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Le crime à l'écran dans le monde arabe

THE 1953 CODES: RAYYĀ AND SAKĪNA ON SCREEN (1953–2005)

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Abstract | Cet article s'intéresse aux représentations des femmes criminelles à l'écran. Il se concentre sur Rayyā et Sakīna, deux sœurs arrêtées par la police égyptienne en 1920 et condamnées à mort en 1921. Depuis 1953, les sœurs ont inspiré des films et des séries télévisées qui ont ancré leur mythe dans la culture populaire. Rayyā et Sakīna sont au cœur de récits porteurs d'impératifs moraux sur des questions sociétales, telles que la place des femmes dans la société et la relation de la nation avec ses marges.

L'article montre que, jusqu'à une récente re-signification hors écran, Rayyā et Sakīna n'ont pas été resignifiées en profondeur dans les films égyptiens. Au lieu de cela, elles ont été représentées comme des tueuses nées, conformément au premier film sur elles de 1953. Ce que j'appelle « les codes de 1953 » – les marqueurs qui rendent les personnages de Rayyā et Sakīna reconnaissables – persistent en effet dans les œuvres postérieures jusqu'en 2005.

Mots-clés | Crime, Cinéma, Mythes, Signification, Violence féminine, Égypte

Abstract | This paper examines on-screen representations of female criminals. It focuses on Rayyā and Sakīna, two sisters who were arrested in Egypt in 1920 and executed in 1921. Since 1953, the sisters have inspired movies and TV series that have entrenched their myth in popular culture. Rayyā and Sakīna are at the core of narratives that bear moral imperatives on societal issues, such as the place of women in society and the relation of the nation to its margins. I will argue that,

until a recent off-screen resignification, Rayyā and Sakīna have not been deeply resignified in Egyptian movies. Instead, they have been represented as natural-born killers, in line with the first *Rayyā wa-Sakīna* movie of 1953. What I call “the 1953 codes” – the markers that make the two characters recognizable – persist in subsequent works up until 2005.

Keywords | Crime, Cinema, Myths, Meaning-making, Female violence, Egypt

In her essay on the representation of women in artworks, Linda Nochlin clarifies that she approaches women as a “problematic signifier”, instead of reducing them to a “pre-existing entity or frozen image”.¹ The ambition here is similar, although the framework is more limited. This article studies, as signifiers, Rayyā and Sakīna, two sisters who rose to fame in Egypt as female criminals.

The sisters Rayyā and Sakīna were arrested in Alexandria in November 1920, along with their husbands and other men. The police charged the gang with the murder of seventeen women, yet the press sensationalized Rayyā and Sakīna as female perpetrators, minimizing the role of the men.² In 1921, during the trial, the judges reversed the perspective. They saw in the men the main perpetrators and in the sisters mere accomplices, but they sentenced Rayyā and Sakīna to death too.³ The sensationalist press coverage, and the sensation of the first execution of women in modern Egypt, contributed to shaping Rayyā and Sakīna’s criminal myth. The myth, however, could hardly have survived without the movies and, more recently, the TV series that entrenched it in popular culture.

In Barthesian terms, a myth is an act of meaning-making.⁴ It consists of attributing meanings to a highly recognizable sign. The sign – Rayyā and Sakīna in this case – becomes an icon, which people easily identify thanks to its presence in cultural productions or in the social sphere. But an icon can be signified, and resignified, in different ways. Its constant presence in the socio-cultural landscape does not imply a motionless meaning. Rayyā and Sakīna’s myth is no exception to this pattern. The sisters are resignified, in Egypt, on and off screen. On-screen resignifications, analysed in this article, relate to the case of 1920-1921, expressing in some cases a pretension to historical accuracy. At the same time, they show concerns around femininity, masculinity, and national purity. This has been noticeable since the first movie made about the sisters, in 1953. I argue that this first movie made the sisters so iconic that further works resignified them within its framework. I will start by questioning the reality claims of the movie, before delving into what I call “the 1953 codes” and showing their persistence in subsequent works up to at least 2005.

Rayyā wa-Sakīna, 1953: a movie with reality claims

The first on-screen resignification of Rayyā and Sakīna dates to 1953, at the beginning of the Nasserist era that shaped post-colonial Egypt. This epoch was marked by strong state interventionism in all cultural fields, including cinema.⁵ As a medium, film was crucial in portraying the new Egypt as a land where the modernity project was on its way. In this framework, many movies of the

1- NOCHLIN Linda, *Representing Women*. London, Thames and Hudson, 2019 [1999], p. 7.

2- CHITI Elena, “Building a national case in interwar Egypt”, *History Compass*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–13.

3- ‘ĪSĀ Šalāḥ, *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna*. Cairo, al-Karma, 2016 [2002]; TAKLA Nefertiti, *Murder in Alexandria*, PhD thesis, University of California, 2016.

4- BARTHES Roland, *Mythologies*. Paris, Seuil, 1957.

5- SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2007, pp. 108-109.

Nasserist era deal with the roles of women in the family and in the new society.⁶ The movie *Rayyā and Sakīna*, released in 1953, is at first glance far from such issues. An analysis of its reality claims and spatial construction, however, reveals a preoccupation with female morality and national purity, more than with the criminal case of 1920.

The movie was directed by Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf (1915-1996), with a script co-written by the novelist Najīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006). It is traditionally included in the wave of Egyptian realism, of which Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf is regarded as one of the founders, especially for the scripts written in collaboration with Maḥfūz.⁷ Without contesting such periodization in the history of Egyptian cinema, I will argue that the movie *Rayyā and Sakīna* is more complex than an account “based on true facts,” which “embraces naturalism by not disclosing the causes of the deviance (*inḥirāf*) of the two women, while describing their environment in detail”⁸. In line with Viola Shafik,⁹ I will embrace the challenge of problematizing realism.

The movie itself has reality claims which are worth investigating. The initial disclaimer, after the titles, states that the movie is based on *al-Ahrām* newspaper’s accounts from Rayyā and Sakīna’s time, that is, 1920. *Al-Ahrām* is also staged in the movie. Copies of the newspaper appear in the hands of different characters, from city dwellers to the barber and his customers. There is usually a group of men gathering around the one who reads it aloud, becoming the trustworthy source of the city news. The characters do not question the newspaper’s information. They rather build on it to depict future scenarios, often expressing fears and concerns. Sometimes, *al-Ahrām* alone occupies the screen, through close-ups and without the mediation of the characters. The camera frames the newspaper closely enough for the audience to read the main title and the first lines. Then, the shot fades to black. The close-up and the fade-out create a reality effect. They give the impression that *al-Ahrām*, a direct source from 1920, is physically separated from the action reproduced in 1953. *Al-Ahrām* stands supposedly untouched by cinematic distortion, thus guaranteeing the authenticity of the plot of which it is presented as the source.

Yet a comparison between *al-Ahrām*’s excerpts in the movie and *al-Ahrām*’s excerpts in the archives reveals some level of distortion. In the archives, at the head office of the newspaper in al-Galaa Street in Cairo, I could not find correspondences between the movie titles and the newspaper’s titles. This could, of course, be my mistake. I consulted *al-Ahrām*’s issues in 2015, on microfilms that were not searchable through keywords. I did find, on the contrary, a discrepancy in tone between the movie titles and the actual titles.

6- SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2007.

7- AL-NAḤḤĀS Hāshim, “Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf wa-tajdhīr al-wāqī’iyya wa’l-tanwīr fī’l-sinimā al-miṣriyya”, *Alif*, no. 15, 1995, p. 7.

8- AL-NAḤḤĀS Hāshim, “Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf wa-tajdhīr al-wāqī’iyya wa’l-tanwīr fī’l-sinimā al-miṣriyya”, *Alif*, no. 15, 1995, p. 8. Quote translated from the Arabic by the author of this article.

9- SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2007, pp. 254-255.

Although *al-Ahrām* did sensationalize the case in 1920,¹⁰ the movie titles bear a more alarmist tone, generalising concerns around the case to the safety of all women, if not the whole population, in Alexandria. There is also a discrepancy regarding the authorship. The movie disclaimer, in 1953, attributes *al-Ahrām* articles to Luṭfī ‘Uthmān, “editor at *al-Ahrām*” (*al-muḥarrir bi’l-Ahrām*). In 1920-1921, however, *al-Ahrām* articles were usually not signed. Those related to Rayyā and Sakīna are not signed by Luṭfī ‘Uthmān or anyone else. They simply bear the by-line “from our correspondent”, or “our special correspondent in Alexandria”. Exceptions are the few opinion pieces on Rayyā and Sakīna written by prominent intellectuals, such as ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād,¹¹ since their name was a seal of authority legitimising personal appraisal. It is then possible that, in the 1950s, Luṭfī ‘Uthmān had told Najīb Maḥfūz what he recalled about his coverage. The movie would then rely on a retrospective recollection, more than on the accounts of 1920.

In any case, there are more striking elements to question the reality claims of the movie. Not only are *al-Ahrām*’s titles and excerpts modified, but also the unfolding of the case is significantly altered. Despite the initial disclaimer discussed above, stating that the movie is based on *al-Ahrām*’s accounts, the plot takes a different turn. In the movie, we see the police getting suspicious about Rayyā and Sakīna in connection with the disappearance of some women in Alexandria. We see a clever police officer disguise himself as a drunkard to patronise the places where Rayyā, Sakīna, and their men gather. We see him infiltrate the gang to dismantle it from the inside until the denouement, when he guides a cavalry-like charge of good people attacking the house of the criminals. None of this occurred in reality. Nobody infiltrated the gang. The arrest was not a spectacular, collective endeavour, and the police were criticised, including in *al-Ahrām*, for having shown a lack of preparation.

Even the choice of location shooting, a traditional feature of realism,¹² deserves to be interrogated. The 1953 movie was, indeed, shot in Labban, the Alexandrian district where Rayyā and Sakīna lived. However, the Labban that we see is marked by a sharp contrast between indoor and outdoor spaces, which shapes a mythology of order and chaos. Indoor spaces are sharply divided into places of order and places of chaos. The former, such as the barber’s shop or the police station, enjoy uniform lighting. The latter, such as the bar (*khammāra*) or Rayyā and Sakīna’s brothel, are immersed in alternating light and darkness, highly contrasted. This results in shadows that reverberate on the faces of the criminals and point to moral shadows.

Outdoor spaces are often seen at night, with the same contrast between deep darkness and scattered spots of light. During the day, another contrast arises. Outdoor spaces are either narrow and crowded, such as Labban’s alleyways and

10- CHITI Elena, “Building a national case in interwar Egypt”, *History Compass*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–13.

11- AL-‘AQQĀD ‘Abbās Maḥmūd, “Rayyā wa-Sakīna bayna Lūmbrūzū wa-Anātūl Frāns”, *al-Ahrām*, 30 November 1920.

12- HAYWARD Susan, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London-New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 355.

marketplace, or vast wastelands. Alexandrian topography is redesigned along this contrast. The wasteland around Pompey's Pillar, which is in fact almost a 20-minute walk from Labban, is placed right outside Labban's alleyways. It looks uninhabited, hosting only archaeological ruins and cemeteries, but not completely free from human presence. The criminals who, in the movie, seem to control Labban often run off into the wasteland. They even hide in the cemeteries, going so far as to use tombstones as shields in their firefights with the police. Moreover, both sides use rifles. While smuggled weapons did circulate in Egypt after World War I,¹³ it is difficult to believe that common criminal gangs could have such easy access to them. In British-occupied Egypt, the government had warned civilians against bearing weapons, even before the re-establishment of martial law in December 1921.¹⁴

It would therefore be simplistic to embrace the reality claims of the movie and its reading as an account of true facts or a naturalistic depiction of an environment.¹⁵ I will rather argue that the movie contributes to creating Rayyā and Sakīna's myth in Barthesian terms. It makes the two female characters easily recognizable as merciless women, through a series of visual and non-visual signs that will be studied in the next paragraph. They range from pieces of clothing to a specific music and song, all associated with cruelty. These signs become a sort of markers of Rayyā and Sakīna, the codes that construct them as negative icons.

Markers of Rayyā and Sakīna: The 1953 Codes

In the movie, not only do Rayyā and Sakīna live in places of chaos, but they are characterized as its agents. The movie constructs a series of markers for Rayyā and Sakīna, which set them apart from good women. It starts with clothing. The sisters wear *milāya laff* and *bīsha*. The first garment, literally a "wrapping sheet", is a loose black cloak, put over other clothes, to cover the female body. It was usually paired with a white face-veil, called *burqu'*, a marker of social status and respectability. The *bīsha* is instead a black face-covering, usually made of transparent muslin or in the shape of a net that both veils and unveils the face. It seems that the *bīsha* was, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the traditional face-covering for upper-class women in periods of mourning, before becoming a garment of the lower classes.¹⁶ In the movie, "two women with *milāya laff* and *bīsha*" is the recurrent description of Rayyā and Sakīna according to eyewitnesses of their wanderings about. Each report to the authorities contains this formula. As a police officer says, "half of the women in Alexandria wear *milāya laff* and *bīsha*", yet this clothing becomes an index of the sisters. At the marketplace, their black *bīsha* is contrasted with the white *burqu'* worn by

13- REID Donald M., "Political Assassination in Egypt, 1910–1954", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1982, pp. 625–651.

14- BADRAWI Malak, *Political Violence in Egypt*. London-New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 3–4.

15- AL-NAḤḤĀS Hāshim, "Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf wa-tajdhīr al-wāqī'iyya wa'l-tanwīr fi-l-sīnīmā al-miṣriyya", *Alif*, no. 15, 1995.

16- AMER Sahar, *What is Veiling?* Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2014, 202.

innocent ladies. Nowadays, *milāya laff* and *bīsha* are frequently associated with belly dancing and regarded as an expression of female sensuality.

While these two garments mark Rayyā and Sakīna as an inseparable whole, their behaviours are complementary. Rayyā has a cutting look and a coarse voice, which immediately reveal her cruelty. Sakīna, the younger sister, has sweet eyes and a sugary voice, with which she reassures the victims, who are afraid of Rayyā. While Sakīna deceitfully recomforts them, Rayyā prepares the poisonous beverage that will narcotize them. But victims are not the only ones whom Rayyā scares. Even the men of the gang defer to her. They call her *mu'allima* ("boss"), while she gives them harsh orders or reprimands them. While the men drink from glasses, Rayyā drinks directly from the flask or from bottles, in a sort of appropriation of masculine habits. Contrary to historical reality, acknowledged by the judges in 1921,¹⁷ in the movie Rayyā is the chief of the gang.

Rayyā's centrality in the movie also emerges during the killings. Those follow a precise ritual, which looks like a drummed *zar*. In popular culture, *zar* is regarded as a healing to spirit possession. Through the sacrifice of animals, the offering of jewels, and/or music and dancing, the possessed persons seek to placate "their" spirits.¹⁸ In the movie, Rayyā watches, while the men play drums and the female victim dances until she faints. Then come her blood and jewels as in a sacrifice, exemplified by the image of a slaughtered white lamb, a visual metaphor disconnected from the plot. The drummed *zar* is marked by a series of jump cuts, from one character to another, from an extreme close-up on Rayyā's eyes to an extreme close-up on a man's face, or on the victim's belly or feet. From a narratological perspective, the action is focalized through the victim. The recurrent oblique shots, and even flip shots, show the disorientation of the female dancer under the effect of narcotics. The drumming accompanies a song in Egyptian dialect, *Bint el-Hāra* ("Girl of the Neighbourhood"), whose lyrics are the work of the famous poet Bayram al-Tūnīsī. They describe the freshness and beauty of a girl whom the singing voice, that of a man, used to love. The love song quickly turns into an elegy, with the obsessive repetition of *ḥasra 'aleyhā* and *kibdī 'aleyhā*, two ways of saying "I'm sorry for her." This terrible drummed requiem is probably the most iconic of the 1953 codes, present in subsequent movies until 1983, but also in popular culture until today.

The negative iconicity of Rayyā and Sakīna is emphasised by the contrast with their male counterpart in the movie. The brave police officer who defeats the sisters appears as their antithesis. He is as brilliant as them, but uses his brilliancy for the common good, which coincides with state interests. The men under his orders are not smart enough or brave enough to challenge Rayyā and Sakīna, but they are loyal to their officer and follow him. The officer is brave for all of them. This stands out even in the choice of weapons. Ordinary policemen carry a rifle, which is a weapon designed for long-range shooting. They never try to get closer

17- 'ĪSā Ṣalāh, *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna*. Cairo, al-Karma, 2016 [2002]; TAKLA Nefertiti, *Murder in Alexandria*, PhD thesis, University of California, 2016.

18- EL-HADIDI Hager, *Zar*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2022.

to danger. The brave officer bears a gun, a weapon that is not accurate at longer distances, and is the only one who engages in close combat with the criminals. The binary between Rayyā and Sakīna, agents of evil, and the police officer, champion of good, permeates even the space. As shown in the previous paragraph, the boundary between good and evil is unambiguous in the movie. It coincides with the separation between Labban and the uninhabited wasteland around it, as in a frontier between civilisation and wilderness. By spreading prostitution and crime within Labban, Rayyā and Sakīna bring chaos within the order of civilisation. Through their presence, Labban itself becomes a frontier, a threshold-space through which the desert penetrates and corrupts the city, while the valiant police officer strives to repel it. Far from a realistic portrayal of an environment, the 1953 movie stages the fight of civilised Egypt against its internal agents of chaos, its inner barbarians. In the movie, Rayyā and Sakīna are resignified as the inner barbarians of the Egyptian nation.

Along with Walid al-Khashāb, one can read such resignification as an expression of the “collective unconscious” of modernity that, in post-colonial Egypt, depicted the urban poor and the uneducated woman as anti-modern elements to be defeated.¹⁹ Since the anti-colonial struggle, Egyptian iconography has idealized middle-class women as wives of the defenders of the country and mothers of its future citizens.²⁰ In parallel, pictures²¹ and movies²² have exposed a sort of counter-idealization, showing how women should not be in order to match ideals of national purity. Rayyā and Sakīna have embodied, since the press coverage of the 1920s, this counter-example, which Shaun Lopez vividly calls “cultural anti-icons”.²³ The 1953 movie, shot after independence, retrospectively depicts colonial Egypt in pejorative terms through two anti-icons: Rayyā and Sakīna. Their black, traditional garments and their reliance upon a ritual such as *zar* mark them as both poor and anti-modern. Further resignifications of the sisters, in different epochs, play along with these codes.

Changing Genre, so the Signification Remains the Same. The Comedy Movies of 1955 and 1983

Rayyā and Sakīna later appear in two comedy movies, in 1955 and 1983. In this case, I will not question the definition of genre. Yet I will argue that the shift towards comedy does not imply a parallel shift in the signification of the main characters. While the two movies are undoubtedly lighter, in both Rayyā and Sakīna are as dark as in 1953.

The comedy movie of 1955 is titled *Ismāʿīl Yassīn yuqābil Rayyā and Sakīna* (“Ismail

19- AL-KHASHĀB Walid, *Muhandis al-bahja*. Cairo, al-Marāyā liʾl-intāj al-thaqāfi, 2023.

20- BARON Beth, *Egypt as a Woman*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

21- RYZOVA Lucie, “‘I Am a Whore But I Will Be a Good Mother’: On the Production and Consumption of the Female Body in Egypt”, *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 12/13, no. 2/1, 2004, pp. 80–122.

22- SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2007, pp. 213–227.

23- LOPEZ Shaun, “The Dangers of Dancing: The Media and Morality in 1930s Egypt”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2004, pp. 99–108.

Yassine encounters Rayyā and Sakīna”). The plot juxtaposes the 1953 plot with the absurd situation mentioned in the title. Indeed, while Rayyā and Sakīna run their criminal gang, star actor Ismail Yassine bumps into them. Unlike what the title suggests, Ismail Yassine plays his usual cinematic persona, not himself. In other words, Yassine does not impersonate Yassine. He plays the role of Felfel, an unknown cabaret actor who struggles to make a living, but gets ahead in life because he is good-hearted and simple-minded. The last two characteristics are salient in the roles that Yassine plays in other movies and that the audience associates with him.²⁴ In line with this cinematic persona, the role of Felfel is again that of a naïve man, incapable of bad feelings and second thoughts, who cannot read the reality and yet, by chance, remains unharmed. A sort of modern Goha, Felfel navigates and defeats social dangers while being hardly aware of them. The comedy consists of a series of gags that stem from his clumsiness and unawareness. They could be removed from the plot without altering the story of Rayyā and Sakīna, but, without them, the movie would not be a comedy.

The gags superposed on the story highlight, first of all, an inner binary, within the comedy movie itself. The binary sets in contrast the good-hearted, innocent Felfel with the ruthless Rayyā and Sakīna. It is worth emphasising that no comedy elements surround the sisters in the comedy movie of 1955. Not only are they as ruthless as in 1953, but the same actresses play their roles. In 1953 as in 1955, Negma Ibrahim plays Rayyā and Zouzou Hamdi el-Hakim plays Sakīna. This reinforces the impression of Ismail Yassine being thrown into the real world of the sisters, as the title suggests.

Such an explicit parallel also shapes an intertextual binary, putting the comedy movie of 1955 in dialogue with the movie of 1953. The presence of the same female criminals, from 1953 to 1955, highlights, by contrast, the change in the male hero. The two movies have very different men as protagonists. The 1953 movie revolves around the brave police officer played by Anwar Wagdy. The 1955 comedy movie does not have its valiant man. Instead, Felfel becomes his parodic alter-ego. While the police officer of 1953 plans his infiltration to disrupt Rayyā and Sakīna’s gang, Felfel comes across the criminals by accident and defeats them by chance. He is as scared and clueless as the police officer was fearless and smart. The evilness of Rayyā and Sakīna points to two different kinds of masculine integrity: manly heroism, in 1953, and child-like purity, in 1955.

Another famous comedy movie, released in 1983, relies on the 1953 version of Rayyā and Sakīna. Its title is simply *Rayyā and Sakīna*, as in 1953. Intertextuality is also deliberate, since the main feature of 1953 – the sisters being cruel criminal bosses – is unaltered. Yet this feature, untouched by comedy elements, is not at the core of action. It is relegated to the margins, while a contrast is constructed between the 1953 plot and the new one, openly parodic. The 1983 movie stages a couple in Alexandria. A young waitress, played by Sherihan, serves in the house of an old and incompetent police officer who is in charge of the case of Rayyā

24- SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*. Cairo-New York, AUC Press, 2007, p. 155.

and Sakīna. Her lover ‘Azzūz, played by Younes Shalabi, tries to find his way as an aspiring actor and dreams of launching his own theatre. The waitress and the wannabe actor cannot marry because they are broke, which forces them to hide their relation. To enter the police officer’s house, ‘Azzūz disguises himself as a woman, pretending to be a female cousin of the waitress. But the wife of the police officer mistakes the duo for Rayyā and Sakīna. Panicked, she gives them her jewels and faints. After that, the lovers disguise themselves as Rayyā and Sakīna to rob wealthy women in town and make money for their future. At the very mention of Rayyā and Sakīna’s names, women are petrified by fear and give the robbers what they want. This trick functions until their encounter with the real Rayyā and Sakīna. The lovers decide to penetrate their house, pretending to be unaware victims, when they hear of a rich bounty on the sisters. Yet the fake Rayyā and Sakīna do not recognize the real ones on the spot, going so far as to try to rob them too. This reversed-mirror perspective, with fake and real Rayyā and Sakīna trying to rob one another, is the highest parodic moment of the movie.

In 1983, even more than in 1955, Rayyā and Sakīna are a pure signifier, the signified of which is female cruelty. The comedy stems from the contrast between the clumsiness of the fake Rayyā and Sakīna and the evilness associated with the real ones. This stands out in the reaction of a woman whom the lovers try to rob. Simulating deafness, the woman pretends not to hear Rayyā and Sakīna’s names and, therefore, is not afraid.

In 1955 as in 1983, the sisters are signified along the 1953 codes. They wear black *milāya laff* and *bīsha*, which in 1983, with colour film, makes them even gloomier in contrast to other characters. In both movies, Rayyā has terrible eyes and gives killer looks all around. In 1955, the men still call her *mu’allima*. In both, the places and faces of the criminals are immersed in a contrast of light and darkness, even during the day. The killings look like drummed *zar* rituals, accompanied by the iconic song *Bint el-Ḥāra*, the one written by Bayram al-Tūnīsī for the movie of 1953. The obsessive repetition of *ḥasra ‘aleyhā* and *kibdī ‘aleyhā* underscores the increasing disempowerment of the victims, showing their hopeless fate. Even oblique and flip shots are there in 1955. In 1983, the drummed version of *Bint el-Ḥāra* marks the encounter with the real Rayyā and Sakīna, while the fake ones only sing it a cappella, with clumsy, nasal voices.

In both comedy movies, the main elements defining the characters of Rayyā and Sakīna come from 1953. The sisters still stand as a standard for female cruelty. This core is untouched, in line with the reality claims of the 1953 movie discussed above. This enhances the impression that the 1953 movie presented the historical truth of Rayyā and Sakīna. On the other hand, the male counterparts, in both comedy movies, are linked to the world of theatre and performing, and therefore of fiction. As mentioned above, in 1955, star actor Ismail Yassine plays Felfel, himself a cabaret actor; in 1983, star actor Younes Shalabi plays ‘Azzūz, an aspiring actor who struggles to get a role. This idea of actors playing actors introduces a further rupture between the reality claims surrounding Rayyā and

Sakīna, taken from the 1953 movie, and the amusing gags juxtaposed to the criminal plot, which are immediately recognizable as fictional. The disguise of the two lovers as Rayyā and Sakīna, in 1983, underlines this boundary, rather than blurring it. Fake Rayyā and Sakīna rob, but they do not kill. Moreover, their robbery is not motivated by greed. ‘Azzūz wants to open a theatre. His fiancée wants to marry and constantly feels guilty for making money illicitly. Their transgression is a minor one, with which the audience can sympathize.

Criminogenic Environment and the Taste of Crime. The Televised Theatrical Play of 1983 and the TV Series of 2005

A shift in the resignification of the sisters occurs in a theatrical play of 1983. Starring singer Shadia and star actress Suhair al-Babili, the play was also released on TV and reached a wide audience. Unlike the previous productions, the play does not start with Rayyā and Sakīna in Alexandria at the time of the crimes. For the first time, viewers see the sisters before they became criminals. At the beginning, the focus is precisely on how they became criminals in a criminogenic environment. Poverty is at the core of all their concerns in Alexandria, and even more so before they migrate to the big city. The play portrays the sisters as young girls, born into a lower-class family of Upper Egypt, with no father to take care of them. It also suggests that socio-economic hardship is not the only factor that pushed them to break the law. Both class and patriarchy explain that. The sisters fall prey to wealthy men who abuse them and to others who buy their services as prostitutes.

Such background contrasts with the previous image of Rayyā and Sakīna, and especially Rayyā, as natural-born killers, acting to fulfil a thirst for blood. Yet the thirst for blood appears in the 1983 play too. The difference is that it develops over time, after the sisters commit the first crime, then the following ones. After a while, they get accustomed to bloodshed and seem to enjoy it – especially Rayyā – in an escalating addiction. They sell the jewels of their victims and make money, and yet they continue to kill, as if money was not the real motive. A psychological explanation is given, towards the end, to clarify such behaviour. Rayyā had fallen in love with the heir of an aristocratic family, for whom she worked as a servant. The man had made promises, but did not keep them. His parents did not let him marry a servant and went so far as to tell Rayyā that her child was born dead, before chasing her away. It is in fact this very child, now a beautiful young woman, whom Rayyā kills as her last victim. The discovery that she has killed her only child seems to be the punishment for her thirst for blood. The initial focus on the time before the crimes, then the shift toward a thirst for blood, remains in another work. It is a Ramadan TV series, also titled *Rayyā wa-Sakīna*, produced by al-‘Adl group and screened in 2005. During my periods of fieldwork in Egypt – in October 2022, January 2023, and April-May 2024 – I realized to what extent this series has become iconic, in its turn, for younger generations. The opening theme song is a poem by the late Aḥmad Fu’ād Najm,

renowned for his poetry in Egyptian dialect. More than once my interlocutors, especially in Alexandria, started singing this song at the very mention of Rayyā and Sakīna. Some advised me to watch the series as if it were a faithful source on the case. Like the 1953 movie, the series has explicit reality claims. It starts with a disclaimer about the true facts and the real characters that it stages. But its reputation for accuracy also comes from a further disclaimer, according to which the script is based on the book *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna* (“Rayyā and Sakīna’s men”). In 2002, the late journalist Ṣalāḥ ‘Īsā published this book, which is still a best-seller in Egypt, available in different editions in bookshops and street markets. Through the judiciary records of 1921, ‘Īsā showed that, despite the traditional version of the myth, the sisters were not the main perpetrators but rather the accomplices of the men. He also insisted on post-World War I poverty as a criminogenic factor, disproving the view of Rayyā and Sakīna as natural born killers.²⁵ Yet the TV series, whose script is the work of Muṣṭafā Muḥarrām, does not really embrace this version. It is somehow split into two: some reality effects in the setting do not prevent a traditional resignification of the sisters along the 1953 codes.

In the setting, the series points to some historical references that, although dramatized through music and camera effects, are meant to portray Egypt after World War I. Poverty is represented through the appearance of beggars, often children, or queues of desperate people looking for a job or for charity. There are also scenes of anti-British demonstrations and anti-colonial slogans written on the walls. People discuss their suffering during the past conflict. In episodes 11 and 12, Sakīna’s husband, ‘Abd al-‘Āl, recalls a nostalgic song that Egyptian conscripts in the British army used to sing, far away from home. The song is historically attested.²⁶ The language also shapes reality effects. The Alexandrian dialect sounds sometimes old-fashioned, mainly through the increased usage of Italian terms that nowadays have disappeared. The word for hospital is *usbitāliā*, instead of the current term *mustashfā*. The word for contract is *kuntrātū*. That for lawyer is *avūkātū*. In taverns and brothels, people drink a mixture of cheap alcoholic beverages called *sucūlansā*, a term attested in the coverage of Rayyā and Sakīna’s case in *al-Ahrām*.²⁷

Yet reality effects shape only the overall setting, not the characters and places of Rayyā and Sakīna, for which the 1953 codes still prevail. The rooms of the sisters are marked by a sharp contrast between darkness and light, which reverberates on the faces of the criminals. Extreme close-ups, highlighting their facial expressions, are even more frequent than in 1953, which contributes to undermine the sense of realism constructed in the setting. Drummed *zar* ceremonies accompany the crimes. Although the 1953 song *Bint el-Ḥāra* is not

25- ‘ĪSĀ Ṣalāḥ, *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna*. Cairo, al-Karma, 2016 [2002].

26- MOSSALLAM Alia, “‘Ya ‘Aziz ya ‘ayni ‘ayni ana bidi arawwah baladi...’ Voyages of an Egyptian tune”, in GORMAN A. and IRVING S. (eds.), *Cultural Entanglements in Pre-Independence Arab World*. London, Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 51–69.

27- “Qaḍīyyat iḡhtiyāl al-nisā”, *al-Ahrām*, 9 December 1920.

played, others mark the rituals, underscoring the disorientation of the victims. Even more sharply than in 1953, the killings are focalised through them. Such focalization persists even after their death, through dreams. In episode 17 Sakīna, but not Rayyā, has a nightmare where she finds herself at the victim's place. She sees a man approaching, then another man's hands, before all the men surround and kill her. Sakīna is signified as the younger sister misled by the older. She is characterized, more specifically than in previous works, as a woman of easy virtue, aware of her beauty. She likes playing with men, but is genuinely in love with 'Abd al-'Āl. Her thirst is more for sex than for blood.

The truly evil character is, again, Rayyā. Her humanity is denied more systematically than before. Rayyā's character in 2005 is the perfect embodiment of the anti-icon, who overturns all the social expectations about female roles. Not only is she the *mu'allima*, the boss who scares the men, but she perverts marriage and motherhood. She violently shakes and threatens her little daughter Badī'a, who has witnessed one of the killings. She cruelly insults her, even when the girl simply asks for a new *gallābiyya*. She holds a knife to her husband's throat. She is, as one of the songs repeats, *mashūra, magnūna, mal'ūna, mal'ūna, mal'ūna...* ("bewitched, mad, cursed, cursed, cursed ..."). Her madness goes together with a denial of maternity: apart from Badī'a, she has carried four children, all born dead. Despite the judiciary records that 'Īsā consulted for his book, the script, allegedly based on it, is rather in line with the movie of 1953. Rather than push factors, post-WWI poverty and chaos seem to be an opportunity for Rayyā to express her inner cruelty. As powerfully as in 1953, the 2005 series depicts Rayyā as the woman who ran Egypt's most infamous gang.

Off-Screen Heroization. The Movie in the Making

As shown above, the sisters, especially Rayyā, have not been resignified, so far, in positive terms. At least, not on screen. In 2022, another Ramadan TV series, *Ranyā wa-Sakīna*, produced by Masha Entertainment, celebrated sisterhood in the face of hardship. The series, however, is not about the criminal case of 1920. Set in contemporary Egypt, it is the story of two women that are not even related to each other. Ranyā comes from a wealthy family, Sakīna belongs to the lower class. The former is framed by her entourage, unjustly charged with murder, and pursued by the police. The latter is pursued by a criminal gang with which her partner was in business. They meet on an ambulance, after a car crash, and dislike each other on the spot. Nothing but misfortune unites Ranyā, a naïve upper-class lady, and Sakīna, a strong woman used to daily struggles. They gradually become sisters in the face of distress. Of the two, Sakīna's character is more sympathetic at first. Her counterpart, in addition, is renamed Ranyā. The new name, along with her being spoiled and clumsy, opens a gap between Ranyā and Rayyā. The 2022 duo seems to be an Egyptian resignification of Thelma and Louise, more than a positive resignification of Rayyā and Sakīna.

Yet the Rayyā and Sakīna of 1920 are often, today, resignified in positive terms

and even heroized in popular culture. Their ongoing heroization is also linked to cinema, but not to movie screening. In the spring of 2015, Egyptian scriptwriter Aḥmad ‘Ashūr revealed the title and the topic of his movie in progress: *Barā’at Rayyā wa-Sakīna* (“Rayyā and Sakīna’s innocence”). He claimed to have new evidence about the case of 1920, proving not only Rayyā and Sakīna’s innocence of murder charges, but also their involvement in the Egyptian anti-colonial struggle against the British occupation.²⁸ Unlike Ṣalāḥ ‘Īsā, ‘Ashūr did not say that the sisters were accomplices of the men. He discarded even this version, arguing that the whole affair of the women’s killings was a fake, orchestrated by the British to punish Rayyā and Sakīna for their anti-British activities.

Despite his initial claims, ‘Ashūr could not bring any evidence to support his version. Yet his version spread, quickly imposing itself as a possible reading of Rayyā and Sakīna’s case. The movie faced censorship and copyright issues, then production issues and, it seems, problems with some actors. Originally rescheduled to be released in 2021, it is reported that work only resumed in April 2023, after a break of more than two years.²⁹ The version of Rayyā and Sakīna fighting against colonial occupiers, however, did not need filmic images to make an impact. As Peter Burke points out, the evocative power of a movie title can be enough to create a horizon of expectation, and even to function as an iconotext on its own.³⁰ In this case it certainly was, helped by the extensive coverage that the announcement of the title and the topic received in the press and on TV. Nowadays, a debate rages in Egypt on whether Rayyā and Sakīna were involved in crime or in the anti-colonial struggle. The most powerful resignification of the sisters since 1953 stems from a movie that has not (yet?) made it to the screens.

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ملخص | تتناول هذه المقالة تمثيلات المجرمات على الشاشة. وهي تركز على ريا وسكينة، الشقيقتان اللتان أُلقي القبض عليهما في مصر عام ١٩٢٠ وتم إعدامهما عام ١٩٢١. ومنذ عام ١٩٥٣، ألهمت الشقيقتان أفلامًا ومسلسلات رسخت أسطورتها في الثقافة الشعبية. تكشف أسطورة ريا وسكينة حتميات أخلاقية حول قضايا عامة، مثل مكانة المرأة في المجتمع وعلاقة الأمة بهوامشها. تشير المقالة إلى عدم إعادة المعنى لشخصيتي ريا وسكينة على الشاشة. قد تم أعمق تغيير المعنى لهما في مصر خارج الشاشة. أما الأفلام، فلم يتغير فيها تمثيل الشقيقتين بعمق. وبدلاً من ذلك، تظهر ريا وسكينة كسفاحيتين بالفطرة، تماشيًا مع الفيلم الأول حولهما الذي عُرض عام ١٩٥٣. العناصر التي أسميها "شفرات عام ١٩٥٣"، والتي تميز الشخصيتين، موجودة في الأفلام اللاحقة حتى عام ٢٠٠٥.

كلمات مفتاحية | الجريمة، السينما، الأساطير، تكوين المعنى، العنف النسائي، مصر

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