DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :
Locating the Lost Archive of Arab Cinema

BAHIGA HAFEZ ON YOUTUBE AND FEMINIST ARCHIVES OF EGYPTIAN CINEMA

Claire Cooley
Tufts University

Abstract | Since YouTube's inception in 2005, scholars of Egyptian cinema have enjoyed access to films in unprecedented ways. Remediated to the digital from a variety of formats – satellite broadcasts, VHS, celluloid – Egyptian films and other parafilmic material are available on YouTube and accessible to nearly everyone. Despite the growing dependence of scholars on YouTube for research on Egyptian cinema, and the possibility of complicating male-centered narratives through its collections, there has been little theoretical consideration of YouTube's role in their work. In this essay, I draw on the idiosyncratic collection of Bahiga Hafez-related material on YouTube to argue that the site serves as a potential feminist archive for Egyptian cinema. The idiosyncrasies, temporalities, geographic specificities, and conflicts over ownership that are characteristic of YouTube, as well as the various users that upload content, preclude any myths that YouTube as an archive is complete, stable, and neutral. Rather than encouraging authoritative claims about Bahiga Hafez and other Egyptian female cinema pioneers, YouTube as a potentially feminist archive of Egyptian cinema helps us think of alternative cinematic futures.

Keywords | Feminist film historiography – Egyptian Cinema – Bahiga Hafez – YouTube – Archive.

Abstract | Depuis la création de YouTube en 2005, les savantes du cinéma égyptien ont eu accès aux films d'une manière sans précédent. Remédiés au numérique à partir d'une variété de formats – diffusions par satellite, VHS, celluloïd – les films égyptiens et autres matériels parafilmiques sont disponibles sur YouTube et accessibles à presque tout le monde. Malgré la dépendance croissante des universitaires à l'égard de YouTube pour les recherches sur le cinéma égyptien et la possibilité de compliquer les récits centrés sur les hommes à travers ses collections, il y a eu peu de considération théorique sur le rôle de YouTube dans leur travail. Dans cet essai, je m'appuie sur la collection idiosyncratique de matériel lié à Bahiga Hafez sur YouTube pour affirmer que le site sert

d'archive féministe potentielle pour le cinéma égyptien. Les particularités, les temporalités, les spécificités géographiques et les conflits de propriété qui sont caractéristiques de YouTube, ainsi que les divers utilisateurs qui téléchargent du contenu, excluent tout mythe selon lequel YouTube en tant qu'archive est complet, stable et neutre. Plutôt que d'encourager les affirmations faisant autorité sur Bahiga Hafez et d'autres pionnières du cinéma égyptien, YouTube, en tant qu'archive potentiellement féministe du cinéma égyptien, nous aide à penser à des futurs cinématographiques alternatifs.

Mots-clés | Bahiga Hafez – YouTube – Cinéma Égyptien – historigraphie.

In 2004, the Egyptian actress, film producer, TV host, and the head of Al Arabia Cinema production and distribution company Isaad Younis sold 850 Egyptian film negatives – and the rights to them – to Saudi Prince and businessman Al Waleed bin Talal. Younis had purchased the films from a range of sources: private collectors, the public sector, and from production companies that had declared bankruptcy. The sale sparked outrage among Egyptian filmmakers and others who accused Younis of selling Egyptian culture and history. That Younis had acquired and sold the materials, moreover, highlighted the state of official film archival and preservation efforts in Egypt. As Egyptian media historian Lucie Ryzova notes, "Egyptian public archives are notoriously difficult institutions."[1] The National Film Institute in Egypt is no exception, as films in its collections are often mislabeled and incorrectly catalogued, improperly stored, missing, remain undigitized, and are otherwise neglected.

In somewhat of a reversal of the dynamics initiated by what is now known as the "sale of Egyptian cinema heritage" YouTube users with Egyptian cinema-related usernames have made recordings of satellite broadcasts and uploaded them onto their personal channels. Watermarks emblazoned on some of the videos indicate the films' previous formats as satellite broadcasts, and some channels also include videos remediated from sources such as DVD and VHS. Through their labor in copying, saving, uploading, and curating these films, YouTube users have created a unique film archive accessible for Egyptians, scholars, and anyone else who searches for them on the site.

Since YouTube's inception in 2005, I and other scholars of film in Egypt have benefitted greatly by the labor of YouTube users such as EgyCinematic who upload films from their personal collections onto the site[2]. In a recent article on film historiography in the Middle East and South Asia, for example, I used a clip posted by the YouTube user EgyCinematic of a film by early Egyptian female filmmaker Bahiga Hafez to ask how we might tell narratives of cinema in the region through a feminist lens that complicates the national frameworks that often circumscribe film histories outside of Euro-American contexts[3]. Despite the dependence of researchers like me on YouTube for research on Arab cinema, however, there has been little theoretical consideration of YouTube's role as a corpus of sources in their scholarship. In their respective studies of Egyptian cinema, scholars Walter Armbrust and Joel Gordon engage in such conversations as it relates to the influence that the difficulties of finding VHS tapes in the 1990s

1- Lucie Ryzova, "Mourning the Archive: Middle Eastern Photographic Heritage between Neoliberalism and Digital Reproduction" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 4 (October 2014): 1033.

2- Some recent examples include: Ifdal Elsaket, "Sound and Desire: Race, Gender, and Insult in Egypt's First Talkie", *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51 (2019): 203-232; Frances S. Hasso, "I Have Ambition": Muhammad Ramadan's Proletarian Masculinities in Postrevolution Egyptian Cinema", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52 (2020): 197-214.

3- Claire Cooley, "Lessons of Pause: Writing Media Histories in the Middle East and South Asia," *Spectator 41* no. 2 (Fall 2021) 10-19.

had on their research[4]. Whether about the difficulties, or ease in the case of YouTube, of access to materials, such a reflection provides critical insight into the archives that undergird the histories that we write and reflection on the presences, absences, and temporalities that inform our questions, methods, and conclusions. In the case of a feminist history of cinema like that informed by Bahiga Hafez, our choice of archives is also entangled in our underlying gendered expectations[5].

Scholars working across a variety of geographical and temporal contexts have differed and/or expressed ambivalence about YouTube's categorization as an archive for a range of reasons related to copyright, its users' idiosyncratic frames of collection, and the distinct temporality of digital content[6]. In her study of Indian cinema on YouTube, however Kuhu Tanvir helps us move beyond these debates in describing how the material available on YouTube (and the Internet in general) is an archive "because its myriad sites and the varied forms of cinematic data that it provides may be individual collections at one level, but form part of a rhizomatic, networked supra-collection at another."[7] YouTube generally functions this way, but theorization of how YouTube manifests as an archive for Egyptian cinema is critical, and requires specific tools and approaches in order to account for a unique set of concerns, including: the vast quantity of Egyptian and associated para-filmic material on the site, the labor and curation among various individuals and institutions that support these collections, the role that the site plays in scholars' work, the (in)accessibility of Egyptian films in physical and online spaces and archives, and the male-centered and nationalist narratives of traditional Egyptian cinema histories.

Elodie A. Roy reminds us that the archive is an "implicitly *gendered* site." The idea of the official archive is closely intertwined with constructions of history, nation-state ideologies, and colonial regimes that are overwhelmingly male-centered and patriarchal[8]. In this essay, I theorize YouTube in the context of Egyptian cinema as an archive with feminist potential by drawing on the shifting and idiosyncratic collection of Bahiga Hafez-related videos uploaded by various users from a variety of sources and formats on YouTube. YouTube as an archive is transient, dynamic, scattered, polycentric, and unstable, and it has feminist

4- Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Joel Gordon *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

5- Melanie Bell, Shelley Cobb, Christine Gledhill, Debashree Mukherjee, Laraine Porter, Rasmi Sawhney, and Ulrike Sieglohr, "Researching Women's Film History", 1. In The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication, eds. Karen Ross, Ingrid Bachmann, Valentina Cardo, Sujata Moorti, and Marco Scarcelli (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 1-22.

6- See for example Thompson 2021 Hilderbrand 2008

7- Kuhu Tanvir, "Pirate Histories: Rethinking the Indian Film Archive", *BioScope* 4, no. 2 (2013): 124.

8- Elodie A. Roy, "Archives of Women's Media" in *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication*, eds. Karen Ross, Ingrid Bachmann, Valentina Cardo, Sujata Moorti, and Marco Scarcelli (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 1.

potential in that it can upset the authority of official archives and subvert traditional canons of Egyptian cinema history. Drawing on available material on YouTube, a film historian can construct a feminist history of Egyptian cinema that challenges national frameworks and their patriarchal overtones. Such narratives are crucial to complicating traditional canons of Egyptian cinema that, among other problems, are overwhelmingly structured along male-director-centric genealogies. Indeed, except for studies such as that of Kay Dickinson's on early female film director Aziza Amir and Mona Ghandour's notable *Queens of the Screen: Pioneers of Egyptian Cinema*, scholars have largely focused on the female cine-workers who were dancers or superstar actresses[9].

Theorization of YouTube as a potentially feminist archive also requires that we go beyond the content of the videos themselves to consider why material is on the site in the first place, and how YouTube's architecture structures and conditions our access to materials[10]. In the second part of this essay, therefore, I ask: how can we account for the wealth that global corporations such as YouTube accumulate from the presence of Bahiga Hafez's materials on their channels, and scholars' interactions with them? How does YouTube's platform architecture and algorithmic sorting influence access to these materials? In what ways do these dynamics undermine the possibility of a feminist archive? Although theoretically problematic, these dynamics prove crucial in that they highlight the *potential* – rather than authoritative guarantee – of a feminist archive. In contrast to official archives that attempt to sustain myths of completeness and authority, YouTube makes no such pretenses. The idiosyncrasies, temporalities, continuous conflicts over ownership, and varying objectives amongst users for uploading content are crucial reflexive characteristics for a potentially feminist archive of Egyptian cinema.

YouTube as Feminist Archive

On August 4, 2020, Google featured Bahiga Hafez as their Doodle (see Figure 1) in celebration of what would have been her 112th birthday. The YouTube owner's[11] decision to celebrate the female director, who is largely unknown outside of Egypt, prompted several English and Arabic-language online news outlets to explain who she was. Google itself gives an overview of Hafez's life on its Doodle page, listing her accomplishments as actress, composer, director, and production company owner and ending with "*Shukran*, Bahiga Hafez, your efforts set the scene for generations of filmmakers to come!"[12] The Doodle has

9- Kay Dickinson, "I Have One Daughter and That Is Egyptian Cinema: 'Azīza Amīr amid the Histories and Geographies of National Allegory" *Camera Obscura* 22, no. 1 (2007): 137-177. Mona Ghandour, *Queens of the Screen: Pioneers of Egyptian Cinema* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books SARL, 2005).

10- Rielle Navitski "Reconsidering the Archive: Digitization and Latin American Film Historiography" *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 1 (Fall 2014), 123.

11- Google purchased YouTube in 2006 – a year after YouTube was started – for $1.65 billion.

12- "Bahiga Hafez's 112th Birthday" *Google Doodles* Archive, August 4, 2020, https://www.google.com/doodles/bahiga-hafezs-112th-birthday

brought unprecedented global attention to Hafez, and the description's claim of her impact on subsequent generations of filmmakers sits awkwardly with her faint presence in Egyptian film histories. In featuring Hafez, Google perhaps unwittingly followed a recent trend among feminist film historians to focus on the largely unexpected number of women filmmakers in the history of early cinema around the world[13]. Since Hafez's Google Doodle debut in 2020, several news outlets and film appreciation groups have uploaded on their YouTube channels short video biographies of Hafez consisting of photo montages with explanatory voice-overs. Even though a considerable number of women in Egypt occupied powerful positions as directors, studio owners, and producers in the silent period into the early years of sound, there is generally a lacuna of women's perspectives in Egyptian film history[14]. Bahiga Hafez is one of these female filmmakers.

In Egyptian film historiography, the story of Bahiga Hafez and her role as the female star of one of the first Egyptian silent films *Zeinab* and director, producer, and composer of Egyptian films has been represented by a variety of sources, including the authoritative memoirs of male auteurs and directors such as Mohammad Karim[15]. The existence of memoirs is useful in the information they provide and in the way they index the power to narrate and circulate a version of history. In his memoirs, Karim provides a such a commanding reading of events in a narrative that justifies his and Yusuf Wahbi's actions towards the diva when they memorably fired her from the role in the first full-length Egyptian sound film *Awlad al-Dhawat* ("Sons of Aristocrats" 1932) after having reluctantly cast her in the film. The role of the film's female character Zaynab Hanim would require a very capable actress, and while Karim was aware of Hafez's acting capabilities, her vocal inabilities made him hesitant to cast her in a starring role in a sound film. Yet, according to Karim, Hafez took offense to his reasoning and believed he was merely being cruel in his assessment of her voice. So, Karim decided that he would not interfere in her training for the role or her work as an actress in general. Yet at one point while filming a dramatic scene, Hafez failed to give the strong performance that Karim expected of her. According to Karim, she stuttered, messed up her lines, and pronounced Arabic words in a distorted manner. Karim finally lost his patience, and said "that's incorrect" to which Hafiz replied that she had been taught to speak that way. "That's impossible" Karim retorted and determined they needed to record the scene again. Yet before they could finish the scene, Hafez fainted and fell to the ground[16].

13- Melanie Bell et al., 1.

14- See Rebecca Hillauer's *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005) for short entries on early Egyptian and other Arab female filmmakers such as Aziza Amir, Bahiga Hafez, Mary Queeny, and Assia Dagher.

15- See also Abdallah Ahmad Abdallah's *'ālam al-nujūm wa dhikrīyāt mīkī māūs* (Cairo: Akhbar al Yeom, 1992).

16- Muhammad Karīm, *Mudhakkirāt Muhammad Karīm: khamsin (50) sinnah sinamā; i'dād Mahmūd 'Alī* (Cairo: s.n., 1972) 139-140.

Hafez soon after returned to Egypt and filed a lawsuit against the film directors, demanding that they pay her the rest of the money owed to her as stipulated by their contract. According to Egyptian star magazine *Al-Kawakib* ("The Stars"), Hafez also requested that they cover the cost of what her reputation had suffered given the fact that the directors told her she had a voice unfit for sound films[17]. Hafez claimed that what Wahbi and Karim described was merely an excuse to justify their decisions and their treatment of her. Wahbi responded to the lawsuit with his own, asking the court to demand that Hafez and her husband reimburse him for their travel and lodging expenses in Paris according to a clause in their contract. The court ruled in Wahbi's favor, and Hafez appealed. Despite Hafez's efforts to defend herself, the press made fun of her voice and determined that it was unfit for films with synchronized sound[18]. The quarrel around Hafez's voice provided publicity for the film, and ultimately became memorialized in memoirs[19].

After a long absence from making films in the 1930s, and after having suffered near financial ruin through the censorship of her film *Layla, Daughter of the Desert,* Bahiga Hafez appeared in the 1966 film *al-Qāhira 30* ("Cairo 30" dir. Salāh Abu Seif), an adaptation of a 1945 Naguib Mahfouz novel by the same name. The film is also available on YouTube as of this writing. The film takes place in 1930s Cairo and, broadly, focuses on a group of men who struggle professionally and personally in the social and economic environment created under British colonialism and the monarchy. Hafez appears in a cameo role in the film as an aristocrat millionaire named Nayrūz Hanim, who holds a charity event at some point in the film which the film's protagonist, Mahbūb, attends. In the film's only scene in color, Nayrūz makes a grand entrance to her event and speaks to her guests in a way meant to be reminiscent of contemporaneous Egyptian aristocratic classes (Figure 2). As she stumbles over her Arabic words in what is meant to be a foreign accent while delivering her speech, Nayrūz says the word 'holiday' *'aīd*, and in doing so pronounces the Arabic letter *'ayn* as the sound "ay." Mahbūb, angrily points this out to his friend Ahmed Badir. Badir is sitting next to him, and proceeds to curse the upper classes as Nayrūz continues her speech.

17- "Bahīja Hāfiz: batala riwāya "zaynab" tukhrij fīlman jadīdan" *Al Kawakib* 8 (16 May 1932), 5.

18- Roberta L. Dougherty, "Badiʿa Masabni, Artiste, and Modernist: The Egyptian Print Media's Carnival of National Identity" in Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000), 262.

19- In her 2019 article about gender, race, and the sound film in Egypt, for example, Ifdal Elsaket draws on Karim's memoirs and celebrity magazines to understand the gendered, sonic, and class-based elements of the quarrel.

Hafez's appearance and vocal performance in the film harkens to the aging doyenne's tumultuous experience with the sound film. Filmed more than thirty years after the dispute between Wahbi, Karim, and Hafez, *Cairo 30* reinforces the narrative of Hafez's vocal failure in the transition to cinema with synchronized sound. In the film's narrative, her voice renders her a laughingstock and sonically associates her with a segment of Egyptian society that was loathed and mocked by Nasser-era propaganda during the time of the film's release.

The idiosyncrasies of the ever-changing collection on YouTube mean that lesser-known films and parafilmic material appear alongside the commercial hits and male-auteur creations that often structure traditional Egyptian film canons. Watching this scene from *Cairo 30* and other Bahiga Hafez-related material on YouTube in close succession provides a different framing of Hafez's voice and career. A YouTube search in Arabic for Bahiga Hafez بهيجة حافظ from the United States comes up with a range of material. The first result is video of an interview of Hafez conducted by journalist and TV show host Jilan Hamza on her talk show *fīl-marāa* ("In the Mirror"), which is currently on the YouTube channel of historical videos curated by Maspero (the headquarters of the Egyptian Radio and Television) entitled "YouTube Maspero Zaman" (Figure 3)[20]. The presence of this video on YouTube is significant for researchers given that Maspero and its physical holdings are largely inaccessible to researchers.

Jilan Hamza later said that this interview was especially memorable because of the way Hafez spoke Arabic. The diva pronounced the Arabic letter *qāf* as a *kāf*, and Hamza explained that this apparently aristocratic way to render the

20- MasperoZaman, "Fīl marāya: jīlān hamza tahāwir al-fanāna al-rai'da bahīja hafiz" August 25, 2016, YouTube Video, 39:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lkdEuFubPM

distinctly Arabic letter as one would pronounce "k" in English and other European languages would have proven confusing for the program's target audiences. At several points while filming the interview, Hamza and the show's producers had to stop filming to ask Hafez to repeat her words until Hafez spoke in a way that their listeners could understand[21]. This situation was eerily reminiscent of Hafez's experiences three decades earlier when Yusuf Wahbi and Mohamad Karim used her pronunciation of Arabic as grounds to dismiss her from her starring role and to subsequently sue her.

Yet the video itself is a revealing contrast to Hafez's appearance in *Cairo 30*, and it complicates the memoirs of successful male directors and auteurs, such as those of Wahbi and Karim. Listening to Hamza's interview with Hafez on YouTube, I hear Hafez's voice and compare that to her performance in *Cairo 30*. The juxtaposition reveals that Hafez exaggerates her mispronunciation of Arabic in the 1966 film. Perhaps aware that the incident years prior damaged her reputation and career, Hafez conforms to the infamous narrative about her voice in versions of events such as those remembered by Mohammed Karim and reiterated by Jilan Hamza in her later reflections on the conversation. One wonders whether Hafez's pronunciation was truly undecipherable or if remarks like Hamza's is a re-hashing of the histories that have represented Hafez. Hafez's appearance in *Cairo 30*, the same year that she sat for the interview with Hamza, was her last time on the silver screen. In the interview with Hamza, Hafez at one

21- Soha Sa'īd, "Jīlān hamza: 'abd al-qāder hātim ja'alnī modhī'a" *Majalla al-idhā'a wa al-*telīvfizīn, August 10, 2018, https://www.maspero.eg/wps/portal/home/radio-and-tv-magazine/talks/details/43832c14-906b-42e5-8d3f-1efbd7cfa8d9/

point admits that she feels hopeless when reflecting on her career in cinema and her life in general. Such an insight into her experiences puts histories of successful male directors into stark relief and indicates the effects that the increasingly structurally enabled male dominated commercial film industry had on cine-workers such as Hafez.

The informal collection of Bahiga Hafez-related material on YouTube has the potential to make apparent the contemporaneous gender dynamics of filmmaking in Egypt that would lead, in part, to fewer non-acting and hierarchically prominent roles for women in film work. The contrast between Hafez's voice in the interview with Hamza and her voice in the film *Cairo 30* points to the sound film's role in reinforcing a normative national accent at the exclusion of people from cinema not only the so-called upper classes and foreigners like Hafez, but presumably other minorities of early Egyptian cinema such as Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians from Upper Egypt with less social and political capital and clout. These texts, therefore, provide important dimension to the memoirs of directors such as Karim, sources which have been digitized and are available on sites such as HathiTrust and are accessible to scholars in libraries around the world. This combination of this film and other audiovisual texts on YouTube helps us begin to understand the class-based, gendered, and sonic dimensions that contributed to Hafez's sometimes fraught career, bankruptcy, and exit from the industry.

On a seemingly simple yet important level, YouTube provides quick and easy access to otherwise inaccessible material. On the site, there exists as of this writing excerpts of two of Hafez's films. These include a two-minute clip of the 1934 film *al-Dahaya* ("The Victims") uploaded by YouTube user أحمد الجندي. A full copy of "The Victims" was found in 1995 and screened at the National Film Festival in Cairo. There is also a three-minute clip from a Hafez's 1937 film *Layla bint al-sahra* ("Layla, Daughter of the Desert"). Uploaded by the YouTube user EgyCinematic, and watermarked with the channel's logo, the video is described as "a scene from the very rare film Layla Daughter of the Desert 1937." Significantly, this film was a major factor in Hafez's financial ruin, as its narrative of an Arab princess kidnapped by an Iranian king was thought to parallel the then upcoming marriage of Egyptian Princess Fawzia to future Shah of Iran Muhammad Reza in uncomfortable ways. The British blocked distribution to Palestine and India in 1937, and in 1938 the French did the same in Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia[22]. With her film forbidden from appearing on film screens in Egypt and across the Middle East, Hafez lost the small fortune she had put into its production and went bankrupt[23].

22- Marlé Hammond, "If only al-Barrāq could see…': Violence and Voyeurism in an Early Modern Formation of Pre-Islamic Calls to Arms," in *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East* (London, NY: IB Tauris, 2013), 215-240.

23- Rebecca Hillauer, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 30.

The YouTube archive also allows a range of institutions, users, and organizations to curate collections according to frameworks of their choice. On its "About" section and corresponding Facebook page, for example, EgyCinematic includes statements of its mission in collecting, curating, and providing access to Egyptian films. It describes itself as "the biggest library that preserves Egyptian cinema heritage and broadcasts it for free" and states its belief that "Egyptian cinematic heritage isn't for sale, it's for future generations to own."[24] EgyCinematic's statement seems to be in conversation with Isaad Younis's sale of Egyptian films to Al Waleed bin Talal, but it also encourages an understanding of archives as a collection that should be accessible to all and its contents open to interpretation by all. The comments section encourages this viewpoint in the way it gives space for users to share their personal memories of Egyptian cinema. This aspect of YouTube's structure allows for a changing history that is largely beyond the grip of official narratives[25].

The idiosyncratic collection of materials on YouTube challenges carefully constructed narratives and hierarchies of Egyptian cinema history. In this and other ways, YouTube has the potential to facilitate a feminist historiographical method of reading against the grain and resisting absence. Yet in the same way that official archives can prove problematic in their claims of authority and promoting certain narratives at the expense or exclusion of others, this potentially feminist archive can also create equally problematic canons and operate along equally problematic lines. It is critical to emphasize the feminist *potential* of YouTube as an archive for Egyptian cinema, rather than its *guarantee*.

A Feminist Archive Not Guaranteed

As Australian feminist scholar Maryanne Dever explains, "it is important to remember that futures – and often uncertain ones at that – have been as central historically to the conceptual underpinnings of the archive as they have to the emergence and unfolding of feminism's intellectual and political projects."[26] As part of a critical engagement with the archive, a feminist media historian looks to the past not to narrate the experiences of figures such as Bahiga Hafez with authority but rather to envision alternative futures. Potentiality is a critical concept with which to approach YouTube as a feminist archive for Egyptian film history for a range of reasons, including issues of decontextualized readings, the power of both corporate and user content moderation, geopolitics, and the capitalist logics that undergird YouTube's objectives and that complicate the site's expressed values as a place for open expression.

24- "Sīnamātīk masrī Facebook page" Facebook, April 5, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/cinematiceg/?ref=page_internal

25- Kuhu Tanvir, 130.

26- Maryanne Dever, "Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research" Australian Feminist Studies 32, no. 91-92 (2017): 3.

As it circulates films and other material around the world, YouTube does not promise critical reception among researchers and other users. As scholar Robert Gehl notes, "like objects sitting on shelves, the videos one encounters within the YouTube browser are decontextualized, chaotic and flattened."[27] The decontextualized circulation of these videos can also potentially flatten the class and gender dynamics that Hafez's career can reveal about the early industry and reinforce dangerous and colonial assumptions about women's agency in Egypt and other parts of the Arab World. For example, feminist film historian and head of the *Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP)* Jane Gaines has invoked Hafez briefly in several publications in her work on women in early cinema in the United States in ways that demonstrate the potential dangers presented by the flattened circulations of texts on platforms like YouTube. In the conclusion of her book on female filmmakers in the US and Europe in the silent film period, Gaines brings focus to Hafez and other female film pioneers in other contexts around the world.

In briefly describing Hafez's career, however, Gaines appears to attribute Hafez's difficulties in finding success in cinema to the fact that she came from a Muslim family. Gaines also attributes Hafez's lawsuit against Wahbi and Karim to 'discrimination' but does not provide further explanation of what discrimination means[28]. Gaines's gesture towards female filmmakers in other contexts of early cinema around the world is a critical historiographical move, but it risks reinforcing western colonial explanations and US/European standards that attribute female struggles solely to one-dimensional forces such as Islam and culture. Gaines's uncritical conclusions suggest an understanding of Hafez's career and an approach to Hafez-related material that does not take potentiality into consideration, despite her feminist historiographical intentions.

The promise of YouTube's universal reach yet susceptibility to local dynamics is problematic in other ways. As Thorton notes in her study of YouTube as an archive of Mexican film stars, "geopolitics and national boundaries determine access: content is removed, limited, or banned in certain territories dependent upon national laws and how they are implemented at a particular time and place."[29] Through geofencing, a YouTube channel can block access to its videos for reasons such as ownership. VPNs and other tools can allow users to subvert these restrictions, but the ways in which the platform is susceptible to geopolitics and national boundaries risks reinforcing the national frameworks that have been used to study Egyptian and other cinemas outside of the Euro-American contexts. Among many of its drawbacks as a methodological approach, national

27- Robert Gehl, "YouTube as archive: Who will curate this digital *Wunderkammer*" International Journal of Cultural Studies 12, no. 1 (2009), 48.

28- Jane Gaines, *Pink Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 198.

29- Niamh Thornton, "YouTube as Archive: Fans, Gender and Mexican Film Stars Online," in *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 208.

frameworks often perpetuate traditional male-centric canons of cinema history. As part of YouTube's susceptibility to national borders, content moderation can occur in local ways that we can interpret as attempts to narrate and shape the YouTube archive. Sometimes, older Egyptian film material that is considered inappropriate or too titillating is censored, is requested to be taken down, or is left out entirely for reasons including the so-called misrepresentation of the nation or religion. Though not related specifically to Egyptian cinema, the Egyptian government has asked YouTube in 2020 and 2021 to take down the channels and videos by *mahraganat* artists as part of an effort to ban the popular music genre in Egypt. While these efforts have been largely unsuccessful, they can be effective in dissuading users from uploading content. In a recent conversation, the popular Egyptian singer-rapper Wegz (who circulates his music videos on YouTube) told me that content moderation on the part of the government is a real concern for his team.

YouTube's infrastructure and the capitalist logics undergirding it complicate the open-access archive objectives of YouTube users such as EgyCinematic. In uploading films and curating collections, users such as EgyCinematic perform a form of unpaid digital labor that is exploited by YouTube. YouTube profits off the artifacts of Egyptian cinematic heritage uploaded by EgyCinematic in placing advertisements from third parties all over their site: advertisements play before videos begin, interrupt the videos as they play, and appear all over the site itself. A user can qualify for monetization from YouTube for their channel, but they must have over 1,000 subscribers, more than 4,000 hours of watch time in a year, and their content must be considered "advertiser friendly." While many of the Egyptian films on YouTube have received thousands of views, they remain niche and inaccessible in comparison to their counterparts that do receive payment for their users' labor. Even if a channel meets requirements for monetization, which EgyCinematic does not, YouTube takes a 45% cut of advertising revenue[30]. In any case, the fact that YouTube will not monetize a film if it has any suspicion of copyright violation makes it unlikely that many Egyptian films on YouTube are monetized. As scholars have discussed, YouTube itself has immense power to monitor, amend and remove content through its algorithmically driven content moderation[31]. Despite its claims to openness, its content moderation and other parts of its infrastructure remain largely opaque to users[32].

These challenges are not an exhaustive account of what can be problematic about YouTube's role as a potential feminist archive for Egyptian cinema. Yet contestation and change prove crucial to feminist historical projects, and these

30- Minnie Che, "The New Job Market is Online: YouTube" *onlabor: Workers, Unions, Politics,* May 29, 2019, https://onlabor.org/the-new-job-market-is-online-youtube/

31- See for example Ragnhild Brovig-Hanssen and Ellis Jones, 2021.

32- Lisa Parks, "Dirty Data: Content Moderation, Regulatory Outsourcing, and the Cleaners" *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2019): 16.

dynamics "burst the myth of historical stability."[33] Without an overarching frame that characterizes the archive, the fluctuating collection of Bahiga Hafez-material does not consciously present a particular narrative or claim to be completely representative. YouTube's gaps, ephemeral material, and absences also challenge positivist legacies of film historiography that have been largely harmful to early Egyptian female cine-workers who don't appear in texts that are considered official or legitimate.

Conclusion

Theorization of YouTube as a potential feminist archive for Egyptian cinema requires that we consider a complex knot of dynamics, including YouTube's official policies, for-profit platform, and how geofencing affects collections and users in uneven ways and potentially reinforces problematic film historiographical methods; past and current archiving efforts on the part of official institutions such as the National Film Archive, as well as independent organizations that receive foreign funding such as Wekalet Behna; the users who upload material, and the ways in which researchers benefit from these users' unpaid labor.

While sometimes problematic, these factors are valuable in that they foreclose any understanding of the archive as a neutral, permanent, uncontested, equitable, and authoritative space. The fact that videos on YouTube also need to be considered in conjunction with other resources such as ElCinema.com prevents theorization of the archive as complete and free of errors. The dynamic collection of Bahiga Hafez material on YouTube is mediated from a variety of formats and uploaded by a diverse array of users. In this, it has the potential to subvert traditional, male canons and counter any hopes that we may know any single historical figure with certainty. Rather, its potential as a feminist archive for Egyptian cinema encourages us to draw on the material to consider alternative, feminist futures.

In this essay, I have focused on YouTube as a potential feminist archive for early Egyptian cinema. I have not considered the ways in which contemporary Egyptian filmmakers such as El Sobky production company use YouTube in close coordination with YouTube itself. Future studies might consider this connection between contemporary Egyptian filmmakers and YouTube as an archive in conjunction with other video-sharing platforms such as Vimeo and Dailymotion.

33- Kuhu Tanvir, 116.

Bibliography

- ARMBRUST Walter, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- BELL Melanie, Cobb Shelley, Gledhill Christine, Mukherjee Debashree, Porter Laraine, Sawhney Rasmi, and Sieglohr Ulrike, "Researching Women's Film History", *in* ROSS Karen, (dir.), *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020, DOI: 10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc115
- CHE Minne, "The New Job Market is Online: YouTube" *onlabor: Workers, Unions, Politics*, May 29, 2019 [en ligne]. Lien : https://onlabor.org/the-new-job-market-is-online-youtube/ (consulté le 15 February 2021).
- DEVER Maryanne, "Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research", *Australian* Feminist Studies, 32:91-92, 2017, p. 1-4.
- DICKINSON Kay, "I Have One Daughter and That Is Egyptian Cinema: 'Azīza Amīr amid the Histories and Geographies of National Allegory", *Camera Obscura*, 22:1, 2007, p. 137-177.
- DOUGHERTY Roberta L., "Badi'a Masabni, Artiste, and Modernist: The Egyptian Print Media's Carnival of National Identity", *in* KENNEDY Hugh (dir.), *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2000, p. 243-268.
- GAINES Jane, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?,* Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2018.
- GEHL Robert, "YouTube as archive: Who will curate this digital *Wunderkammer", International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12:1, 2009, p. 43-60.
- GORDON Joel, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film in Nasser's Egypt,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- HAMMOND Marlé, "If only al-Barrāq could see…': Violence and Voyeurism in an Early Modern Reformulation of the Pre-Islamic Call to Arms", *in* ARMBRUST Walter (dir.), *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, London and New York, IB Tauris, 2013, p. 215-240.
- HILLAUER Rebecca, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers,* New York and Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2005.
- KARĪM Muhammad, *Mudhakkirāt Muhammad Karīm: khamsin (50) sinnah sinamā; i'dād Mahmūd 'Alī*, Cairo: S.N., 1972.
- PARKS Lisa, "Dirty Data: Content Moderation, Regulatory Outsourcing, and the Cleaners", *Film Quarterly*, 73:1, 2019, p. 11-18.
- ROY Melanie, "Archive of Women's Media", *in* ROSS Karen, (dir.), *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020, DOI: 10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc054
- RYZOVA Lucie, "Middle Eastern Photographic Heritage between Neoliberalism and Digital Reproduction", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56:4, October 2014, p. 1027-1061.

- SAÏD Soha "Jīlān hamza: 'abd al-qāder hātim ja'alnī mudhī'a" *Majalla al-idhā'a wa al*-telīvfizīn August 10, 2018 [en ligne]. Lien: https://www.maspero.eg/wps/portal/home/radio-and-tv-magazine/talks/details/43832c14-906b-42e5-8d3f-1efbd7cfa8d9/ (consulté February 13, 2021).
- TANVIR Kuhu, "Pirate Histories: Rethinking the Indian Film Archive", *BioScope*, 4:2, 2014, p. 115-136.
- THORNTON Niamh, "YouTube as Archive: Fans, Gender and Mexican Film Stars Online", *in* QIONG YU Sabrina and AUSTIN Guy (dir.), *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes and Methods*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, p. 205-222.
- Facebook (2021). *Sīnamātīk masrī* [en ligne]. Lien : https://www.facebook.com/cinematiceg/?ref=page_internal (consulté le 5 April 2021).
- YouTube (2021). *MasperoZaman : Fīl marāya: jīlān hamza tahāwir al-fanāna al-rai'da bahīja hafiz*. [en ligne]. Lien : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lkdEuFubPM (consulté le 10 August 2021).

Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank Chihab El Khachab for his thoughts and feedback on several drafts. I also am grateful for the extensive and careful comments of the editors and two anonymous reviewers at *Regards*.

ملخص | قد استفاد باحثيّ السينما المصرية بالتواصل إلى الأفلام بشكل غير مسبوق منذ تأسيس موقع يوتيوب في عام ٢٠٠٥. هذه الأفلام المصرية والفيديوهات الأخرى المتعلقة بالسينما تُتحول إلى الديجتال من اشكال متنوعة مثل البث الفضائي، شرائط الكاسيت، والسلولويد وهي متناولة للكل في اليوتيوب. مع أنّ الاعتماد المتزايد عند الباحثين على يوتيوب للبحث عن السينما المصرية بالإضافة إلى إمكانية الموقع في تحدى السرديات الابوية السائدة من خلال تشكيلته من الأفلام، فليس هناك تحليل جدي لدور يوتيوب في اعمالهم. في هذا المقال، أنا أتدبر في المجموعة العشوائية للفيديوهات المتعلقة برائدة السينما المصرية بهيجة حافظ لكي ادعي بأن الموقع ينفع لأرشيف نسوي محتمل للسينما المصرية، فالخصوصيات والمؤقتات والعناصر الجيوغرافية الخاصة وخلافات حقوق النشر التي هي جزء لا يتجزأ من يوتيوب والمستخدمين المتنوعين الذين يحملون أفلام للموقع، تمنعنا من اعتباره أرشيف كامل أو محايد أو ثابت. يوتيوب كأرشيف لا يشجع دعوى مرجعية لبهيجة حافظ ورائدات السينما المصرية الاخريات، بل يوتيوب كأرشيف نسوي محتمل يساعدنا في التفكير في مستقبلات سينمائية بديلة.

كلمات مفتاحية | بهيجة حافظ – أرشيف – يوتيوب – السينما المصرية – التأريخ النسوي للسينما.

Notice biographique | Claire Cooley is a postdoctoral fellow at Tufts University. Her research focuses on film historiography in the Global South; sound studies; south-south media flows; and media infrastructures and racialized labor in the Gulf. Her work has appeared in a range of publications including *Jump Cut, Film History,* and *Spectator.* She is currently writing a book on the interconnected history of cinema in the Middle East and South Asia from the turn of the 20th century to the 1960s.