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The Willfulness of a Missing Frame: Ahmed Zaki and the Politics of Visual Resistance

Miriam M. Gabriel

City University of New York Graduate Center

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THE WILLFULNESS OF A MISSING FRAME: AHMED ZAKI AND THE POLITICS OF
VISUAL RESISTANCE

by

MIRIAM GABRIEL

A master's thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in the Middle Eastern Studies Department in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Arts, the City University of

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Miriam Gabriel

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in the Middle Eastern Studies Program in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

Approved by

Date

Christopher Stone

Thesis Advisor

Date

Beth Baron

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

The Willfulness of a Missing Frame: Ahmed Zaki and the Politics of Visual Resistance

by

Miriam Gabriel

Advisor: Christopher Stone

Ahmed Zaki (1949-2005) is one of Egyptian cinema's most prominent leading actors, with work spanning three decades of critical films that informed a generation's visual register of masculinity. However, the beginnings of his career were marked by public skepticism around his place as a leading actor due to him being "too dark" and "too poor"; as his career continued to flourish, those very markings of racing and classing Zaki became a foundation for increasingly stamping his public image with the "authenticity" of an Egyptian citizen. At a particularly neoliberal moment in the Egyptian economy, that of the early 80s, new directors brought with them unexpectedly fresh faces for leading actors, including Ahmed Zaki. While his talent has usually been uncontested as an artist, his social place as a performative body shifted so much between his early and late career: while he started his career as a lead in the 80s playing mostly roles that challenged the middle-class, pro-military masculine ideal, his latter career became marked by playing some of Egypt's most revered, and notorious, military leaders, such as presidents Nasser and Sadaat. Focusing mostly on Sara Ahmed's performative theory of Willfulness, this thesis reexamines a nonlinear history of Ahmed Zaki's social body and what it says about the tumultuous mechanisms of militarism in shaping notions of masculinity, and how

gestures of inhabiting this masculinity can be quite effective – if a certain effect is to be desired – in laying bare the impenetrable foundations on which performances of militaristic masculinity usually rely. As a final note of artistic advocacy, this paper calls for a revisit of one of Ahmed Zaki’s early work given the renewed contract of austere militarism in Egypt after 2013, a time of a revolution that persistently is yet never was. The film is *The Innocent* (1984), where Zaki plays a soldier in a work of Egyptian cinema that is uncharacteristically so few of words, brimming with gestures, and concluding with a censored yet still viewable ending.

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He is the Emperor. He is Egyptian Cinema's "black tiger." He is the boss and the top dog¹; he is Mr. President and his Excellency the Minister. In early 90s Egypt, young boys and men lined up at their local barber shop to don his crew cut, his urban-worker's crown of a shave: the *Kaborya*.² Similarly, the myriad epithets of grandeur that inscribe his place in public memory cull their coinage from his own work as a leading actor. His name is Ahmed Zaki, a name that rings with memory and multiplicity of representative iterations for Egyptian viewers between the mid-seventies and the year 2005, when he passed. He has been reinscribed after the roles of a poor Egyptian boxer who rises to international stardom (*The Black Tiger*, 1984) an Upper-Egypt drug dynast who falls as quickly as he rises (*The Emperor*, 90), and an eerily perfected reincarnation of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser (*Nasser '65*, 1998). When known to an international audience, Ahmed Zaki is usually referenced as the actor who played Nasser.

Together, these titles collage a portrait of masculine authority as mediated between roles that inhabit both formal office and outcast edge, a shifting nationalist masculine ideal that, if personified, seems to study the rules of institutional membership front to back before deciding the appropriate course of navigating this membership - by embodying the foundational heroes, by going rogue, by returning to family and home, or by descending into despair. Meanwhile, Zaki himself as a public figure is also popularized through an adjectival biography of his "humble beginnings," as an orphaned country boy³; a dark and handsome next-door neighbor; a workaholic fatherly ideal; and, finally, an "innate" genius. A lonesome artistic virtuoso.

¹ Two of many possible translations for the lay honorary title *al-za'iim*.

² Meaning "crab" and the plural "crabs," also the name of a film starring Ahmed Zaki, released in 1990.

³ Translation of *Ibn el-Balad*. See Armbrust, Chapter 5 titled "Classic, Clunker, National Narrative," from *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (1996).

The year 2005 saw a seldom-matched level of media coverage around one public figure, Ahmed Zaki. As Zaki 's diagnosis of cancer was publicized, day to day coverage monitored his worsening health condition, alongside daily updates of the film project he started during his illness and worked on until his death. The footage he left behind form the bulk of *Halim* (2006), a biopic of an indelible Egyptian icon, the “dark-skin coroner” Abd-el Halim Hafez. In 1977, Hafez’s funeral was spoken of as one of the nation’s most mobilizing public events, as it was attended by millions of mourners and was even rumored to include the public suicides of adoring fans. While Zaki's funeral was speculated to have magnanimous scale, it was surprisingly concluded within minutes and intentionally dispersed as a space of mass public gathering. The funeral was attended by an unusual number of security brigades, who preemptively circumvented the procession. Upon the Flag-enshrined body’s entry onto a public road, some security forces began to disperse the unilateral procession of the mourning crowds, while others immediately circumvented the body into a police van and sped off (Muharram 14-25).

This abrupt denial of mass public mourning with military force, coupled by the unprecedented magnitude of the media’s coverage, signals the public memory of Zaki’s death as a site of powerful political struggle that is significantly negotiated through images, both still and moving. They are discursive images on a vast public scale, a reel of publicly contested edits to a shared lexicon of citizenship ideals and ends, trials and disappointments, inscribed through Zaki's performative body. These edits consolidate a range of mechanisms through which the body of the “citizen,” especially a masculinized citizen, works with(in) the script of day-to-day governance. The latter usually involves the joint authorship of macabre militarism and carnivalesque capitalism, parodied from one film to another through various characters and contextually archetypal dilemmas in relation to which Zaki's leading role serves as some sort of model. This

essay constructs a possible “narrative reel” of publicly co-authored pedagogies of masculinized citizenship through select visual performances of Ahmed Zaki’s career. These pedagogies create a possible discursive code for contending with the nationally-upheld binary regime of a co-dependent, permeable link between materialist globalization and military discipline. Moreover, as pedagogies of participatory contention and mediation that inhabit films intended for mass distribution, visualities of Ahmed Zaki provide an exemplary link to mass mobilization that does not necessarily inhabit a “revolutionary” rubric, as is often the fetishizing effect of eliding multiple forms of public inhabitation, and the resulting politicization of public space, as lying outside of or lesser than the highly visual years of the January 25, 2011 Revolution. Therefore, there are multiple, historically distinct yet intersecting visual mechanisms for how coercive citizenry and public struggles for visibility are simultaneously mediated in Egypt, mechanisms that interrupt, continue, and contextually edit one another.

As an actor, Ahmed Zaki is usually respected as a Promethean performer, hence his many appellations. However, the artistic category of “role” proves too insular and insufficient as a unit of analysis to address a political and performative theory of audience-mediated authorship within historically-implicated images. Instead, Zaki’s films are here viewed through the gesturally malleable constructs of will and willfulness, as described by Sara Ahmed in *Willful Subjects*.⁴ Looking at national(ist) citizenship, raced masculinity, and anti-military public assembly as ways through which “styles of willfulness” draw their political itineraries, this paper will describe three

⁴ Following is a brief genealogy from Ahmed’s book: assuming that “will” signifies a teleological vector of action, a “straightening device,” that also assumes a morality of “doing good” (7, 12), Ahmed describes willfulness as a “queer history of will” (7). In other words, willfulness is anti-will: a reclamation of one’s will within, and oftentimes despite, the larger hegemonic grounds of its very dismissal (Ahmed 134). Willfulness produces a different kind of historicity, forged through an itinerary of its many “styles”: abrupt pauses; unhappy exclamations; silent refusals; mid-march swerves; and gestures of stubbornness, persistence, and disobedience (2-12).

possible styles of willfulness. Some styles of willfulness may utilize the seemingly-omnipotent language of state power to strategically occlude this variance, to silently survive as a strategy communicated through "indirect" gestures with the audience (Ahmed 29, 152). Meanwhile, other styles of willfulness may emphasize standing their ground as a visible variance from the normative, assuming a posture of standing against dominant will while at the mercy of standing within it, risking even death to embody a moment of precariously visible variance (Ahmed 134, 158). Reductively, the three styles of willfulness at hand can be introduced as gestures of infiltration, divestment, and risking annihilation. Therefore, the primary three styles of will are intended as an attempt to anchor a queering history of anti-heroic masculine citizenry in Zaki's earlier films, particularly *The Innocent* (1984).

Introduction: the Ploebian Intellectual who Bends the Disciplinary Rod

When studying visual media, W. J. T. Mitchell advises attuning to how visual and social constructs interchangeably shape one another, reexamining what is familiar and fundamental to an assumed "medium" with new questions and renewed wonder (179). In the 1971 comic play *The School of Troublemakers*, the construct of the student plays an important role in visually shaping the shifting notions of nationalism in relation to post-1952-coup pedagogical expectations. It starts with the goal of reforming a group of five incorrigible high school students within a public school, and it indeed ends by accomplishing this goal at the hands of a new teacher, the philosophy PhD candidate Miss Effat (played by Suheir el-Babli). However, throughout the middle acts of the play, improvised sarcasm and collaborative schemes dismantle the expected structure of both classrooms and plays, with hours of on-the-spot jokes and intermitted yet barely occluded stabs at a newly democratized, Arabic-based education system. One way to view the chaotic yet calculated students is to describe them as oscillating constructs of willfulness: the rebellious genius, the

master interrupter, the play-dumb deferrer, and more. It is a classic satirical play that is usually viewed as a black-and-white film.

There is a scene where Effat brandishes a ruler at the pack leader Bahgat – played by a then-young Adel Imam, one of Egypt’s most renowned celebrities – threatening to cut off his tongue if he repeats the offense of speaking out of turn. Referring to the utilitarian pedagogy of John Mill, Sara Ahmed writes “the rod” as a metaphor for instruction practices that are intended to break the will, to align students morally by “straightening” their affective behavior and “aligning” them together (68). However, to emphasize the sternness of the rod, Effat uses a heavy-sounding, rural word for tonsils – *laghaleegh* – to indicate cutting the tongue from its very base, from its earliest visible nub. This affective slip away from formalized Arabic by a teacher does not go unnoticed. It fills the space as Bahgat’s improvisational weapon, reclaiming voice with one pun after another, as an audience roars with laughter. Slipped in there is Bahgat’s socioeconomic pun about the nationalized price of a *laghloogh* and how to cook it.

The student’s banter brings another pedagogical metaphor to mind, one that shares the socialist foundations of nationalized education in Egypt. Jacques Rancière emphasizes the proletariat intellectual, also the “Ploebian” intellectual, as one that produces critique from their position of exclusion from historical speech. This production, in turn, takes place as speech: with a honing of linguistic activities such as translation, oration, and becoming “lettered” (58-64). Furthermore, Rancière proposes a model of intellectual emancipation where “all knowledge must be capable of being acquired in the same manner as the mother tongue, in other words without the intermediary of an explaining schoolmaster” (60). In this sense, the play’s failing students are also excellent commoner-intellectuals, refusing the straightening rod of a unified curriculum and demanding the discursive equality of bending the classroom’s linguistic and bodily norms.

Yet one student stands apart from the comic rebels. He is tall and hunched. He is usually quiet and sad, occasionally echoing the moralizing words of a weary anger, and also occasionally backing up fellow students-actors with light humor. However, for the first two-thirds of the play, he refuses to laugh or to induce laughter, and he resists the few jokes others make at his expense. He is few of words yet a poet. His classmates seek him to write love letters on their behalf, bribing him with offers of dinner or new clothes. Miss Effat is astonished that this poet fails Arabic yet relies on him as a last bastion of “good manners,” of agreed-upon affective comportment in a classroom of troublemakers. Meanwhile, the troublemakers treat him as an insider-outsider, a member of their rebellion and an untamable challenge to its limits – especially as they dangle over him the food and clothes their families repeatedly donate to him, who responds as a refusal to join the rebellion with the words, “my conditions are different.” Ahmed the poet, played by a young Ahmed Zaki, displays the quieter rebellion of darker skin, oversized white shirt, and a willful reminder that resistance to the rod is just as classed as the rod. There are also biographical parallels between Ahmad the poet and the actor, as Ahmed Shawqi Abd el-Fattah describes Zaki’s early childhood as a time of “resistance through innocence and weakness”: an orphaned child of the Zagazig province, with limited adult protection, provincial education, and a lonely, quiet childhood (12-22). Yet Ahmed the poet roars loudly at least twice during this play: once with anger, and another time with song.

In a mid-play fit of anger, after being framed for another classmate’s misconduct, Ahmed exits the stage melodramatically yelling out about how unjust everyone around him is: his friends, his school, and his society. Returning to Rancièrè, the “character” of Ahmed mirrors a key aspect of Ploebian politics that the rebellious bunch miss: the worker’s self-emancipation through self-apprenticeship, in matters of health and of education, as a necessary starting unit to “verify [the]

equality of intelligence” (68-77). His Arabic may not be institutionally recognized, and his Marxist interruptions may leave unheard by fellow characters, but Ahmed displays a clear willfulness to change social arrangements of intelligence by asserting one’s place in it. The anger of this performance of self-apprenticeship, in a classed space that barely notices, is the performance offered to the audience as speech. Future performances of Zaki would continue his image as an actor with a gift for traversing multiplicities of the mother tongue – from presidential speeches and provincial dialects, jargons of professionalization to grammars of street economy. Moreover, they would also continue to present characters that leave frustrated interstices of affect that do not fit the rod trajectory of pedagogical projects, even that of self-training from one shared literacy to another. The rod bends slightly with every mournful silence, or yell of protest.

Chapter I: The Cultured Charlatan: Epistemologies of Health and the A-Secular Infiltrator

A clearer example of a character increasingly frustrated by his own coercive efforts to "fit" the rod-like will is Mustataa’ (meaning “capable” or “can-do”), through which a now-iconic Zaki enters the frame as the teacher and PhD candidate in the 1990 comedy *The Egg and the Rock*. Mustataa’ is shown at the beginning of the film teaching at a public high school to make ends meet. His loquacious philosophy lectures instruct students to ration their food, avoid excessive consumption, self-monitor their physical and mental health, and exercise logic in all compartments of living. As rumors of his “leftist” and “communist” lectures reach the school’s principle, Mustataa’ is fired. He is pressed to move into the smaller quarters of a decrepit, rooftop room atop an inner city Egyptian apartment complex: one rumored to be haunted by the dead man who was once murdered there.

After taking up a neighbor’s suggestion of earning some cash by re-packaging his philosophical training as a mystical gift, he discovers a capacity to garner from his neighbors –

laborers, working-class housewives, and fellow unemployed locals – a new attentive audience. Moreover, they become a profitable audience the more he can translate what he knows into some ambiguously spiritual terms. Eventually, Mustataa’ the local mystic expands his audience. Middle-class singles, fastidious parents, and New-Age-inclined tourists alike request his exceptional mediatory discourse with ghosts, planets, and the dead. Before he knows it, his clients include state ministers, millionaires, media superstars, and Ronald Reagan!

Rancière theorizes proletariat education, primarily based in speech-production, as emancipatory not only for its tie to the mother tongue, but for its subversive relationship to the logic of the Enlightenment, with its dialectic hierarchies of canons and literacy (66). This subversion, he argues, is imbued with a somewhat mystical capacity: through language-production, the world is rendered open to experience-based, symbolic participation as “a universe in which ‘everything speaks’” and “the act of knowing... acquires the figure of an initiatory relationship, a universe of the knowable world of revelation” (66). The meaning of Mustataa’s name speaks to this capacity to know more than to knowledge itself, as the meaning means “the capable one.” However, Mustataa’ clearly shows that he is not entering some emancipatory project for the proletariat. First, while he initially performs gestures of gratification at helping an impotent neighbor (using psychoanalysis communicated in spiritual terms), his self-apprenticeship in the marketable languages of New Age capitalism follows an exponential will to leave the proletariat. He does so not through a dialogical revelation of how everything speaks, but an exploitative vector of voice, where everything can be spoken at.⁵

Second, Mustataa’ is not only exploiting the fraught present conditions of his neighbors, who are marginalized by the *lassiez-faire* politics that enable him to access progressively wealthier

⁵ See contemporary debates on the long, uninterrupted speeches of president Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi

targets, but he is also exploiting modes of knowing and of remedying that are usually attributed to the urban and rural poor. Too often generalized, by secular and religious pedagogical canons alike, as syncretic, non-canonical, superstitious, or – whether as a positive or a discrediting description – mystical, Mustataa’ utilizes this Orientalist, canonical abstraction with complete detachment from its possibility as tied to long-standing, legible literacies in their own right. Third, he leaves no room for bad faith in this appropriation, as he spends the time between high-profile interviews and clients drinking away, indulging in sex whenever offered (possibly prescribing as “cure,” in one scene), and venting away his frustration at the unstoppable rate of consultation requests, media interviews, press releases, and so on.

Mustataa’ traded one rod for the other, the ruler for the antenna: he aligns his can-do will to the public pedagogy of television, of globalized information as re-packaged simulacra of one sort of discipline or another that can make a symbolically knowable unit out of anyone who will pay enough. References to marginalized epistemologies that are recognizable enough to the Egyptian middle-class and to Orientalizing visitors are merely translated into pixels on a screen. Moreover, through the individual as a celebrity, Mustataa’ becomes a new pedagogical cannon regardless of its coinage as embedded within an embodied community.

Indeed, there is a long-lasting history of foreign celebrities that have forged their discursive and economic power through “canonizing” mystical traditions in colonial and post-colonial Egypt, with varying mentions or complete disregard for their canon’s ties to living locals.⁶ Moreover, in addition to known Sufi orders, both Sunni and Shi’a, within Egypt, there are many arrangements of “the mystical” across Islamic and non-Islamic living traditions in various social spaces of Egypt, from community *zawiyas* to few saint shrines – even private homes. This renders an ahistorical

⁶ Refer to, for example, Aleister Crowley (*Western Occultism and Magick*). For a more contemporary example, see Jean Houston (*the Human Potential Movement and the Egyptian Mystery Schools*).

cannon of mysticism not only just as impossible as that of orthodoxy⁷, but also just as inseparable from the development of larger modernist institutions. In the middle of the nineteenth century, during the tail end of Ottoman rule in Egypt, the rise of forensic medicine reorganized the institutional power of various epistemologies of embodiment. By privileging the written testimonies of dead bodies, bureaucratic governance could centralize its hierarchical authority over, as well as through, the living voices of multiple institutional reforms.⁸ These institutions include new, overseeing legal codes; Westernized medical schools; and locally diffused police stations, alongside a thorough re-appropriation of the powerful testimony of local *shari'a* courts (Fahmy 225-7).

Far from erasing local forms of knowledge, Khaled Fahmy documents various court cases to demonstrate how the autopsy was “read” with different aims and interpretations by each of the religious *‘ulama*; the Arabic-speaking, French-educated doctors; and the mostly illiterate masses (224). Moreover, historian Liat Kozma speaks of the many “reads” that reproducing bodies as evidence led to through the example of the *hakimat*, women who were scientifically trained through a newly canonized curriculum in hospital-led certification programs, primarily to be stationed at various, local police stations new and old. While the certified and trained *hakimat* replaced local midwives, thereby weakening the latter’s social and epistemic credence (36), they also provided a new source of power for women who were poor workers and manumitted slaves, who solicited the *hakimat* as newly available sources for bodily knowledge as justice (29).

⁷ See Langer and Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Dealing with Divergence in Muslim discourses and Islamic Studies” (2008).

⁸ See Kozma *Policing Egyptian Women* (2011), Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men* (1997), and Laverne-Kuhne *Lives at Risk* (1990).

Indeed, the formerly enslaved provide the powerful example of being dually credited for bringing to Egypt its earliest forms of *zar* spirit cults and forming within Egypt its first class of Western-trained *hakimat*, as patriarchal consent was easy to forego with women who had little genealogical protection (29, 77). Therefore, medicalization and mysticism can be constituted simultaneously by the same agents; meanwhile, institutionalized medicalization did create a power differential across epistemologies of embodiment, hierarchies that diminished and bolstered the authorities of various communities. However, representing less canonically religious epistemologies exclusively as victims of modernism remains an Orientalist status quo,⁹ one that works hand in hand with the sense of nostalgia, of what is missing from a secular modern world, that celebrities like Mustataa' can stand to capitalize on.

In his book, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, religious anthropologist Talal Asad begins with the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, focusing on how industrialization, state law, and shifting ideas of social reform and personal morality were all contestable pegs in the philosophically nebulous intersection of “secularism” (24). According to Asad, secularist behaviors, knowledge and sensibilities were shaped by the creation of co-dependent “polemical” “binaries” with the religious, such as “belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, sacred and profane” (23). He traces, for example, a textual shift in the concept of the “sacred” from a reference to individually venerated things, persons or occasions, to a universally accessible act as a sacrament that renders something or someone sacred (31-34). This for Asad leads to the double bind of some foundationally secular assumptions: the rights to vote, own property, or have the rule

⁹ Orientalist accounts of Shamanism and “syncretic” Sufism provide another source of this dualistic myth. See, for example, Zarcone and Hobart, ed. *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals and Spirits in the Muslim World*, published recently in 2013.

of law becomes “sacred” (36), while a theology of things or persons outside of the parameters of the senses becomes “superstitious” (35).

This ideological co-dependence, posing for opposition, obfuscates the power solicitations it enables in post-colonial nationalisms. Asad considers the rise of secularism in post-colonial governance suspect, not for any perceived antagonism towards religious authority, but because of its consistent collusion with global, economic capitalism alongside the legal “blessing” of discursively referencing and modifying notions of freedom and individualism (15). Dr. Mustataa’ obfuscates his economic rise to power through the terse binary that gives him power. He defines his simulacra of mystical training as a *via negativa* relationship to the secular, as capitalizing will posing for the willful performance of the superstitious¹⁰ in a modernizing time, rendering every paying customer divine, divinely readable, and economically capable of fulfilling a modernist nostalgia for this provincial readability through global capitalism. Mustataa’s mysticism is a commercial add that is never meant to fulfill its promise, like a billboard of a perfume bottle by an endless shore, which does not come with the bottle.¹¹

As opposed to Ahmed the poet, who stands apart from both educators and rebels to assert the challenge of classed space, Mustataa’ the philosopher-mystic-businessman refuses to be apart by playing the part. Forsaking the ethics of his formal education and its meager wage yet keeping its profitable exercise of speech-production, he nonetheless stands apart by choosing – perhaps referentially “stealing” – a marginal epistemic commodity. In turn, he is rewarded by moving up the *lassiez-faire* class rungs as the rod-antenna of post-colonial subservience to, and empowerment

¹⁰ In his book, *Shades of Modernity in the Sociological Images of Egypt through Cinema*, Essam Zakariya describes films that play with non-empirical experiences, such as djinns or ghosts, or with epistemologies like magic, as films that commit a “crime against science.” They are also accused of helping spread ignorance, disease, and “backwardness” within the country (155-62). It is a textual example of film criticism that speaks from a hegemonic evaluation of films as a form of public pedagogy across the binaries of science and superstition, or progress and backwardness.

¹¹ See Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1973).

through, global capitalism. However, there is willfulness in his post-fame vents of frustration, as a happy-go-lucky Mustataa', who expected to be happier, begins to appear curt, distant, dismissive, and at times loudly angry. He expresses increasing dissatisfaction with the inability to embody anything outside of being an aggregate of constantly demanded speech- and image-production. Usually performed as brief and momentous escapes of contrary affect, Sara Ahmed describes a willfulness style of striking as an intricate refusal to go with the grain, even within the same subject that chooses to follow the grain (77).

Ahmed complicates modernist notions of unified agency by highlighting ambivalence as a political incongruence – taking shape, for example, when one's desires and planned behaviors do not match, or when one finds it dissatisfactory to explain away their reluctance to stay the course as a weakness of will (77). She explains how “willfulness can also be an experience a subject has of itself, when one part of itself seems to ‘get in the way’ of a conscious intention.” (77). Therefore, “willfulness is striking [when] it is ‘in the way’ of what is ‘on the way’” (77).

This willful pulling-apart polarizes even further when Mustataa' gets summoned by the most authoritative representation of “the rod” in post-colonial Egypt as a military-rank minister sends a police car to pick him up. As the minister requests – or rather orders – Mustataa' to heal the body of his gravely ill daughter, the latter tremors in his seat; minutes later, Mustataa' is seen in another police car as a potential prisoner, but not for having his act exposed. As the minister demands incessantly that Mustataa' channels planets and “soul records” for a diagnosis, Mustataa' stammers for words as he pleads the Minister to seek medical intervention. Reciting adages and Quranic lines that call for humility before the unknown, Mustataa' finally hurls confession after confession, declaring himself a “a charlatan.”¹² The minister listens in disbelief, clearly indicating

¹² One possible translation of the Arabic adjective *daggal*.

that Mustataa' most likely did not plan this confessional assault on his own plan. This is when the minister orders the arrest of Mustataa' with this curious accusation: he refused to serve the public interest of his daughter's health by evasively lying that he is not a healer, possibly accepting a political rival's bribe to do so. At the local police station, Mustataa' begs his interrogating officer to jail him for willfully lying to the entire nation as the only way to restore Mustataa's peace of mind.

Describing Mustataa's "peace of mind" as a restored state of selfhood, of a lived life outside of the rod-antenna performance, Mustataa' can be said to have lost his sense of self-variance through the unplanned tensions of self-apprenticeship. He inevitably commodifies his own ability for truth-telling (let alone truth-telling about himself) as he commodifies the possibility of any truth claim to his mysticism. His reclamation of selfhood requires that he risks bodily safety by accepting the charge of epistemic willfulness (Ahmed 95): Mustataa' asks back for his self-variance by turning the military rod onto his own body. The comic film becomes psychically disturbing as Mustataa' bends into an affective itinerary of frustration, panic, and the terrified despair of no longer being knowable to himself. In fact, *The Egg and the Rock* is Zaki's only collaboration with the psychological-horror team of scriptwriter Mahmoud Abu Zeit and director Ali Abd-el Khalek. Their films usually teem with characters that struggle with the competing (and economically classed) claims to useful knowledge for a vastly changing Egypt, where an ethical dialectic between truth and greed looms large and drives the plot to a moral completion.

While *The Egg* does not deviate from this formula by actively critiquing greed-driven truth claims, it is a work of comedy written by a team that usually took up the mood of psychological horror to explore issues of embodiment, morality and profitability. More importantly, while former Zeit-Abd el-Khalek collaborations usually ended tragically to evoke a clear ethical position

towards some measure of epistemic humility and repudiation of greed,¹³ *The Egg and the Rock* ends by ambivalently releasing Mustataa' from jail, unharmed against his own will to be punished!¹⁴ The first police officer to interrogate Mustataa' debates him in disbelief, for Mustataa's outing himself as a charlatan would bear a heavy consequence on the collective body that participates in canonizing his media pedagogy. This would include the interrogating officer, who comforts Mustataa' about the consistent accuracy of his published horoscopes; yet he also questions that Mustataa' takes him for a fool, alongside the Egyptian people who would testify to the accuracy of his predictions.

Mustataa' sits across from the officer looking stunned, motionless. He philosophizes wearily about how doubt permeates all schools and labs; how information is manufactured to support all sorts of claims; and how people's faith in him is rather a matter of weakness and not stupidity, a weakness that "does not distinguish the educated from the ignorant." Again, the meaning of his name, capacity, returns to the center of this performance: weakness here is not a lack of capacity to be resisted, but a willfulness strike to be reclaimed through as a dismembered self, as a selfhood that cannot be separated from the biopolitical tensions of militarized policing, capitalism, and the desire to live an economically decent life. Talal Asad holding suspect the rise of secularism in postcolonial governance comes to mind again: the concomitance of legally enforced economic exploitation with legal lip-service to guaranteed individualism and freedom of religion (15). As a higher-rank officer orders the un-shackling of Mustataa', he walks out as a physically unharmed, pixelated property of the state, a neoliberal canon through which public sovereignty affirms itself by manufacturing a zone of epistemic consent, of "the people," across

¹³ Refer to, for example, *Run of the Beasts* (1987), where the object of critique is unfettered medicalization of living bodies, human and animal. Quranic scripture and legal righteousness provide a counter-balance.

¹⁴ For a late Zaki work that symbolically critiques power with an ambivalent ending, see the film *His Excellency the Minister* (2002).

the exponential power differences of officers, ministers, laborers, rich widows, hopeful tourists, and more.

Returning to Mustataa': the horror of hollowing oneself, of losing the ability to distinguish oneself as such, is signaled through losing the ability to be a willful citizen. With tranquil smile and steady steps, Mustataa' walks parallel to an escorting officer, exits a marble gate with Ancient Egyptian motifs overhead, and stretches both hands forward to embrace the officer's palm. It is turned up in anticipation. Mustataa' reaches for the officer's arm, studies it. His hands encase the palm, caressing, running a finger, pointing, and patting the palm gently before letting go. Smiling at the officer, then swerving to face a horizon above the screen, Mustataa' marches forward, as if exiting the screen through the screen. He stares over the viewers, eyes wide with fear and lips tightened into a minimal, wry smirk, like an asterisk that documents the wordless whisper of having gotten away with something – of an occluded victory.

While Ahmed speaks of the pedagogy of the straightening rod, she also speaks of willful hands: raised fists of protest, reaching hands of willful resistance, and also withdrawn hands that are refusing to help (195, 203-4). Is it possible that Mustataa' restored some of his willfulness by re-embodiment his hands? Following this image, a potentially emancipatory read of this disturbing ending to a comic film comes to mind, a potential that is perhaps worth reading and re-imagining not only for the lexical importance and circulation of Ahmed Zaki's performances in Egypt, but for its potential circulation now. This paper is being written three years after the reinstatement of the "rod" of militarized police rule in Egypt during the 2013 military coup d'état. As unlawful incarcerations, bodily disappearances, and at times confirmed deaths continue to rise around the activities of imprisonment practices, oftentimes on epistemic grounds by targeting journalists,

academics, labor lawyers and more, this image of willful cooptation and escape at the hands of an officer presses for reevaluation within historical (ir)relevance.

Assuming a measure of intimate trust that accompanies the officer's investment to place his upturned palm in Mustataa's hands – regardless of whether he seeks back a truth claim, an expected flattery, or both – is it possible that this exchange of hands left Mustataa' with some itinerary into the future of the officer? To entertain this possibility, two questions of willfulness re-open: the question of *The Egg and the Rock* as a work of prophetic horror and the question of Mustataa' as, indeed, a mystic. As 2011 marked the January 25 Revolution and the ousting of Hosni Mubarak's 30 years of (militarized-police and *lassiez-faire* economics') presidency, media theorist and occultist Eugene Thacker published the first installment of his three-part thesis on *The Horror of Philosophy*, where he explores Western horror film and literature as works of philosophy particularly through a theology of dark mysticism. By conducting anthropological genealogies of lasting non-human constructs – the demon or the ghost – he displays the limits of anthropology in addressing the boundaries of the human and the non-human. At these boundaries lie the interstices of frustrated epistemology and terrified will, where “the hidden world reveals itself at the same time that it recedes into darkness” (55), which only in part speaks to “the very story of our ability or inability to comprehend the world is encapsulated in the ritual acts of invasion, possession, metamorphosis, and exorcism” (26-7). What worlds and limits do the “exorcisms” of working hands reveal – their pats to power, rising as fists, refusal to serve?

Then there are moments of frustration and fear through which these interstices disappear, losing the separation between the spectacle and the unknown (77). Perhaps this points to the loss of self as a packaged simulacrum and stamped official property that Mustataa' could not avoid in his capitalizing exploitation. For Thacker, an itinerary example of this loss of boundaries is the

motif of the spiral in Japanese horror manga; usually representing a non-anthropomorphic danger, spatial and psychic at once as it expands, the spiral as a geometric shape can only negatively exist while endlessly expanding (77-9). This spiraling can be said to metaphorize the impossible itinerary of Mustataa' as he exits the frame by walking towards the audience. Indeed, the film ends as the screen freezes to a comical song that Zaki also sings mid-film. However, the visuality that centers his surreptitious yet terrified face and continues the outward spiraling of his motion reinstates this dissolution of social boundaries, this loss of knowing oneself as "the people" viewing the film. This is a fair warning to the dangers of profiteering infiltration: of the Ploebian intellectual who refuses to heed the ghost of a murdered man or the trust of his living neighbors, losing himself within his individuality as he dissolves like the rising stocks that give him imagistic and epistemic power.

It is also an itinerary of voidness that can be described in terms of a certain "dark mysticism." Thacker quotes Schopenhauer's notion of the nothing, the nihil negativum, as a space where language reaches its limit to correspond with a given horizon of thought, where a struggle to comprehend the unhuman marks a "denial of will" usually described "by names of ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, and so on" (47).¹⁵ This is not the New Age, feel-good commercialism of Mustataa's early career: Thacker stresses the distinction that, "whether it is the affectivist-hippie mysticism or the eschatology-of-oil type of mysticism, in both cases mysticism is ostensibly a human-centric and human-oriented experience. Mysticism in these cases is always a union 'for us' as human beings" (152). It seems as if, at the limits of language and anthropological

¹⁵ See Almond's *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi*, Chapter 2: The Honesty of the Preplexed: Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi on "Confusion" pp. 39-62 and Chapter 8: "Mysteri-Tasting and Abyssality: the Secret in Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida" pp. 89-115.

thought, Mustataa' not only confronts a vacuity of self, but of space, of Egypt as a social space: a capitalistically exploited, militarily ruled, Egypt that is not-for-us.

Thacker suggests a reexamination of dark mysticism as a method fit for a climatology of impending environmental collapse, in part due to rapacious capitalization and maltreatment of the planet human life inhabits as a world-for-us (154-9). As the signifier of “mysticism,” in all its fraught generalizations, usually gesture towards some experiential mode of experiencing divinity (156-7), the ubiquity of nothingness introduces an impossibility of experience, of contact (158). It is a direct annihilation of Rancière’s prescription of the mother tongue rendering everything discursively knowable, an annihilation that Mustataa’ embodies as simulacra. Holding the officer’s hands, “reading his future” after multiple confessions of his utter incapacity to do so, Mustataa’ breaks skin with a world not-for-himself, a world that reveals postcolonial aspirations of a globally-recognized rule of humanism, of liberal citizenry and security forces and the promises of individualist wealth, for the sham that it all is. Thacker concludes, “mysticism today would have to devolve upon the radical disjunction and indifference of self and world... it is a kind of mysticism that can only be expressed in the dust of this planet” (158). Viewing the film as a work of horror, and Mustataa’s spiraling exit as the embodied epistemology of dark mysticism, Mustataa’ labors once more with his hands before potentially continuing his co-opting charlatanism. Perhaps he lies against the grain this time, opportunistically copying an itinerary to avoid from the hands of a credulous officer before staring above the possibility of a no-future, the ambivalence lying at the dust of a revolution.¹⁶

The willful infiltrator carries the nihilistic visuality of spiral as a social space. He looks the same whether willfully fragile like an egg or standing firm like a rock, always risking a lonely loss

¹⁶ See Shielke’s anthropology *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence Before and After 2011* (2015), Chapter 8: “Conditions: Normal” pp. 170-90.

of being recognizable or trusted as a citizen. Perhaps this is exactly the risk entailed in the willfulness style of hardening and infiltrating; Ahmed writes, as “willful stones do not stay in the right place, the place assumed as divine or... as human” (191). Moreover, fragility is far from weakness to the infiltrator who must remain intimately close to the powers he potentially subverts. The encased viscosity of an egg is needed to emulate – to learn and to repeat – a believable performance of consent. Referencing the example of an American diversity officer who is “happy” to use the troubling language of diversity to labor for counter-hegemonic ends within her office, Ahmed asserts that a measure of infiltration is always necessary to the epistemic power of willfulness. “Somewhat ironically then,” Ahmed writes, “it is given that the willful subject is so impressive, because she has already gathered too much, that we acquire even more possibilities for willful action, by appearing in ways that are not consistent with this impression [of standing apart]” (152).

Past the tragic-comic possibility of Mustataa’ as a tremulous antenna saving face, recovering one’s body as just enough willfulness for the day (Ahmed 140), there is a possibility of forewarning cinema-goers of the autopsies of mass willful resistance to come by surviving as an infiltrating body. At hand is a *via negativa* map of too much intimate knowing, about too many high-profile wielders of biopolitical rods, surviving along the simulacra that delivers them to other willful hands that read outside of their right place, that harden there, hands that mold the willfulness of innocence into that of a survival and a mapping fit for post-coup dust.

Another style of willfulness with revolutionary potential, one that is too often summoned as a binary enemy of infiltration strategies, or strikes, of will, is the image of the radical: one who assumes, or rather is assumed to assume, the risk of full bodily harm, from some chronological origin point until the welcomed finitude of possible corporeal death. It is also too often an assumed

lingua franca of revolutionary performance, both as visibility and activism, across contextual lands, histories, and social formations, oftentimes valorized in universalist terms as the zenith of revolutionary action, strategically and morally, due to its unabashed tie to political performances of standing-apart, blatantly, by closely “facing” militarized impunity.

This comprises the second style of willfulness that this paper highlights and complicates, which will be primarily done through Ahmed Zaki’s performance in a chronologically earlier film called *The Innocent* (1984). While *The Egg* is still largely regarded as a comedic work of light entertainment, *The Innocent* stands as a highly celebrated, critically acclaimed film that presents a direct, incisive critique of police rule and its violent quelling of dissident bodies.

Chapter II: The Success-Failure Abyss of Raced Masculinity

Before tackling *The Innocent*, a pressing intermission is needed to supplement its visibility out of linear chronology with a brief and partial map of Ahmed Zaki’s visibility as a political body. The itineraries implied in this map will start as inquiries that locate Ahmed Zaki’s multiple transformations as an Egyptian actor and a public figure within the possible conditions of long-standing identity assumptions and biopolitical developments paralleling his work. Excluding the more explicitly political performances in his later career, such as *Nasser 65* (1996) and *Days of Sadat* (2001), this intermission will focus on the subtler roles that bolstered his visual and artistic status to their suitability for such projects, namely as a romantic lead. For the second part of this analysis, an emphasis on the biopolitics of late-twentieth-century global militarism and capitalist dominance will inform how this map intrudes on radical “roles” by highlighting radical acts within the trajectories of Zaki’s appearance – presented here as a rural peasant being aligned into the hard shape of a soldier – within the 1986 timeline of *The Innocent*.

Finally, the closing frame(s) of *The Innocent* will be given discursive chances to translate some intimations of, and interruptions to, radical willfulness that bear their relevance to a living, ongoing textuality of willful bodies disciplined by mass incarcerations and disappearances, a textuality of rallying images that document missing frames and interrupted spaces of mourning within the pedagogical discourses of prisoner letters and decriminalizing photos; silenced autopsies and independent-journalism eulogies; held hands of ring-bound suitors that cup and occlude willful plots; and missing bodies of writers, prisoners, and their lovers.

But first, a brief return to *School of Troublemakers* will continue the twofold ways through which Ahmed Zaki as Ahmed the poet punctuates the steadfastness of his quieter rebellion, of his critical inhabitation of already queered classroom and play, with a few louder moments that reinforce the poet's standing apart with larger, political translatability across stage and screen. While a melodramatic vociferation of his different "conditions" invites the audience to claim and participate in the character's socioeconomic realities, a song invites viewers to inhabit his dream identity, romantic fantasy, and agonizing fear. A musical interlude near the end of the play features each student in independent song-and-dance act with Suheir el-Babli, who sheds Miss Effat's sisterly warmth and bookish restraint; instead, she embodies each student's uniquely mythologized love interest.

El-Babli swaps the first act's voluptuous dress and fur scarf for a long, frilly dress in Ahmed's fantasy. After doting exchanges invoking their love and mutual children, Ahmed boasts of his recently published volume of poetry and the several million pounds it will earn him. She laughs exuberantly, yet scurries off the stage as the school principle (Hassan Mustafa) marches in as a military patrol officer. He asks for Ahmed's ID to confirm his married status, who dismisses a need to carry one. Ahmed is now Egypt's "Prince of Poets" himself, the late-Ottoman Ahmed

Shawqi Bek. As the officer asks for bribe money in place of the ID, Ahmed sings his yet-penniless state. The officer lugs him away to prison, abruptly ending the act.

Ahmed Zaki's significance as the "dark-toned artist," a trailblazer who changed Egyptian Cinema's image of the leading lover, appears all too often in the voluminous cadre of commemorative media that surrounded his terminal illness and gradual succumb to death.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Zaki's interim dedication to the project of *Halim* (2015) reveals a trail of inheritance, of stretched hands, through which non-normative lovers produced some of Egypt's most canonical images of romantic predicaments and gendered citizenry. Firstly, the biopic's subject, Hafez, produced some of contemporary Egypt's most definitely canonical love songs. Moreover, Halim and Zaki intersect at defining sites of biographical imagery: the same rural birth place, orphaned childhoods, and defining experiences of early-career Othering, socially and professionally, on systemic grounds of class, genealogy, and colorist racism. Yet, they persisted in those spaces: Ahmed the poet persisted despite failing Arabic, being framed, and gets jailed.

Much like the quieter rebellion of Ahmed the poet, to persist is to respond to being marked as a visual disturbance riding the performative creativities that disturbances enable (204). A brief analysis of gender in Zaki's performances reveal how the social locations his performances embodied as a romantic interest worked within a normative lexicon of militaristic, masculinist citizenship to reinforce his blackness as a new masculine beauty and romantic possibility on screen. Zaki plays a marginal role in *Alexandria, Why?* (1979), directed by the cinematic giant Youssef Chahine. Zaki performs the sub-plot of Ibrahim, a working-class Egyptian Muslim who falls for and marries an Egyptian Jew named Sarah (Naglaa' Fathi). Although Sarah's father is an anti-Zionist, communist activist, Ibrahim is jailed instead as an accused "communist." Three years

¹⁷ See, for example, Abu-Maged's "Ahmed Zaki: The Rise and Fall of a Generation." *Egypt Independent* (2010).

later, Zaki co-stars in *A Dinner Date* (1982) alongside the “Cinderella of Egyptian Cinema” herself, Soad Hosny. He is a blue-collar hairdresser who competes for her love with her wealthy ex-husband, played by Hussein Fahmy, a blonde, blue-eyed Don Juan in the 70s. Two-thirds into the film, Zaki’s character is punished for marrying his lover with a bullet from Fahmy’s gun. How did an actor who was only offered roles as a lover that end with death or imprisonment well into the early 1980s come to biographize the iconic, coercive-with-cool masculine ideal of (the lighter-toned) Gamal Abdel Nasser?

Indeed, interviews with Zaki himself and with friends well into the 2000s resuscitate his early-career experiences of rejection on accounts of being dark, black, and/or simple strange-looking. While Zaki was disturbing Cinematic aesthetics through closer-to-lead roles, the early 1980s snowballed seismic changes in Egyptian cinematic production, circulation, and political content. Known as the New Realism period in Egypt, 1980s directors were countering melodramatic social realism of the 1960s by replacing the tropic formula of heroes, villains and victims with a larger framework that pits quotidian struggles against a shared sense that authority is inevitably corruptible (“The Emperor Has No Clothes”). Overall, Sadat’s *Infitah* policies (literally means “opening”) promulgated opportunities for lowering a film’s production value through funding that lies entirely outside state-run studios and their explosively-costly star system (Stone 44). Aesthetically, New Realism produced an archive of films that are characterized by disturbances of the frame: reels that deteriorate with time, choppy edits within a rushed deadline, VHS distribution on a cheap budget, and working with less-trained and less-normative young talents (Stone 44).

One new director named Mohammed Khan rides the production wave, strengthening his career’s beginnings as a would-be established director and innovator, and forging a collaborative

bond with a new, shy actor, a Third Worldist¹⁸ face who would star in his 2001 work as Anwar el Sadat. Between 1981 and 1989, Khan and Zaki collaborated on four iconic films of the 1980s, including *A Dinner Date*, rippling frames that reverberate the political bluntness of lessened censorship, which is enabled by working without national funding. They also rupture with the loophole possibility of a new starring actor who looks familiar, idiosyncratic, and approachable: looking more like other commonly encountered Egyptians than the star-system exceptions, yet exceptionally handsome within, not despite, his provincial flare. While Khan writes Zaki as a romantic interest in each of the four films, yet faces such violent ends that biographer Abd el Fattah named the pair a “suicidal-victim duo” (103).

In each of the four deaths, Zaki moves away from roles of quiet rebellion that meets senseless punishment at the hands of superior men. Instead, he progressively establishes himself as a new face of radical willfulness, a transgressive young actor who cathartically embodies the ambivalent lives and violent undoing of paternal masculine ideals. In 1987, Zaki plays the role of a macho secret service officer who devolves after being fired from his office. Replacing authorized torture with physical abuse to his wife, the ex-officer dies in a fit of self-destruction to a Halim love score. In *Dreams of Hind and Camilia* (1989), Zaki plays a bus driver and small-scale money launderer who hesitates between capitalizing on his women friends’ innocence and reforming into a devoted father. The ending frame assigns Zaki as Eid a more forgiving fate than violent death. Eid is made invisible through incarceration, exiting the frame just as indecisive about his implicit responsibilities. As his daughter Ahlam, meaning “dreams,” finds a bag of money he failed to

¹⁸ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe “Third Worldist” film as one that constitutes an on-screen insertion of the filmmaker’s awareness of being servile towards a dominant cultural model, particularly in the context of colonialism, in part by selecting actors that challenge internalized ideals of Hollywood stardom (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 279, 283). This applies indirectly to pre-New Realist conventions of stardom in Egypt. It can be a useful intervention for describing the globalizing moment during which these (mostly) nationally-distributed films challenged provincial aesthetic Eurocentrism and elitisms.

traffic while playing in mud, her mother Hind and her friend Camilia plot their escape to Alexandria to “start a new life.” As their ride to Alexandria leaves them drugged and penniless by a nameless shore, Hind and Camilia wake up wailing, screaming, calling on Ahlam. Finding the daughter, they crackle with laughter, hammock Ahlam between their arms, dance to the roofless swoosh of shore. Eid’s disappearance from the frame, perhaps as he wrestles with his own responsibly and privilege in a jail cell, describe a radical willfulness to disappear, to liberate not by standing apart but by stepping away.¹⁹

This disappearance of a Zaki character takes a sharp turn as of the 1990s. As Zaki archives Eid, Hind and Camilia struggling against the dirty ups and downs of *lassiez-faire* money-grabbing and hasty incarceration, he begins 1990s with two lead roles additional to Mustataa’s, the Emperor drug lord and the Kaborya-cut boxer, each featuring the eventual failure of a love story with a blonde. He would produce at least ten films with blonde love interests as their driver, doorman, cheating husband, and more, while other films he co-stars with multiple women, usually including the blonde Yousra, center the visuality of Zaki’s character until the end. While his lead women shift the colorist aesthetics by the late 90s, olive toned with long, black hair,²⁰ Zaki has already forged his masculinity through proximity with Eurocentric aesthetics as a love interest with a dominant will.²¹

¹⁹ Films with other directors during the same period arguably partake in a similar, gradual elevation of Zaki’s acceptability as a national celebrity. For example, he co-stars with the more fair Athar al-Hakim in both *I Do Not Lie But I Beautify* (1981) and *Love Atop The Pyramid Plateau* (1984). In *I Do Not Lie*, he lives a double life as a top psychology student and a secret, rurally-dwelling mortician. As al-Hakim’s role discovers this, she eventually renounces her love for Zaki’s character. However, in *Love Atop*, al-Hakim and Zaki’s characters do not occlude their class difference, marry secretly, and leave the film embracing lovingly in a Police minivan that is delivering them to their joint arrest. She takes on the male’s class-based culpability.

²⁰ Refer to the comedy flic *Hysteria* (1996) or the more psychoanalytic action-drama *Land of Fear* (1999), both which morbidly certify Zaki’s visuality through big-brother nationalist scripts.

²¹ However, it is worth noting that, by 1998, Zaki’s character ends the film *Smile for the Picture* by exiting the frame while present as father. After helping his daughter through a love struggle, where the wealthier father of her lover sabotages their marriage, Zaki commemorates his daughter’s happiness by placing her close to his own lover and mother, stepping behind the frame to take the film’s last picture.

Nevertheless, even after his death, Zaki is doubted to have “what it takes” to attract his co-stars, let alone a number of them simultaneously, including blondes. For example, in his critical account of Zaki’s life and work *Ahmed Zaki: the Original and the Copy*, scriptwriter Mustapha Muharram continually reiterates his surprise at a number of producers and directors who insisted that Zaki play a romantic lead (152). Comparing Zaki’s appearance to three other actors that include Hussein Fahmy (153), he blames producers for doing Zaki a disservice by placing him within a genre of films where his physique “does not fit,” rendering the competition for masculine beauty “above his capacity” (159). While there are many possible reads to Muharram’s analysis, it constitutes one among many archival footnotes that brings up the possibility of Zaki experiencing racial violence regularly, always feeling one step further from normative masculinities even as rebellions (*School of Troublemakers*), yet one step closer to carrying the sacrificial mantle of cathartic death for the rest of society, sacrificed on behalf of raced masculinities he is never allowed to fully inhabit (collaborations with Khan).

These privileged exchanges of evaluating aesthetics, fitting-in, and the competence of stakeholders in the infrastructures of image-making may seem frivolous in isolation, but they speak for serious biopolitical distinctions that inform a given context’s fields of citizenry and exclusivity, especially within the public texts of film. In his article “People of Color Blindness,” Jared Sexton speaks of a contextually varying yet globally ever-present politic of anti-blackness. In addition to Zaki’s being an orphan, Sexton reminds the reader of how various systems of enslaving dark-skinned and black bodies usually demanded “the strict prohibition of nativity under the regime of racial slavery” (40). Moreover, he discusses pre-modern antecedents to segregationist sociality, writing, “the racial circumscription of political life (bios) under slavery predates and prepares the

rise of modern democratic state, providing the central counterpoint and condition of possibility for the symbolic and material articulation of its form and function” (41).

Sexton’s incisive analysis beckons further study that would reveal how integrally divergent systems of slavery can be while remaining inseparably shaping of each other’s injustices and afterlives, such as Ottoman slavery within the Egypt Khedivates versus the British North American Atlantic Slave Trade. Moreover, divergent histories invariably lead to distinctions of present experience, given current discussions, or sad lack thereof, around Egypt as an African Nile country, or the military government’s dismissive relations with Northern and Southern Sudan and the contested Nuba.²² Nevertheless, this intermission ends with the discursive justice of acknowledging the inseparable intersection of antiblackness.

If black Egyptians are assumed to carry a history of “foreclosed” nativity, of a “truly non-original origin,” (41) of a dislocation that more hegemonic accounts of postcolonial nationalism cannot underlie, then why did Zaki forsake the radical itineraries of his 1980s willfulness and, instead, experimented with correctives? Moreover, is it possible that Zaki rejects the rebellion of Khan the same way Ahmed the poet stands apart from the troublemakers, refusing to continue a career of willful resistance on behalf of lighter-toned Egyptians to whom the masculinity he subverts unquestionably belongs? Is there unacknowledged cultural labor there as an indelible afterlife of enslaved labor? As Sara Ahmed states, “willfulness [is] the slave’s assignment” (202). Antirblackness is a social discursive space that emerges from spaces of slavery where being preemptively criminalized, and documented as such, becomes one of the most immediately accessible forms of political expression,²³ rendering the assignment of innocence anywhere

²² See, for example, Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (2003).

²³ See, for example, Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997).

between an impossible embodiment, an individualist pipe dream, or a construct one must disturb, decenter, and do without.

By becoming the militarist rod of Nasser and Sadat,²⁴ or the capitalizing antenna of quick money and available blondes, is there a willfulness for Zaki, a problematic one nonetheless, as to why he insert himself into the imagistic lexica of belonging to Egypt, belonging as an Egyptian, in a way that postcolonial ties to land alone may not address for his embodiment? Sexton distinguishes between “the oppression of nonblack people of color” versus antiblackness by describing the latter as “invariant and limitless” (47). Nevertheless, given a seeming limitless brutality on the part of militarized rule in Egypt, why would Zaki wish to inhabit this spiral, this ceaseless trail of silenced autopsies defined via negativa through the razor-sharp silence of presidential speeches about a world not-for-us. What does Zaki bring to hegemonic understandings of criminality and innocence as a body that is at once Egyptian and not-Egyptian, fitting within a colorist stratification of labor, aesthetics, and manhood, yet unwelcomed as willful performances outside of the “office” of his color, resisted through the pedagogical cannons of physicality and production value.

What does the rod as the presidential microphone, or the frame as the ID certifying his erotic coinage, specifically condition for the raced history of Ahmed Zaki’s performances – and, working back, for visualities of a rural, orphaned, self-taught, or pixelated public bodies? In the last scene of *School of Troublemakers*, students kiss the hands of Miss Effat in farewell, followed by the hands of the school principle. Ahmed the poet exclusively hands Miss Effat a flower. Approaching the principle, he is the only student to bend, to lower his torso downward. Kissing his hand, Ahmed’s eyes are fixed on the principle’s face, smirking into the hand.

²⁴ It is also rumored that, after playing Halim, Zaki planned a biopic of Mubarak.

Chapter III: The Willful Innocent, Amnesiac Archives, and an Autopsy of a Missing Frame

It is a vast desert and a small military truck is getting bigger. Inside the truck are new soldiers being transported to their new post in a detention center; one soldier moves back and forth restlessly, played by a young, slim Ahmed Zaki. His name here is Ahmed Sab' el-Leel el Fouli, and he had just come from the village of his upbringing. There, he argues with the donkeys and cows he farms with. Other boys insult him as the village idiot and almost kill him with cocaine, which they told him was salt. A man holding a book interrupts the debacle, reassuring him about being recently drafted to the military. "You never know when war might happen... You will come out a new man," the bookish friend says. Ahmed the soldier sharpens his flute, takes a train, makes it across monotonous examinations and exercises, and is finally dressed in military beige, pacing in a truck that is heading for the desert.

Inside the compound, prisoners line up as a military man, who carries a fan to the sergeant's face, follows a circumventing head sergeant. Before Zaki arrives, a body on a hunger strike falls to the ground, strikes from the lined formation, and a soldier drags him away. After Zaki arrives, whose name here is the sergeant makes sure they cannot read or write. He orders the young boy soldier as Ahmed – who will be called Ahmed the soldier until he is finally named while he visits his home village – to slap his friend; asking him why, Ahmed the soldier says he follows orders. Half-eaten loaves of pita bread are lined up in front of the prisoners, who are ordered to bend down and eat off the hot sand with hands held behind their back.

This is the dinner of prisoners on a day ripe with rumors of a hunger strike. The next scene, soldier Ahmed is looking ahead, at the prisoners, tearful. The following scene, soldier Ahmed is told by his platoon head that these prisoners "are the enemy of the motherland," to which he responds with wonder that they were fed. He asks: why not just kill them all?

The above summary outlines the first six minutes of *The Innocent*. It is richly symbolic with small interstices of dialogue, as stretches of visuality can be punctuated only by the clanks of feet shackled to one another, or a humming engine from far, or a droning siren, a huffing train, a clanking ladle, a screaming prisoner's body, or laughing children at a birthday party. A father in a suit and tie entertains the children with magic tricks for maybe six other minutes. Some scenes later, the father approaches the compound on horseback, military beige, expressionless sunglasses. He interrogates a man who was arrested at a women's socialist protest. He claims he was there because he is a pervert. He interrogates the next man, a writer, and the next one, a doctor with a geology PhD.

This is the monotonous precarity, the crowded silence, of revolutionary time. This is the pace of a non-characteristically Egyptian film, without melodramatic chatter or the occasional break into song and dance. It is a quieter terseness that is more fit for post-coup times, as in the 2013 coup d'état, one where the struggle continuing looks like men quietly lining up, where state-sponsored torture looks like magic tricks to laughing children at a birthday party. It is a monotony of the unexpected and unexplainable, where six minutes of near quiet can summarize the usual inexplicability of bodies that fall out of strike, that are dragged out of uselessness, that hold up a fan as a form of office.

In his article "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe uses the French Revolution to trace a genealogy of codependence between modernity and terror. Terror, he argues, is an extension of public executions (19). It is also a way of "making aberration in the body politic" (19). These on-demand aberrations obfuscate whatever negotiated forms of consensus there are between "error" and "crime" there may be, legal or political or otherwise, to rearrange these rhetorical devices around the preemptive decision to eliminate the enemy (19). A given subject of Marxian

modernity, Mbembe says, is “a subject who is intent on proving his or her sovereignty through the staging of a fight to the death” (20). As the father-officer teases the doctor about his useless education and must-be-lonely wife, the doctor asks for haste if he received orders to kill him, to get it over with.

Choppy edits evoke enough to indicate that the doctor is tied to the father-officer’s horse. He is dragged across the desert, bleeding, as melodramatic violins play too loudly, normalizing this siege time back into an Egyptian 80s film. Necropolitics and violins, error and crime: Talal Asad sees no absurdity in calling out the odd tension through which some of Europe’s most canonical writers of liberal modernism argued for violence within an intellectual movement that was, in large part, founded on the repudiation of violence. Asad reassures, “There is no fatality in all this – as Adorno and Horkheimer claimed – no necessary unfolding of an Enlightenment essence. It is just the way some liberals have argued and acted” (60). Within the empty spaces of discursive binaries lie the incipience of nihilistic spiraling out of the social location of binaries. What lies between the rod as a microphone and the rod as rife is exactly that: empty space. However, what lies between the bodies that hold them – whether this space props standing feet or buries unclaimed dead – shifts with the rod holders, wills in uniform passing the baton.

About midway through the film, Ahmed almost produces a song. Holding a rifle and a flute atop a watchtower, he surreptitiously closes his lips on the flute. A fellow soldier catches his gaze from below, yelling reprimands. He drops the flute all the way down to the ground.

Working outside, in the still of desert, the writer suddenly hits Ahmed the soldier on the head with a shovel, running off with his rifle. Rallying calls, more military trucks, more soldiers and rifles, and a chase down. Ahmed the officer finally catches up to the writer, and they fight with bare hands as the father-officer props his gun on standby. “I don’t want to kill you... you won’t get

away from me”: soldier Ahmed contradicts himself in words as he chokes the writer and slams his head, eliminating an enemy. Smiles across bloody faces, a shuffle of shovels and sand, and Ahmed is promoted for his bravery. He runs to receive his award in uniform, and then he runs to catch the train heading for the village on an honorary break. He runs in uniform to embrace his brother and, a scene later, in a *jalabiyya* to embrace his aging mother. He hurriedly takes off the *jalabiyya*. Grabs the plough, and gets to farming. Hands, rods, and muscles: Sara Ahmed describes wills as muscles that strengthen with training (83). The will of a “good” worker is expected to align his whole body (111). Nevertheless, muscles develop their own wayward wills (117), get disoriented marching to asynchronous beats.

It is a very different performance from those of Ahmed the poet or of Mustataa’. Ahmed the peasant and nascent soldier is not interested in translating his country slang, or learning new speech and writing. He is all body: he runs the same way beneath uniform and *jalabiyya*, unaware of his lopsided hurling yet quick to arrive. He pats, hugs, points and works, hands constantly working and, eventually, fighting with anyone who transgresses his country manners – especially on his way to Cairo to visit his bookish friend. In the village, Ahmed’s friends confront him about his talk of “the motherland’s enemies,” since there is no war. Ahmed asserts, and swears, that there is a war, that a man almost killed him recently. Mbembe writes about how militarized biopower articulates its discipline at the concatenation of a state of exception and a state of siege (22-3). For example, except for terror and the siege of error, one can always make the argument to run, to keep running, unaware of how one even looks like running, running outside the laws and consensus of “languages” and “traditions” running straight into a state of war without end (23), without a need for enemy.

Father-officer takes visiting journalists for a tour of the compound, describing it with the terms of therapy and tourism as a service to the intellectuals and writers he “houses.” As a prisoner voices one complain to a journalist, wishing that the water was a little colder, father-officer takes off his glasses. Ahmed’s bookish friend, Hussein, gives a speech against institutionalized torture, while Ahmed waves a baton at prisoners, sending them to their cells.

A new line of prisoners is greeted with dogs inside the truck and batons at their escape. Ahmed’s baton meets Hussein’s bleeding body, tries to defend Hussein’s body. In a jail cell they wail that night, Hussein struggles for words, tries to explain that what the officer says is home is not home; Ahmed wails. The father-officer visits with poisonous snakes. Ahmed fights the snakes better; Hussein is bit, dying in his arms with the parting words, “come back as you were.” Ahmed wails louder, louder. There is no need for a full script, for the stretches of sentences and arguments, as a body inhabiting an isolated compound of modern militarism’s global mobility. Mbembe explains that “an important feature of the age of global mobility is that military operations and the exercise of the right to kill are no longer the sole monopoly of states, and the ‘regular army’ is no longer the unique modality of carrying out these functions. The claim to ultimate or final authority in a particular political space is not easily made” (31). Combining an enemy-less war trajectory with asymmetrical shifts of authority on the use of violence, what does a body of now-wayward parts being pulled apart do? Where is Ahmed amid the parts from his village and the parts from the compound when they meet at the brutalized body of kin?

After a last night locked up at the cell, looking hard at thought, Ahmed is finally released. The next morning marks his final scene. There are two ways that the film could end, because there are two ways through which the film ends: documenting further chopiness of New Realism, creative disturbances and messy negotiations of funds, censorship, and political grit. In the more

censored ending, Ahmed returns to the watchtower. He asks a friend to throw the flute back up to him. Lips on the flute, no music sounds as, once more, he is interrupted. The sirens of a truck with a new batch of prisoners, the father-officer on his horse: the mundane familiarity of diffuse terror sounds up its bodies, as Ahmed stares ever more intently, maddeningly, angrily. He screams. It is one of the shrillest scream a film can exit with, and without explanation, jutting between a guttural moan and a high-pitch wail that is interrupted by the roll of credit. It is an echo of what is to come, of more missing bodies. It is also an interrupted willfulness, as if echoing a missing frame. It is still unclear where Ahmed is in it all.

In the second ending, Ahmed's willful place is rendered crystal clear within the chaotic machinations of globally mobile militarization in the small village and the distant desert, where there is no time of peace for a surveillance motherland, where is no going back as you were. Staring at the approaching truck – sirens, stares, rifle, and flute – he roars with the same shrill, double-pitched scream. Before any prisoner moves out of the truck, Ahmed fires. Without a second's hesitation, he fires at fellow soldiers of all ranks, bringing down the father-officer. Only stopping when all military bodies within sight are dead, Ahmed finally reaches for his flute. It is the only tool he is seen to handle slowly, deliberately: lips to the flute, a mournful Upper Egypt melody emerges. It continues as he rocks back and forth within the watchtower, playing his flute. A gun fires at his chest as music immediately ceases and Ahmed screams. A bloody flute falls down the watchtower and on the rifle. Ahmed dies at the top. As a camera shifts the visual field down below, a confused young soldier stands with rifle at hand, staring up at Ahmed's dangling corpse. The soldier walks towards some vanishing point alone, anonymous, getting smaller.

He was not a Marxist and was not an Islamist. He had no collective formation save for his love for his village and acclamation within the compound. He seemed to do nothing slowly, or

cautiously, except when handling the flute, which is only heard in a potentially erased ending. On the one hand, the censored ending produces the radical willfulness of refusing to be silent, even when the frame is missing, when there is no knowing whether soldiers or prisoners will pay. It is a gesture that points to abuses to come, a pay-attention. Moreover, it is a scream, a discordant scream that beautifully and terribly queers the affective expectations of the simulacra of capitalism. On the other hand, the unedited frame can be read as a willful reaching out: an agonizing testimony to the dire need, and tragic risks, of collective willfulness, of “becoming army” as raised fists (Ahmed 194). The trajectory of deaths also highlights the terrible losses that can be incurred by taking up radical willfulness alone, by being a “lone wolf” (with his middle name translating as “hyena of the night”). As Ahmed stands apart within the ending of the film, until he stands alone and is then erased, his character comprises a series of actions that make it difficult to entirely extract this movie as radical.

Ahmed the farmer and soldier is a deceptively complicated performance of shifting loyalties within limited access to literacies for him and exploitative adaptations of military governmentality through him. Moreover, Ahmed’s stare seems to carry insurmountable conflicts and richness of willfulness; moments later, he is murdered by a seemingly unassuming new soldier. There is radicalness to the limited radicalness of the characters, the institutional limits and affective realities they show from their contextual locations. Imagining Mustataa’ spiraling out of a screen, into the audience, as a double-forked tongue with a subversive potential of maybe at best, and imagining the anonymous soldier receding in the opposite direction, with Ahmed’s dangling corpse haunting the psychic space of a would-be audience, trajectories of willfulness appear exactly as contextually discursive as they are to one another. Given historical context, the space

between silenced screams of infiltration, and screaming bodies of radical action, is only as full as the willful hands that shape it.

Coda: Stagnations, Lucid Dreams and the Afterlife of a Funeral that Never Was

In his essay “Art, Inactivity, Politics,” Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben attributes to the idle stillness of an artistic image an inherently political significance (140). To Agamben, art “is an operation which contemplates and renders non-operational man’s senses and usual actions, this opening them to new possible uses. For this reason, art comes so close to politics and philosophy as almost to merge with them. What poetry achieves by the power of speech and art by the power of the senses, politics and philosophy have to achieve by the power of action” (140-1). Can an image as mundane as that of a nationally renowned celebrity inherently demand such an esteemed political and philosophical coinage? What would that make of studying an Egyptian celebrity, regardless of whether his performances stayed the course of willful subversion or inhabited neoliberal self-rehabilitation, after such powerfully political and visual markers as the January 25th Revolution and the crushing 2013 coup d’état?

The large visibility of the continuing January 25 Revolution has shaped contextual ideas and practices of visual politics in and about Egypt beyond a point of return. Moreover, there is a way in which younger generations have grown weary of the unjustly-distributed media spaces taken up by mega-stars, as the incarcerations and death tolls of militarized police rule continue to rise in Egypt continues. However, there is the curious coinciding of Ahmed Zaki’s death in 2005, a year marked by the acceleration of nation-wide, grassroots willfulness, raised fists of an Egypt-for-us, from the *Kefaya* movement’s founding in 2004 to many successful labor strikes between

2005 and 2008.²⁵ Moreover, labor-based protests continue to grow exponentially,²⁶ as do the ongoing arrests and deaths of labor-union academics, reporters and lawyers.²⁷

Biographer Abd el-Fattah's of the "roles" Ahmed Zaki artistically performs come to mind: in court, Zaki speaks as the lawyer, the defendant, the accused, the guilty, and the escaped; in governance, he is the ideal(ized) president, the corrupt minister, the tortured interrogator, and even the symbolic upper-Egypt doorman to a Cairo tower's free-market mobility (referring to the comedy *His Majesty The Doorman*, 1987) (92). Sadly, there is an idealized fatalism in how Abd el-Fattah attributes Zaki's acumen for contextual speech to an essential solitary genius. Couched within a larger debate around Zaki's talent as that of impersonation or reincarnation,²⁸ he describes Zaki as an "ahistorical" or "lonesome actor," a man who ironically "cannot find himself standing far from the doors of history," doors to which he "stands as guard" (92).²⁹ Abd el-Fattah describes Zaki's "gift" for Ploebian performance in terms of his capacity for *taQammus* – which roughly translates as reincarnation or embodiment (171). Meanwhile, the biographer Mustapha Muharram critiques Zaki's performance of Nasser as a good "imitation" (138), a performance that was neither "whole" nor "mad" enough to constitute an embodiment.

This study took up the task of complicating the a-historicism with pre-Revolution public figures, such as Ahmed Zaki, are often depoliticized – enshrined at the door of history or presumed dissectible in the depths of his psyche. Neither locations highlight the agentive negotiations that

²⁵ See Jay's interview with Ezzeldin.

²⁶ See Beinun, "Workers, Trade Unions, and Egypt's Political Future."

²⁷ Refer, for example, to the case of Giulio Regeni, Mahienour el-Massri and Sayid Fathi.

²⁸ A possible translation for the Arabic performative convention of *taQammus*, implying greater depth into a character, fictional or historical, by way of rigorous embodiment.

²⁹ Unfortunately, the poetic convention of referring to the doorman in *His Majesty* does not stand well with the active bending of Egypt's class history: a country boy moves to Cairo, works as a city-tower doorman, learns to illegally broker its apartments, parties with the rich and marries a blonde, commands the neighbor's respect and royalties with heavy upper-Egypt slang, and, upon getting caught, returns to being doorman with a fellow peasant, darker-toned wife.

Ahmed Zaki may have labored over to produce every performance, negotiations of differentially marked identities, gaping wealth disparities, and shifting policies of censorship and surveillance. This historicized appreciation of an artist's work is a necessary process of politicizing art-making in a way that can contribute towards what Sara Ahmed names "inheritances of will," (204) which she symbolizes as arms that reach. Ahmed elaborates, "Perhaps we are the ones being reached by the arms. After all, we know some of us are only here now on these grounds because arms in history have extended our reach" (204).

First: Ahmed the deceased. Allegedly, Zaki and Halim were the only celebrity bodies shrouded in the Egyptian flag. Acknowledging a lived tradition of inhabiting public funeral space for political resistance since the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, Muharram was shocked by the magnitude of security forces that surrounded Zaki's funeral, as well as their organized curtailment of the funeral and separation of the crowd into smaller, contained groups (19-20). This interrupted public funeral lives today alongside the relative-to-absolute abnegation of public mourning for hundreds of missing and/or found-dead bodies of Egyptians, most of whom received this bodily sentence as punishment for receiving the sentence of willfulness, for standing apart together while reaching out for further emancipatory rallying. A morbid warning spirals from the missing public frame of his funeral, a warning of a coup, of unheard mourning.

Second: Ahmed as Halim. Ahmed Zaki is occasionally bed-ridden, as he acts the role of Abdel Halim Hafez while he is bedridden. In an illness-induced haze, Zaki as Halim envisions children playing in the street, crackling with joyous laughter and kicking the rain. One of the children is an actor that plays a young Halim. Exchanged smiles, Halim and Halim, as texts, connect their referential hands. Reaching out back to a public figure of mass-produced art as an exercise in politicized visibility, reaching back to work that admittedly reached out first through

frustrating contradictions and incredibly clever insertions of willfulness, this paper concludes that the pixels, bullets, and projectile dust of this planet can take a back seat to the lived muscle and willful autopsy, between which there is plenty for the hands to do and the tongue to heed.

Finally, without finality: Ahmed as cinematic autopsy of willfulness, an autopsy whose timeline is only footnoted by the globalist moments of valorized revolutionary graffiti. A visual politics of willful muscles that challenge the binaries of nationalist resistance – of a Mustataa’ (citizen-occupier and potential infiltrator) and an Ahmed (marginalized yet gifted, and an idealized radical) points at the participatory process through which these texts of willfulness are negotiated as the central subject and inheritor of resistance.

On the making of *Nasser 65*, Joel Gordon describes Ahmed Zaki’s performance as a “monument” to a “Nasser that never was” (178). A crossover of archival footage and actor performances, most of the film focuses on the secret deliberations that aimed to nationalize the Suez Canal, as Nasser – played here by Zaki – delivered a speech from Alexandria on the night of July 26th to announce the plan (162). The exorbitantly expensive project was entirely produced by the state-owned Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), allegedly to maintain Cairo’s dominance over Arab film production (Gordon 162). However, Gordon argues, within this funding ledger of dominance, a monument to Nasser was scripted through a dialogical process of writers, artists, actors, film crew, and more, as they contest their disagreeing accounts of Nasser - arranging archives, evaluations, and memories (or lack thereof) - as a means of producing the film’s “official” cut (*Nasser 56/Cairo 96* 164,8).³⁰

The aim of this project was to resuscitate Nasser as an archetype for “an era of hope, unity, national purpose, social stability, and achievement,” (Gordon 171) an unfulfilled hope shaped

³⁰ In fact, Mahfuz Abdul-Rahman, the author of the script to *Nasser 56*, was primarily a leftist in 1952, largely skeptical of Nasserism (Gordon 171).

through the cut-and-paste visual imaginations of film makers; actor performances, most of whom were young; and film goers, most of whom were born post-Nasser, who went prompting their parents about the period (177, 8). Instead of a rallying moment of manufactured “unity,” as the government seemed to have intended (Gordon 173), there was proliferation of contentious re-embodiments of Nasser as the hero to come, the hero to be edited and continued: from demonstrations surrounding the film’s release, to opposition papers’ sympathetic press releases (174, 6), to Radio and Television specials that included debates, interviews, nationalist songs, and more (176). Meanwhile, the state’s response to the initial-release rallies was to indefinitely suspend “The Arab film event of the year.” (178). As scheduled theater release was postponed due to incomplete sound work, or a following Ramadan, or a following election, contending with how an intended visual of unity against a foreign aggressor came to speak for internal discontent with ceaseless privatization to foreign creditors in the service of the elite’s personal interests (173-4). It was a media-rich event of censored inhabitation of cinema space coupled with ceaseless infiltration of willful co-authoring, much like Zaki’s interrupted funeral.

It is in this way that the 2011 Revolution is, despite being organizationally interrupted, is discursively and biopolitically ongoing, diffused across manifold spaces of public infiltration and radical resistance. Gordon writes about Nasser 65 as a work of “soft nationalism,” of publicly assessing the loss of the dream that was a leader of the people (166). This image of Nasser, notoriously renowned for wholesale incarceration of political opposition across multiple affiliations in Egypt, sounds grim post the 2013 coup d’état. A new image of the hero-that-never-was emerges, one that surpasses the infiltrating celebrity of 2011, proudly representing millions of raised fists across global media, or running for office in a democratic dream to come. Rather, it seems to align more with the image of Ahmed the willful innocent: the young, unsuspecting

Egyptian body, with an unclear origin story as a rebel or as a soldier. Exposed to a systemic precarity that “does not distinguish the educated from the ignorant,” her body is the basic biopolitical unit of state coercion, a possible arrest for the simplest gesture of willfulness.

She resists capitalist contingency with contingency and state criminalization with willful anonymity, inhabiting a cell or a disappearance as the public passes her image around, past the frame of its coercion. Neither rifle nor flute, her image is an autopsy of a missing frame. In its reel, Giorgio Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*, “the guard suddenly seems powerless... , as if struck by the thought that the *Muselmann*’s movement – which does not register any difference between an order and the cold – might perhaps be a silent form of resistance” (104).

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