

**Bassam El Baroni:** Good morning. Today we have Raed Yassin with us, who's showing his video *The New Film* at PhotoCairo4: The Long Shortcut. His video is part of an ongoing exploration of the aesthetics and political background of Egyptian cinema. But first we thought to start with an introduction, while another of his videos is being projected in the background. This is a video called *Tonight* that you created in 2007. In this video you use an image, or rather a seven-second sequence from a feature film. The film is called – ?

**Raed Yassin:** *The Amulet*.

**Baroni:** When I first saw this video I felt that it has strong connections to a painterly tradition, to 17<sup>th</sup> century portraiture like Velazquez. Could you elaborate on this?

**Yassin:** This is a very simple piece, and even though it's only one image, it needed a very long period of research to get to this result. I started researching the idea of watching someone who's watching you. And then I had an introduction to Velazquez through Michel Foucault's book, where he wrote about *Las Meniñas*, which is a painting in which you see people who are really watching you, and he talks about their looks, and how they are. And this is where I make a parallel to Velazquez' work, but my main interest is Egyptian cinema, and especially Egyptian cinema in the 80s.

**Baroni:** Why the 80s?

**Yassin:** The first question I was interested in was why does the cinema of the 80s look so different from that of the 60s, 70s, and then later the 90s, and why is it that even the very serious films look so trashy? For me, the 80s was a period when all the big ideas about the Arab world that our fathers and ourselves had been living, growing and believing in – ideas of nationalism and socialism – became an illusion. The 80s was when they began their decline and destruction. Not only as ideas but also in concrete terms, so economically for example. Beirut was occupied by the Israeli army, and somehow we felt deceived because nobody in the Arab world cared. So for us it was a bit disastrous, and this period was a very sensitive one. It also changed the language of music and film in Lebanon.

I was interested in this period because of the language of the image in the Arab world or let's say in the film industry in Egypt, because in the Arab world there's no cinema. There's cinema in Egypt because there's an industry. There are of course independent films all over the Arab world but that doesn't constitute an industry and doesn't create a language. Every director has his own style, but there's not enough of the consistencies of mass production to really make a study about the image in Lebanon or Syria for example.

And in the 80s things got out of control in the industry. I was interested in the new language being created, not in the intellectual scene of cinema but by the directors of very commercial and trashy films. With no rules, because of course there was war and depressed economics. Big businessmen in the 80s – after the open-door-policy years in

Egypt, the *Infitah*, and later when Mubarak came to power – started to get more interested in making money in cinema, so the economics changed, and then maybe for the first time we start to see a big industry of low budget films in Egypt.

**Baroni:** So you're suggesting that there was a kind of anarchy in the film industry that happened. You're talking on one level very politically and on another level you're embracing these kind of aesthetics – I don't want to go into this high art, low art debate because I know somehow it's always buried under the surface in our cultures here in the Arab world. But is there an embrace of this kind of language?

**Yassin:** Of course I have to speak about politics because this is the site where everything connects here in this region, really, more than in other countries. I don't think that I embrace arty or trashy cinema, or high quality cinema. I am just interested in the fact that trash was made in this industry not intentionally, it was done by accident. In the Egyptian industry there are no trash directors. They didn't plan that there would be trash before doing it. I think it all relates to the economic and political circumstances of the 80s. I'm embracing this turning point in the image of the 80s – maybe because I grew up in that period and that provides a parallel between my life and the image that was growing. But – actually I prefer the imagery of 70s films. The colours were more beautiful, the shots were more beautiful, but it's not about beauty. Because an art piece is not only about being beautiful.

**Baroni:** Here in Egypt we have a couple of different camps. One camp is still supportive of a tradition of high art, which is very specific. I'm sure you know what I mean because in Lebanon there's probably the same thing. And there's a camp that doesn't really care about high and low and sees it as being a somewhat archaic argument. And I think what you've done in the project titled *The Amulet* is notice something very reminiscent of a suspected classical beauty in the image itself, but the image is called in from a very popular Egyptian movie, a trash movie like you've just described.

Also in *The New Film*, the project you're showing as part of the PhotoCairo exhibition, I think the interesting thing in that piece is the classical position of the hero in this film. Like there's a hero, a kind of silent onlooker who's always present in all of the imagery. He doesn't speak, he doesn't really interact and it's a position or a subject or object we find in many portraiture projects in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries for example. So are you really interested in this blending between narratives that are from a very popular culture, with something that's more from the stature of the classical?

**Yassin:** No, I was mostly focussing on pop culture, on how the image develops through mass production especially in Egypt. And how it develops through copying from one medium to another, and how this transfer affects the visual language. In the conceptualising of this piece, I tried to imitate how Egyptian mass production manufactures video CDs, which is the lowest video medium, accessible for the biggest amount of people. I was inspired by that fact that you get Egyptian films on two CDs that are separate, and the rhythm of the film is already cut. Of course video CDs which are two CDs sometimes cannot take the whole duration of the film. And then the producer or the distributor do their own editing of any piece of film.

**Baroni:** So there's this particular interval in *The New Film* where we're suddenly hit by this advertisement for –

**Yassin:** A trailer.

**Baroni:** A trailer, exactly, for *The Suspect*. And where did this decision come from to insert the trailer?

**Yassin:** It was an aesthetic decision, I wanted to make the piece a bit more relaxed, because it has very fast editing. But also in these VCD copies the distributors promote their own film by placing inside the film, or between the two discs, trailers of other films. So I felt it's a very natural development for *The New Film*, since I'd been watching like 400 films in two months on video CDs, to use this trailer in the middle of the video. Of course there's an homage to Adel Emam. Now Egyptians are usually not happy when we say this – because Egypt for of the Arab world is Adel Emam, it's the first thing they say.

**Baroni:** I know.

**Yassin:** That's the stereotype. There's a small homage for this guy because there's very few Adel Emam films in which the photo of the president appears. Maybe two out of sixty, seventy films.

**Baroni:** So you know the percentage for other actors is more?

**Yassin:** Yes. I think it's intentionally done. I'm sure –

**Baroni:** Because he is kind of like a president too.

**Yassin:** It's also because I noticed that behind the officer in Adel Emam's films the word Allah appears instead of the photo of the president. And here comes the question, if we hang photos of our presidents all over, maybe it's because in Islamic societies we cannot make portraits of God. This is just a question. A replacement?

**Baroni:** I'm not going to follow up on that. [Laughter.]

**Yassin:** Maybe it's a replacement? I don't know. So anyway both of these, the word or the portrait, are just sources of authority. And of course maybe the officer in the police station is taking authority from this source. So that's why I put in this trailer, for aesthetic reasons, for rhythmic reasons, and also as an homage to someone who doesn't use the photo of the president in his films. The piece is about the photo of the president, that's very clear. But I'm not pointing at stuff, I try not to be didactic, because I really hate that.

**Baroni:** So why did you call it *The New Film*?

**Yassin:** I was inspired by how advertisements work in the Arab world and I think everything has to be new. The most successful things are the new ones. Doesn't have to be good but it has to be new. I'm a big consumer and I cannot live without that. And I always consume new stuff, particularly technology, since it's also related to my work.

**Baroni:** So the word new can take us to the term "new media", which I know you don't like and I don't like either, but you were just talking about this and about how you see yourself, because you're also a sound artist, a musician, and you use technologies, different types of gadgets and instruments in your work. Like how this film behind us is made, the technique –

**Yassin:** The video manipulations I did on *Tonight* use the defaults of technology, which for me raises the question of what video is? A video is a very fragile medium, which is related to seeing – the word *videre* that video comes from means watching or seeing. Video made of three colours is very basic but it is also a sublime medium. It needs a decoder to understand its codes, it's just a magnetic black tape, while with cinema you can really touch it and feel it, it's like a skin. But I did here very primitive manipulations on VHS tapes, on this special scene, by demagnetising the image, by putting magnets on the heads and playing with the RCA cables. And then I copied these seven seconds to the computer and I just let the computer try to understand the analogue manipulations. Of course the computer couldn't understand all the video distortions, so it interpreted the distortions as these shapes – not pixels but also not lines. Blocks between pixels and lines. And this for me feels like technology is not so stable, because it's about the transfer of image from one medium to another, between two video mediums. I use technology not as a means, but as something that misunderstands what I'm saying in video. So the technology, the computer, misunderstood the defects that I meant, and that was the result. So I'm not a new media artist at all.

**Baroni:** Back to *The New Film*. Was the decision made in the beginning that you would make a whole film with edits and clips that feature the president's portrait in the background, and then you went out and looked for these films – or how did it work exactly?

**Yassin:** No it's just a part of my research; I'm really interested in Egyptian cinema. I really love it. I'm kind of addicted to it. And I'm also addicted watching Egyptian films on TV. And it was just one idea that was buried, that I had thought about, and it matched the theme of *PhotoCairo4*. I find it's very interesting to show the piece here in Egypt – maybe it doesn't make that much sense in Lebanon or where I live now in Amsterdam. So just it's part of my continuous research about Egyptian cinema, and my continuing passion for watching these films. There are always stereotypes in Egyptian cinema, which is very funny, everyone knows about them. There is always a belly dancer, there's the Sudanese caretaker. And of course when there is an industry, there are always stereotypes. Also in Hollywood and Bollywood, there are stereotypes. But there are no stereotypes in Lebanese cinema because there's no industry. So one of these stereotypes in Egyptian cinema is the photo of the president.

**Baroni:** How would you imagine this piece would be understood or interpreted in a museum context for example?

**Yassin:** It can be a joke, maybe, in a very clean, well-curated exhibition in a museum in Europe. Maybe I will sell it, because I have to be an artist and I have to sell my work. I don't mind, but I am re-questioning the standards, maybe it's a site-specific video, let's say. That's why it was so important for me to show this piece here.

**Baroni:** I feel that way about it. Because I have issues with things being shown in certain contexts, when you're not grounded in a certain culture – the impossibility of relating to it the same way. And so it would probably work in a completely different way, if it was shown in Amsterdam like you were suggesting.

**Yassin:** I'd like to speak about this piece I did in Sweden recently because it's related. Lately I've been playing on the way that I'm now seen as a war artist product. After the war in Lebanon of 2006, I've been asked only for pieces that I did related to Beirut or related to the war.

**Baroni:** That's so, so unexpected Raed! [Laughter.]

**Yassin:** I did this piece where I really thought of how to sell yourself as a war artist. I did a big text, which is total fiction, about a pop singer in Lebanon coming to sing at my party and a big missile came and destroyed the party, and everything was destroyed. Super drama. The text is done intentionally so that nobody will believe it; it's impossible to believe it. But I was so astonished because everybody believed it! And the only thing that is true from the whole text was the missile that really blew up my apartment, which is the most dramatic thing, and everything else around that event was silly, was just fiction. I'm not sure about this idea but I would like to speak about it because I'm starting to have a big problem being considered only under the category of a war product artist. That's why I cannot show one of my pieces that I really like, like *Tonight*. Nobody is interested in this piece. I'm more interested in stuff related to what art is in this region.

**Baroni:** A certain group of Lebanese artists are probably more established on the international circuit than any other group of artists from the Arab region, but you're coming at a later stage. How does this work for you as an artist? Have these artists set the standards or the language that is now expected from a Lebanese artist, and are people from your generation, at a later stage, finding it difficult to break out of this?

**Yassin:** No. People from my generation are really working on something else that has nothing to do with the generation before. The generation before us – most of them are my friends and I think they are good artists even if I have a problem with their art sometimes – get this international attention because from 1975 to 1990 Lebanon was a black hole. There was nothing coming out of Lebanon. And maybe there were people waiting, internationally, for artists from this region. This generation also knew how to promote themselves because most of their work is about issues from the Lebanese civil war, which

is a very sexy topic to everybody in the world. They are recycling the same ideas, chewing it and then throwing it out and then chewing it and throwing it out. So I don't know, I cannot speak about my generation because it's not clear yet. I don't know if somebody can go to Lebanon and research my generation. They can research the generation before.

**Baroni:** Is it really a generation? I mean the artists that we're talking about they are close-knit, they're somehow focussed on –

**Yassin:** I'm saying that my generation is more interested, maybe, in pop culture, let's say pop and a lot of other topics. But maybe something which is closer to daily life. We are a generation – I will speak about myself, or maybe I can speak about one or two other friends – we really felt disconnected to the generation before us, even though we can have discussions with them and they really did a good job, for a country as small as Lebanon, to be that famous in the art world. We are also interested in the civil war, it is not just something that you can forget. I was born in the civil war and I lived half of my life in the civil war, so that's a big deal for me. But what we are really interested in is production during the civil war – what pop songs and films were produced, as opposed to being interested in the civil war as event. And that's the difference let's say, between these two generations.

**Baroni:** So your work, and maybe you're suggesting that some of your colleagues' works, are more built on this idea that Nicolas Bourriaud suggested, that art can only really be post-produced. So you're kind of creating a post-production.

**Yassin:** I don't agree with this because then I think post-production means stuff stops being vulnerable, and I really like it when art pieces start to be vulnerable and open, and not stable, because it looks exactly like our region and our society. I have to see post-production as about sculpting something that is very neat, maybe Swiss art. But not pieces from our region. I don't know how neat we can be. We try of course, because there's a standard you have to comply with, but who says that this standard is the standard? And also with post-production you always have to rethink a hundred times about everything when you work. And I try not to do this, not to over-do it.

**Baroni:** Would you call the art of the more established generation in Lebanon post-production?

**Yassin:** I don't want to labelize –

**Baroni:** Is it closer to that than you?

**Yassin:** It depends on the people. Maybe it's a language of their generation. It's not something bad.

**Baroni:** Ok. I think we're done. Thank you very much.