

Alexander, Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, and
Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria Again and Forever*

Classical scholarship on the reception of Greek antiquity in film has overlooked Youssef Chahine's 1989 film *Alexandria Again and Forever*. Chahine, an internationally renowned Egyptian filmmaker, offers a unique perspective on Alexandrian cosmopolitanism "that, if it ever did exist, existed in too small a measure ever to be quantified." (Ghoneim 1996: 285). A native of Alexandria himself, and having an Alexandrian Greek mother and a Syrian father, Chahine sees the heritage of his city as a personal birthright. This third film in what is now referred to as his autobiographical "Alexandria Quartet" – a title evoking the modern Alexandrianism that is underscored in his films – makes use of classical antiquity as well as the high culture of colonial Alexandria to comment on the political climate of his times while simultaneously voicing the personal anguish of a cosmopolitan Alexandrian caught at a cultural crossroads. Butler (2007: 265) argues that Chahine "takes up the motif of crossings-over to produce an alternative cosmopolitics, which in his autobiographical [films] creates a layering of ancient, colonial, and postcolonial Alexandrias expressed in the sense of a film/archival palimpsest." In another sense, the vehicle for Chahine's commentary on both the politics of his times and his personal angst is Alexander. In an Arab *weekly* article on Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, Halim (2002) comments on "Chahine's reflections on the foundation myths of the city." Halim argues that in the film Alexander becomes "the point where many layers of significance, some less visible than others, are condensed." Halim does not hesitate to acknowledge Alexander as "an apt icon for homoeroticism," but this is only part of Chahine's purpose – the working out of his own "psychic processes." In Arab cinema this is a bold direction, but so is political commentary. Chahine himself admits "that politics are inevitable... But... in film, you can't bring politics out as a slogan. You have a drama first." (Chahine and Massad 1999: 88). Using a brief historical-musical sequence as a subtext, Chahine offers his audience the demi-god Alexander "giver of life and enlightenment" who turns out to be a "bow-legged, empty-headed" "fake" and "nitwit." Biting Aristophanic humor scarcely veils disillusionment with Egyptian politics. It is all the more powerful in that Chahine plays his film alter-ego 'Yehia' in the main plot (the Egyptian film industry's participation in the general strike of 1987) and Alexander's 'Hephaestion' in the historical-musical sequence – "See him through my eyes, you'll discover he's a sensation." Themes of love and obsession are pervasive against the backdrop of classical antiquity, which provides an acceptable context for Chahine's erotic obsessions. The perspective of this film is hardly western, however. If "Cavafy gave the city a new mythology" (Pinchin 1977: 34) then Chahine has given it an Arab lens through which the West may view its history, past and present.

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