonnafous who granted me access to the precious archives of Films Régence. I also extend my warmest thanks to Nolwenn Mingant, who kindly shared with me copies of the archives she consulted at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and to Mohamed Bennani for introducing me to his printed lyrics collection (Beit el Bennani, Tunis). Finally, I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the conferences *Distribution, diffusion et réception des cinémas d’Afrique et du Levant* (Montréal, 20-22 April 2018), *Cinema-Going in the Arab World: Exhibition, Distribution, and Audiences* (Cairo, 14-15 September 2018) and the panel “Industrial, Institutional, and Ideological: Cinema Histories in the Middle East/North Africa” (Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 14-17 November 2019) for their informed comments on various drafts of this work.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Marc Leveratto, ‘Histoire du cinéma et expertise culturelle’, *Politix* 16, no. 61 (2003): 18.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 142.

<sup>8</sup> Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), 1TU/1V/1890, fol. 700: le directeur de la Sûreté publique au directeur général de l’Intérieur, Tunis, 15 juillet 1932.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); M’hamed Oualdi and Noureddine Amara (ed.), ‘La nationalité dans le monde arabe des années 1830 aux années 1960. Négocier les appartenances et le droit’, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 137 (2015): 13-172.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmet Gürata, ‘Tears of Love: Egyptian Cinema in Turkey (1938–1950)’, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 30 (2004): 74, has shown how “while Turkish films were non-existent, [Egyptian] films were presented as local products”, most notably through dubbing by Turkish singing stars.

---

<sup>11</sup> For the head of the *Centre cinématographique tunisien*, Egyptian cinema was “false propaganda as the audience is led to believe that all Egyptians have achieved the same level of education and lifestyle as suggested by the scenes seen on screen.” (CADN, 1TU/1V/2394(2), fol. 108-109: Tunis, 13 août 1947).

<sup>12</sup> The colonial archives record a few such incidents, although the interpretation of the demonstrations is often debated by the authorities. See, for instance, CADN, 1MA/200/187.

<sup>13</sup> “Especially in North Africa, where the language is less pure, the expansion of the teaching of literary Arabic through the action of the Ulema and the campaign speeches, has helped to strengthen the popularity of Egyptian films,” wrote the rapporteurs of the Haut Comité méditerranéen (Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Archives d’histoire contemporaine, fonds Charles-André Julien, JU 12: rapport n° 3, “Le cinéma en pays musulman et en Afrique du Nord,” session de mars 1939). Sheikh Mohammed El-Fadhel Ben Achour (*Le mouvement littéraire et intellectuel en Tunisie* (Tunis: Alif, 1998), 177-8, insisted on the role of the Egyptian radio, even if it remained difficult to receive.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> See Morgan Corriou, ‘La France coloniale et le spectateur ‘indigène’: histoire d’une incompétence cinématographique’, *MEI – Médiation et information* 49 (2020): 63-77.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> See Morgan Corriou, ‘“Le choix entre l’Orient et l’Occident”? Les Tunisiens et le cinéma dans les dernières années du protectorat français (1946-1956)’, in *Cultures d’Empires. Échanges et affrontements culturels en situation coloniale*, ed. Romain Bertrand, Hélène Blais and Emmanuelle Sibeud (Paris: Karthala, 2015).

---

<sup>18</sup> Massoud Hayoun, *When We Were Arabs: a Jewish Family's Forgotten History* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 130.

<sup>19</sup> In 1939, Khelil Mamlouk rejoiced in the Tunisian magazine *Leïla* that the development of the Egyptian film industry brought to the theaters alongside “Si Ali, the average Tunisian”, “Mrs Si Ali” and “Miss Si Ali” (‘À bâtons rompus...’, March 1939, 10).

<sup>20</sup> The Al-Manar bookstore in the medina of Tunis, for instance, used to publish the lyrics of Egyptian film songs.

<sup>21</sup> In French West Africa, the decree of October 5, 1954 establishing a quota of French films also explicitly targeted Egyptian cinema (Goerg, ‘Les films arabes, une menace pour l’Empire?’, 298).

<sup>22</sup> In 1951, the US Embassy reported to the Department of State that “some patrons object to superimposed titles” (National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], Department of State Records, RG 59, box 5361: Proposal for Arabic-dubbed 16 mm motion pictures, 21 February 1951).

<sup>23</sup> CADN, 1TU/1V/2183, fol. 332 : circulaire aux exploitants de salles de spectacles cinématographiques et de circuits cinématographiques itinérants, Tunis, 23 août 1947.

<sup>24</sup> In 1947 and 1948, American films accounted for 60 per cent of the market share, compared to 17 per cent for France and 13 per cent for Egypt (‘En Tunisie, chaque année 10 millions de spectateurs vont au cinéma’, *Le Cinéma nord-africain*, January 1950, no 1).

<sup>25</sup> CADN, 1TU/1V/2394(2), fol. 108: le directeur du CCT au chef du cabinet du résident général, Tunis, 13 août 1947.

<sup>26</sup> CADN, 1TU/1V/1799, fol. 231: plan triennal de l’industrie cinématographique en Tunisie.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Elizabeth Thompson, ‘Boycott d’un cinéma à Fès en 1948’, in *Publics et spectacle cinématographique en situation coloniale*, ed. Morgan Corriou (Tunis: IRMC, CERES, 2012), 187.

---

<sup>28</sup> Goerg, ‘Les films arabes, une menace pour l’Empire?’.

<sup>29</sup> In Morocco, unlike Algeria and Tunisia, censorship of Egyptian films was both political and moral.

<sup>30</sup> CADN, 1TU/2V/885, dossier “Cinéma”; 1TU/1V/2898: note du 30 janvier 1947.

<sup>31</sup> This second censorship file has unfortunately been lost, but the archives preserve a note from the security services (CADN, 1TU/1V/2898: 18 février 1947). The report of the policeman on duty in the theatre suggests that the musical number *Mawakib al-‘Izz*, the most obviously political as it is a tribute to the founders of modern Egypt, was left untouched. We formulate the hypothesis that the editing of musical numbers was made impossible by the extent of intermedial practices. Thus, the lyrics of *Mawakib al-‘Izz* appear in their entirety in the booklet *Aghana film Gharam wa-intiqam* published by the Tunis Al-Manar bookstore (undated).

<sup>32</sup> Note anonyme, “Le film arabe”, vers 1954. Quoted by Denis, ‘Cinéma et panarabisme’, 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Hollywood even came to be considered an objective ally in the colonial empire. “The American cinema itself constitutes an element of national propaganda, as, more often than not, the Natives believe the films to be French, and, as they enjoy them, they are grateful to us,” wrote Charles Noguès, Résident Général of France in Morocco. Quoted by Nolwenn Mingant, ‘When the *Thief of Bagdad* tried to steal the show. The short-lived dubbing of Hollywood films into Arabic in the 1940s’, in *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends*, ed. Irene Ranzato and Serenella Zanotti (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2019), 47.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Vitalis, ‘American Ambassador in Technicolor and Cinemascope: Hollywood and Revolution on the Nile’, in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 269-91.

---

<sup>35</sup> In “small towns [...] many people only go to the cinema with their families once a year at the end of Ramadan.” Films Régent Archives Jacques Haïk (Régent): Pierre Vercel à Jacques Coup de Fréjac, directeur de l’information à la Délégation générale du gouvernement en Algérie, Paris, 18 février 1961.

<sup>36</sup> NARA, Department of State Records, RG 59, box 5361: the US Embassy in Tunisia to the Department of State, September 1, 1951.

<sup>37</sup> Régent: Jacques Haïk à Abderrahman Ellouze, Paris, 25 août 1945.

<sup>38</sup> 1TU/1V/2394(2), fol. 107: le directeur du CCT au chef du cabinet du résident général, Tunis, 13 août 1947.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Hamouda Chaabini, La Marsa, 21 May 2005.

<sup>40</sup> L’*Agence tunisienne de films* of Jack Baranès represented Mabrouka Films in Tunis.

<sup>41</sup> In 1958, 208 Egyptian films were being screened in France (Fabrice Montebello, ‘Films égyptiens et ouvriers algériens dans la Lorraine industrielle. Analyse d’un cas de ‘diaspora des publics’’, in *Publics et spectacle cinématographique en situation coloniale*, ed. Morgan Corriou (Tunis: IRMC, CERES, 2012) 301) compared to 56 at the same date in Tunisia (*Annuaire statistique de la Tunisie 1957-1958*, 1958, 171).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Hamouda Chaabini.

<sup>43</sup> CADN, 353/PO/2/101: le directeur d’Afrique-Levant à l’ambassadeur de France au Caire, Paris, 20 août 1946.

<sup>44</sup> CADN, 1TU/2V/885, dossier “Cinéma”: “Les importations de films impressionnés;” 1MA/200/187, dossier “Importation de films égyptiens.”

<sup>45</sup> *Le Cinéma nord-africain*, January 1951, no. 1. ‘Francorexfilms a réalisé une double organisation en France et en Égypte’, *La Cinématographie française*, 1952, no. 1453, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Denis, ‘Cinéma et panarabisme’, 45.

---

<sup>47</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel à Nafissa Sid Cara, secrétaire d'État chargée des Affaires sociales algériennes, Paris, 23 mars 1960.

<sup>48</sup> Denis, 'Cinéma et panarabisme', 45-46.

<sup>49</sup> CADN, 1TU/2V/885, dossier "Cinéma": compte rendu de vision cinématographique du film *La Chanteuse du fleuve*, 11 janvier 1950.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 2 in this volume: Eric Smoodin, 'Le Roi du Cinéma: Joseph Seiberras and North African Film Exhibition, 1925-1945'.

<sup>51</sup> CADN, 1TU/701/2/133, dossier "Jacques Haïk."

<sup>52</sup> Régent: convention du 14 septembre 1953 entre Farid al-Atrash et Régence-Algérie.

<sup>53</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel à Ali Khiar, directeur de Régence-Algérie, Paris, 30 décembre 1962.

<sup>54</sup> Around 1954, a colonial official signaled a propaganda for which "the distributor – who is a trader – cannot be held responsible" (note anonyme, "Le film arabe"). Quoted by Denis, 'Cinéma et panarabisme', 44.

<sup>55</sup> CADN, 1MA/200/190.

<sup>56</sup> CADN, 1TU/701/2/148, dossier "Théodore Khayat."

<sup>57</sup> "Plus ou moins mystifiés, plus ou moins bénéficiaires", "métis de la colonisation." Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé; précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 19 and 41. The Crémieux decree gave French nationality to all the Jews of Algeria, but for a long time they remained second-class citizens, plagued by the anti-Semitism of the colonists. There was no such decree in Morocco and Tunisia, which were Protectorates, but many Jews obtained French nationality and/or were educated in French in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, which put them in an ambiguous position perfectly described by Albert Memmi.

<sup>58</sup> CADN, 1MA/200/190.

<sup>59</sup> Régent.

<sup>60</sup> Corriou, 'Un nouveau loisir en situation coloniale', 129-30.

---

<sup>61</sup> A *ḥubūs* is an inalienable endowment dedicated to charitable purposes.

<sup>62</sup> After a PhD in France, Mohamed Salah Mzali (1896-1984) made his career in the Beylical administration. He was briefly Prime Minister in 1954. See his autobiography *Au fil de ma vie: souvenirs d'un Tunisien* (Tunis: H. Mzali, 1972).

<sup>63</sup> Morgan Corriou, 'Des ciné-clubs aux Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage. Entretien avec Tahar Cheriaa', *Maghreb et Sciences Sociales 2009-2010*, (2010):168.

<sup>64</sup> Leveratto, 'Histoire du cinéma et expertise culturelle', 27 and 17.

<sup>65</sup> Leveratto, 'Histoire du cinéma et expertise culturelle', 38.

<sup>66</sup> Régent: convention du 14 septembre 1953 entre Farid al-Atrash et Régence-Algérie.

<sup>67</sup> '*Afrita Hanim (Litte Miss Devil)* by Henry Barakat, 1949; *Akhar Kadba* by Ahmed Badrakhan, 1950.

<sup>68</sup> Régent. This is probably the report, or draft report, sent by the Gaullist Senator of Oran-Tlemcen, Sliman Belhabich, to the Délégué général Paul Delouvrier on 6 October 1960. Films Régence initiated the report and seems to have written all or part of it (the arguments presented in the document were used as early as Spring in the correspondence of the company with the administration).

<sup>69</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel à Nafissa Sid Cara, Paris, 23 mars 1960.

<sup>70</sup> Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society, Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958).

<sup>71</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel au président du Syndicat des distributeurs indépendants, Paris, 27 décembre 1960.

<sup>72</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel à Nafissa Sid Cara, Paris, 23 mars 1960.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted by Denis, 'Cinéma et panarabisme', 44.

<sup>74</sup> Régent: Pierre Vercel au président du Syndicat des distributeurs indépendants, Paris, 27 décembre 1960.



---

<sup>75</sup> Nidam Abdi, MA Diss., Université Paris 8 Vincennes – Saint-Denis, 2003.

<sup>76</sup> Régent: Pierre Verdel au président du Conseil Ahmed Ben Bella, Paris, 25 janvier 1963.

<sup>77</sup> Régent: Pierre Verdel à Nafissa Sid Cara, Paris, 23 mars 1960.

<sup>78</sup> Abdi, MA Diss.

<sup>79</sup> Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema. Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, BFI, 2012), 3.