

ROUNDTABLE

## To Stand by the Ruins of a Revolutionary City

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A scene from the film *In the Last Days of the City* happens on the rooftop of one of the buildings overlooking Tahrir Square.<sup>1</sup> In it, four Arab filmmakers contemplate the messy and meaningless cacophony of downtown Cairo: Bassim from Beirut, Khalid from Egypt, Hassan from Baghdad, and Tariq, an Iraqi living in Berlin. Khalid frantically gestures toward the square. He screams to his friends: “This . . . I need to make sense of this!” They talk about a film that Khalid wants to make to tell the story of Cairo, and which he cannot complete because he feels unable to make sense of his relationship to his city, which appears to be in ruins.

In this paper, I want to pause at this gesture from the rooftop, particularly on the subtle —yet ubiquitous— way in which making sense of the city is central to making sense of selfhood. The gesture is the embodiment of a hope that by narrating the city in film Khalid, the filmmaker, might reckon with Cairo, with his life, and with their failures. For me, this gesture captures a banal affective relationship to the city that is constitutive of political subjectivity despite, or perhaps because of, its banality. My premise, then, is the centrality of the “city” and its materiality to the affective mediation of politics. In other words, the material and spatial makeup of urban space holds, structures, and at times inhibits the possibility of narration and meaning-making. This affective relation draws on the work of Lauren Berlant, which ties the role of the ordinary to patterning our desire for sovereignty, the nation, or the promise of good life.<sup>2</sup> I look at the city as one of those spaces and objects of fantasy. It is this navigation of attachment and disappointment that underpins the desire to narrate the city, so central in the film I started with. Here, film is a key to begin unpacking a ubiquitous, ephemeral, and even ordinary affective relationship to the city and its politics. By focusing on film, I argue that film does not merely represent images of urban space, although it clearly does that, but that through the cinematic lens and its storytelling it also negotiates the fragmentary and material making and breaking of the fascinating and overwhelming reality that is a city. One that is lived, and survived, on an everyday basis.

Ruination serves as a focal point through which filmmakers and narrators of a city like Cairo offer a critical poetic to the material, economic, and political processes that bring about ruin; the depletion of matter and mind. Of course, ruins and debris have a long-held position in European traditions and specifically in cinema.<sup>3</sup> For the postcolonial city, however, the poetics of ruination attune us to a temporality of the postcolonial affective hope that disinvests from a teleological narrative of triumphant sovereignty. I use ruination in the sense developed by Ann Laura Stoler.<sup>4</sup> For Stoler, ruination emphasizes a critical positioning of the present within violent structures, making it an ongoing process with multiple temporalities at work. This understanding, I find, empowers a critical engagement with processes of material and social undoing that differs from a fascination with ruins and, instead, questions the political complicity in processes of ruination.<sup>5</sup> I deploy this concept to argue that the material poetics of debris are

<sup>1</sup>Tamer el-Said, dir., *In the Last Days of the City* (2016).

<sup>2</sup>Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor, “Reckoning with Ruins,” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4 (2013): 465–85. One of the earliest films by the Lumière brothers is a film about demolition of a wall; see Johannes Von Moltke, “Ruin Cinema” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 395–417.

<sup>4</sup>Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 9–11.

used as a critique of urban violence, authoritarianism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalization of the city. Against a conception of (geo)politics that seeks to solidify revolutionary failure, filmic representation may capture the ambiguity of dealing with the debris of the revolution in a city like Cairo. Poetics of ruin here offer alternative urban and geopolitical constellations that do not necessarily challenge the images of crises that override a Middle Eastern city a decade after the Arab Spring, but that instead work with them.

### Creative Expression, Space, and the Revolution

In relation to mid-20th-century Egypt, film gestures to the fantasy of urban modernity that both structured a relationship to revolutionary hope and navigated the looming ghosts of urban anxiety.<sup>6</sup> I explore this relationship between urban space and political hope elsewhere, where I make the case that building the city and the faith in architects, urban planners, and engineers was a key pillar in the postcolonial promise of the Egyptian post-independence state.<sup>7</sup> This went hand in hand with many infrastructural national projects, where an infrastructural ambition consolidated the desire for postcolonial self-determination, sovereignty, and independence.<sup>8</sup> However, the city does not only mediate the fantasy of belonging to the nation, but it also becomes a central site through which we may experience the disappointments of this fantasy. The political historical ambition of the postcolonial moment was interrupted by *al-Naksa* in 1967.<sup>9</sup> This had its accompanying reverberations in film. Indeed, film critics and scholars note a shift in the film industry after 1967. This shift manifested itself in a multivocal and nonlinear narrative, or at times with a clear imagery of collapsing buildings as a political metaphor.<sup>10</sup> The way the poetics of demolition, collapse, and rubble seeped through filmic representations of the mid 1960s and throughout the 1970s, are, I argue, a way through which the political crisis of *al-Naksa* in 1967 has been symbolically mediated by architecture—at least its collapse and failure. As such, the city, as well as its filmic poetics, absorbed and resonated with the defeat of the postcolonial emancipatory project in Egypt through its own material destruction and ruin.

In shifting the focus on filmic expression to post-2011 urban space, I do not claim a novelty of representing city in film *per se*, rather I wish to consider the ways in which the city captures a particular affect, even if this affect resonates with other historical instances of hope and defeat. Of course, several films engaged with the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and its aftermath with different ideological and affective bearings.<sup>11</sup> Documenting the revolution gained urgency for independent filmmakers, especially with the security restrictions on filming. And while the events were still unfolding, there was from the

<sup>6</sup>See Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002); and Paul Sedra, "Anxiety about the Urban in 1950s Egyptian Cinema; Q&K," American University in Cairo, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiQTadPKjiU>.

<sup>7</sup>Aya Nassar, "Spaces of Power: Politics, Subjectivity and Materiality in Post-Independence Cairo" (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2019). See also Mercedes Volait, *L'architecture moderne en Égypte et la revue al-Imara 1939-1959* (Cairo: CEDEJ Égypte/Soudan, 1988), <http://books.openedition.org/cedej/870>; Clement Henry Moore, *Images of Development: Egyptian Engineers in Search of Industry*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994); and Mohamed Elshahed, "Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt 1936-1967" (PhD diss., New York University, 2015).

<sup>8</sup>For instance, see Omnia el-Shakry, "Cairo as Capital of Socialist Revolution?" in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 73-98; Alia Mossallam, "Hikayat Sha'b: Stories of Peoplehood; Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956-1973" (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012); and Nancy Y. Reynolds, "City of the High Dam: Aswan and the Promise of Postcolonialism in Egypt," *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (2017): 213-35.

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Yoav Di-Capua, "The Traumatic Subjectivity of Sun' Allah Ibrahim's Dhat," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 1 (2012): 80-101; Adeed I. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 282.

<sup>10</sup>Essam Zakariya, *Atyaf al-Hadatha: Suwar Misr al-Ijtima'iyya fi al-Sinima* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Thaqafa, 2009), 79-86; Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 286.

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of documentaries and global audiences see, for example, Alia Ayman, "Three Films, One Spectator and A Polemic: Arab Documentaries and 'Global' Audiences," 2016, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25763/three-films-one-spectator-and-a-polemic-arab-docum>; and Alisa Lebow, "Filming Revolution," Stanford University, 2018, <https://filmingrevolution.org>.

beginning a strong concern with imagery and also with documenting, archiving, and recording everything in what would shortly become a battle of narrative and memory.

In addition to understanding this urgency, it might be productive to think about the affective relation to the revolution, its preludes and its afterlives, in slower rhythms and temporalities. One key locus through which this may be investigated is through the ambivalent relationship we—as subjects—have with our everyday spaces of ordinary attachment and disillusionment. A mode for this investigation might well be a poetics of space that does not lock urban space in the realm of representational images, but that is entangled with its physical makeup and breakup. In other words, it invites an understanding of the spaces of the city as both material and metaphorical, aesthetic, poetic and physical. Ruination here acts as a key concept and process for capturing this material aesthetic of Cairo and a constellation of other Arab cities.

Viola Shafik notes that although space has not been typically key in Egyptian commercial films, it emerged as central in the wave of new independent films just before and after 2011.<sup>12</sup> Films like Ahmad Abdalla's *Heliopolis* (2009), for instance, betray the dilapidated physicality of a neighborhood entangled with nostalgia in the popular imagination, as well as continuous and quiet survival and conviviality. Indeed, this is impossible to miss after 2011, as several films have sought to directly reference and represent city space not only as a context or background but as a key protagonist and poetic. Examples include the rest of Abdalla's repertoire, like *Rags and Tatters* (2013), theatrical experiences like *Out on the Streets* (2015), or even most recently Ahmad Magdi's haunting debut *The Giraffe* (2019). Admittedly, these are all very different projects, and in grouping them together I do not seek to impose a unity on what are individual endeavors to reckon with the city. However, it is precisely this desire to reckon with the city that threads through these films and that, in turn, captures a collective mode of enduring attachment to its space. Ayten Amin's *Villa 69* (2014), as an example, weaves the spatial aesthetic of the villa into the narrative of an architect who wants to live (and die) in peace. In this film, the ailing structure of home is interwoven with an urban space that is undergoing revolutionary change, inevitably reconciling the personal biography of an architect navigating the temporal transformation of space.<sup>13</sup>

How might we understand this attachment to the poetics of urban space post 2011? Is the collapse and ruination of the city nothing more than a mediation of defeat and failure, as might be argued for post-1967 film?

I propose not. By centering the material demolition and ruination I seek—precisely—to counter the aesthetics of ruin as irredeemable failure and catastrophe. Drawing on Stoler's work, we can appreciate the way ruination can temper temporality and infuse it with a critical capacity to make sense of the present, allowing a broader implication for how we understand failure. The way we think of failure and catastrophe relates to the ways in which we narrate our historical present. Following David Scott, we might want to question the teleological temporality of heroic narratives in which any failure is not accounted for except as catastrophe.<sup>14</sup> The poetics of destruction or undoing of the city need not be only those of catastrophe. Indeed, Berlant asks about the possibility of looking into scenes of ambivalence, where we manage “being in proximity in the awkward and violent ordinary.”<sup>15</sup> For her, film and poetry are the primary sites for analyzing this awkwardness; they are infrastructures in themselves.<sup>16</sup> Through the prism of the poetic “the world is linked to the body as something that forms part of material *and* cultural space, an association that determines or suggests modes of thinking and acting politically.”<sup>17</sup> Poetics of ruination, therefore, are not simply representations of catastrophe or failure. Engaging these poetics on the one hand and a non-teleological mode of narration on the other serves to precisely counter what might be perceived as an inability to reckon with the contemporary postrevolutionary moment. This counter-attempt neither celebrates agency and victory nor dwells on defeat. In fact, it allows

<sup>12</sup>Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 56–57, 227.

<sup>13</sup>See Muhammad El-Hajj's statement in this issue.

<sup>14</sup>David Scott, “The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014): 799–808.

<sup>15</sup>Lauren Gail Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 395.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Angela Last, “We Are the World? Anthropocene Cultural Production between Geopoetics and Geopolitics,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 2–3 (2017): 151.

detachment from the logic of winning or losing by attunement to the metaphorical affordances a city has to offer. These are excesses in which we can dwell on alternative temporalities and in which we can attend to the ambivalence of physical collapse of infrastructures and material-built environments that act as objects of attachment and affective investment.

### Ruination as a Postrevolutionary Reckoning

We may then look at the centrality of urban space in postrevolutionary film as a promise of reckoning and narration, even if it is not in an epic or triumphalist form. Let us return briefly to the opening gesture from the rooftop, the scene from a film in which a filmmaker wants to make sense of his city but is frustrated with his failure to do so. *In the Last Days of the City* deploys poetics of ruination in its rendition of the cityscape of Cairo as well as that of Alexandria, with specific attention to each city's materiality. The city is visually drenched in sepia, the color of dust, and the debris of crumbling paint. At times, the actual film stops to watch and document the demolition of buildings before it picks up the threads of its narrative again. Demolitions here, like protests, and even the revolution, interrupt not only the narrative, but filmmaking itself.

The film was shot over two years, between 2008 and 2010, but had been almost ten years in the making. The editing and final cut happened only after the revolution. The filmmakers shot 250 hours of footage, some of it scripted and other parts documentary, making it an immense job not only of editing but also of navigating the narrative.<sup>18</sup> Set as a film within a film, the producer enlists his mother and some of his friends as themselves as well as professional actors. There is multiple layering of loss in operation in this film surrounding the lead character, as he faces the end of his lease and begins to search for a new place to rent. The film, then, has an unmistakable melancholic tone, as well as an urge to narrate a finality that never seems to come. There is constant waiting, even for the film to end. This abeyance is orchestrated by the radio, and the pulse of downtown dominates the rhythm of the film.<sup>19</sup> This is a hesitant rhythm even while crossing the street.<sup>20</sup> The tempo of a busy day looking for an apartment, differently busy and intense nights, a visual crowdedness of Tahrir Square with neon billboards: all of these are contrary to the image of resonance that will appear in 2011, even though protest chants intersperse the film.<sup>21</sup>

The hunt for the apartment is an arrested futurity, a temporal glitch that haunts the film.<sup>22</sup> The glitch is not only meant to operate on the mundane affective level. Through the arrested temporality of crises, Cairo is linked to Beirut, Baghdad, and Berlin, a city of Arab exile. Samah Selim calls these cities the contemporary *Naksa* cities.<sup>23</sup> All in different moments navigate their own senses of catastrophe that are, nevertheless, interlinked in the narrative of the film. On that rooftop scene Khalid's friend says "Baghdad is a moment, you feel it and it goes . . . when did the war begin in Baghdad? 1979, and in Beirut? 1840, so you want me to erase a line of blood from 1840 till forever?" We witness here a temporal enfolding of a chronicle that links traces of the enduring effect of violence from colonialism, to civil war, to neocolonialism going through urban neoliberalization and gentrification.

<sup>18</sup>Jay Weissberg, "Berlin Film Review: *In the Last Days of the City*," *Variety*, 14 February 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/in-the-last-days-of-the-city-review-berlin-film-festival-1201705591/>.

<sup>19</sup>The cacophony of Cairo has been the subject of an earlier film with a psychological take on the fear of the city. *The Aquarium* (dir. Yousry Nasrallah, 2008) features similar takes on traffic jams and the carnival of lights as brake lights mingle with dysfunctional traffic lights, all drenched in the soundscapes of the radio. See Omnia el-Shakry, "'A Radioscopy of the Egyptian Soul': Yousry Nasrallah's *The Aquarium*," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 1, no. 2 (2008): 216–18.

<sup>20</sup>Julia Elyachar writes about an anthropology of learning to walk anew in Cairo in "The Political Economy of Movement and Gesture in Cairo," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 1 (2011): 82–99.

<sup>21</sup>Gastón Gordillo, "Resonance and the Egyptian Revolution," *Space and Politics* (blog), 6 February 2011, <https://criticalallegalthinking.com/2011/02/22/resonance-and-the-egyptian-revolution/>.

<sup>22</sup>See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Berlant, "The Commons."

<sup>23</sup>Rowan el-Shimi, "12 Viewers on *In the Last Days of the City* and Its Problems Coming to Egypt," *Mada*, 29 March 2017, <https://madasr.com/en/2017/03/29/feature/culture/12-viewers-on-in-the-last-days-of-the-city-and-its-problems-coming-to-egypt/>.

Besides being *Naksa* cities, the cities in *In the Last Days of the City* are connected in their materiality and embodiment. As Laura Marks comments on the material interconnections: “The waters of the Nile in Cairo, the Mediterranean in Beirut and the Tigris in Baghdad—it was as though these bodies of water connected the people in ways that words alone cannot.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the poetics of bodies of water is not lost on those involved in the film. At the Institute of Contemporary Arts London screening, Khalid Abdalla noted the overwhelming crushing resonance of the final scene, where we see a body on water. A few years later, it will be the most common image through which the Middle East bangs on the shores of Europe. Bodies are folded with matter, as has been noted by feminist geographers, and we see in the film a poetic of this folding.<sup>25</sup> Here, materiality is intertwined with the body. The ailing city is coupled with an ailing motherhood, and the body is used to enact a withering away of the city.

### Beyond Fantasy and Failure

Samah Selim links the film to the disappointment of politics. She notes that “Cairenes today are still trying to come to terms with this meaning and all kinds of questions about personal and collective failure vis-à-vis the revolution.”<sup>26</sup> This is a film where narrating the city takes the form of a film that is impossible to complete, because its narrative structure cannot hold as it traces the slow ruination of the Egyptian urban centers. Disappointment is not resignation, however. What might seem at first glance a self-deprecating critique of a nostalgic relationship to the city can be read as an encounter with the materiality of the past, a documentary evidence-making of an ailing city. We glean an anxiety about the past of the city, yet rather than an act of nostalgia, the film can be read as an attempt to witness in the face of crushing disappointment. Ruination, a key poetic of the film, can be seen as a condemnation of the violent processes that enforce this depletion on spaces and people.

Again, ruination can serve as a critical vantage point through which filmmakers and narrators of a city like Cairo witness and dwell on the political processes that bring about “ruin.” The material poetics of debris are deployed as a critique of multiple urban violences. Indeed, this wave of films coincides with multiple grassroots organizations concerned with urban heritage, preventing illegal demolitions, and an overall desire to document and recover alternative narratives. This might cross-cut uncomfortably with bourgeois sentiments of nostalgia for a middle–upper class golden age of cosmopolitanism, but it is not restricted to that.<sup>27</sup> It also demonstrates awareness of an uncontrollable withering away of physical space and the complacency of multiple sources of violences: corruption in the real estate market, revolutionary hope and despair, and neoliberalization of the city.<sup>28</sup>

I propose then that film may capture the atmospheric ambiguity of dealing with the debris of the revolution in a city like Cairo. Poetics of ruination can orient to alternative ways of storytelling the city. Beyond the aesthetics of ruins in Europe, ruins have traditionally served as a poetic device in Arabic cultural references. To “stand by the ruins” is the characteristic prelude of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. After this, the poetics of narration can begin. Taking my cue from this long-held Arab practice, I have sought to approach the materiality of the city and its poetics in cinematic representation not as a trauma, a destruction, or a catastrophe that invites a loss of meaning or stories, but as a generative space for urban critique and (non-heroic) narrative. This, I propose, may offer us a way in which to think of the politics of the city as something more than the appropriation and closing off of public space. A (geo)poetics of the Middle East offers another mode of relating to these cities typically thought of in terms of catastrophe or a “resource or military background,” but also without wishing their destruction away.<sup>29</sup> It pushes us to

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Deborah P. Dixon, *Feminist Geopolitics: Material States, Gender, Space and Society* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>26</sup>El-Shimi, “12 Viewers.”

<sup>27</sup>Galila el-Kadi and Dalila el-Kerdani, “Belle-Époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District,” in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 345–71.

<sup>28</sup>Asef Bayat, “Revolution and Despair,” *Mada*, 25 January 2015, <https://madamasr.com/en/2015/01/25/opinion/u/revolution-and-despair/>.

<sup>29</sup>Last, “We Are the World?” 160.

think of the contemporary moment as one in between the images of hope (of bodies in the square) and the crushing weight of defeat. Instead it points to a more fundamental yet ordinary entanglement with the city and the inhabitants who remain attached to it and its political promise.

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