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Hashish and the 'Carnivalesque' in Egyptian Cinema

Sobhi al-Zobaidi
Simon Fraser University, British Columbia
Email: sobhi@mac.com

Abstract
This paper focuses on the ever-growing popularity of scenes depicting and referring to hashish and marijuana use in Egyptian cinema. It argues that a shift in attitude and in the overall depiction of these substances has emerged in more recent films, those produced in the 1990s and after. It suggests that whereas in older cinema these substances were always associated with social and political ills, almost all negative connotations and associations have disappeared in favor of an acceptable and playful depiction. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the carnivalesque developed by Bakhtin, and the work of other scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin, this paper suggests that the depictions of smoking hashish and marijuana are subversive moments that ultimately aim at escaping rigid social structures and power hierarchies while providing commentaries on repressive social and political realities.

Keywords
cinema, Arab, Egypt, hashish, carnivalesque

Introduction

The musical number in *Bobos* (2009), the latest film starring Adel Imam, is of a typical Egyptian '*sha'bi*'[1] wedding, but what is not so typical about the scene is the fact that there is no belly dancer, no half-naked women, no sex objects for people to gaze at. People's eyes are freed from this fixation and move in every other direction. The camera is revolving as well, traveling freely to encompass everyone. Everyone is happy and dancing to the song, showing two corrupt and greedy millionaires, Mohja (played by Yusra) and Muhsen (played by Adel Imam) attending the wedding of Mohja's servant. The class distinction is clear. Mohja is sitting in the women's section, exchanging glances with Muhsen, who is sitting with the men. Next to him sits an older woman,

[1] *Sha'bi* is a term that refers to working class people.

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dressed in *sha'bi* clothes and drinking beer from a bottle. In a montage of shots, we see this older woman gradually molesting Mohja, who quickly escapes and sits next to Muhsen in the men's section. They both laugh at this 'grotesque' sexual advance. All this happens as if in a video clip, because the dominant element in this entire plane of action is the song, performed by pop singer Imad Ba'ror and his band, which starts out like this: 'I am stoned, I smoked too much, my head is spinning…'

I begin with this scene because it provides lively and articulate descriptions of a number of issues I will discuss below. First, this scene can be seen as the culmination of a growing trend and attitude in Egyptian cinema toward normalizing the use of hashish and marijuana, as I will argue in this paper. Second, this scene uses hashish and marijuana (H&M henceforth) solely to create an atmosphere in which everyone is happy and all hierarchical distinctions are abolished: there are no apparent differences between rich and poor, or between men and women. Sexual desire is freed from its heterosexual abstractions and brought down to earth, somewhat grotesquely, one might add. This playful environment is one in which a person is more susceptible to becoming another, rather than affirming his or her ego. It is a mood of existence that is real and imaginary, temporary, but everlasting. Some may call it utopian and reactionary; others may dismiss it in the name of religion and morality, but there is no denying the fact that H&M smoking in Egyptian cinema is becoming a fixture. Egyptian newspapers reported that audiences in some theaters in Cairo, when watching the film *Yaqubian Building* (2006) applauded twice; once, when in response to a demonstration they shouted '*islamiyya, islamiyya, la sharqiyya wa la gharbiyya*' (Islamic, not eastern or western), and a second time when Adel Imam tells his girlfriend that while Europeans like to drink, Egyptians like to smoke hashish.

In this paper I offer a reading into a number of Egyptian films made in different historical periods, all of which focus on H&M, or use it extensively. I do not intend to sketch an economy behind this phenomenon, or to express concern with the moral implications of these hallucinogens or their effect on health. Instead, I focus on the moods or states of mind that are created through H&M and how they function. I argue here that H&M provide another space in which social, economic and political realities can be re-imagined and re-invented, drawing on ideas and terms developed by a number of thinkers, in particular Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnivalesque' as a temporary condition or situation that allows for the re-imagining and re-ordering of social realities. I find it useful because the H&M settings share many qualities with that of a carnival, such as the shifting of orders, laughter, and indulgence in the sensual and the ambivalent, and, most importantly, in the ways in which the

nonsensical replaces and displaces common sense and logic and when utterance becomes the unit of communication, not the sentence. For Bakhtin, carnival is the 'place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life' (Bakhtin 1984: 123).

Bakhtin's carnivalesque is a mode of existence that subverts fixities of any sort. It is a temporary experience, something that appears only to disappear, an acting out, or a forgery. Yet it is a forgery that is repeated and ritualized; a fictional escape from all abstractions and the indulgence of the body in earthly matters. Hashish and marijuana smoking in Egyptian cinema, I suggest, create a mood that is instantly turned into a mode of existence, which, like a carnival, almost always has laughter, food and sex. The concept of the carnivalesque is illuminating when applied to H&M smoking, as I will show in my discussion of some films in which social differences and hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and in which a re-ordering that is more playful and less authoritarian is invented. Bakhtin's carnival, as Michael Gardiner explains in *Critiques of Everyday Life*, enables us to discover the powers at work in daily life by 'drawing our attention to socio-cultural forces that transgress and disrupt our received common-sensical notions and habitualized viewpoints' (Gardiner 2000: 76). By examining the H&M setting as 'carnivalesque', I hope to uncover some of the powers at work in a situation that is usually overlooked or dismissed in official rhetoric as plain corruption of morals and that creates imaginary spaces that allow people to comment on social and political phenomenon that are normally considered taboo, in the process penetrating rigid social structures in classes, tribes and elites.

In this discussion, I also draw on Felix Guattari's concepts of 'smooth' versus 'striated' spaces, and on Gilles Deleuze's notions of 'power of the false' and 'the crystalline regime of image', as he develops them in *Cinéma 2*, as forms of negotiations outside the realm of reason and linearity. The 'crystalline regime' of the image emerges upon the collapse of the organic sense of space-time. When history fails you, as Walter Benjamin argues in his thesis on history, what do you do? You grasp an image that bridges those disconnected moments, forming an 'angel of history' that travels in space like a nomad connecting the disconnected and discontinued. 'Power of the false' as Deleuze explains, corrupts narrative and narration as it makes connections between 'disconnected places and de-chronologized moments' (Deleuze 1989: 133). 'Power of the false' opposes the regime of the true; where the latter strives to unify, the later cannot be 'separated from an irreducible multiplicity' (Deleuze 1989: 133). In using these concepts, I move beyond the discourses on morality and sobriety

that seem to dominate discussions of the imaginary in much of the Arab-Muslim world, in order to tease out the subversive powers latent in these scenes and settings, those that are usually suppressed and denied under the premise that nothing good can be learned from drugs or drug-related phenomenon. Before I start my discussion of H&M in Egyptian films, I provide a brief historical account of the social history of H&M in Arab cultures.

Hashish and Cannabis in Egypt

> The third kind is called Indian *qinnab* and I didn't see it except in Egypt, it grows in their gardens and they too call it *hashisha*, it can cause severe drunkenness if taken moderately like one or two dirhams, but more than that it can cause craziness, some people lost their minds and became insane or murderers. I saw the poor use it in different ways; some cook it, then dice it and make it like dough and then make it into capsules. Others dry it and then heat it and mix it with sesame and sugar and then put it in their mouths and chew on it for a long time. It gives them great pleasure and it makes them happy.
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> —Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (940–1037), *The Canon of Medicine*.

One of the liveliest descriptions of social life in medieval Egypt was written and performed by Shams al-Din b. Muhammad al-Mawsili, known as Ibn Daniyal. He was born in Mosul in Iraq in 1248 and died in Cairo in 1310, having moved to Egypt in 1262 to escape the Mongol attacks on Baghdad. There, he became an ophthalmic surgeon, a performer of shadow plays and a poet; he remains one of the most neglected poets in Arabic literary history, simply because his writings are deemed obscene. His work has remained largely unknown in the Arab world and beyond until a couple of German scholars, George Jacob and Paul Kahle, took interest in his work in the twentieth century. Paul Kahle's work stands out as the most dedicated and thorough account, though it took him over six decades to publish the *Three Shadow Plays* (1992), the only surviving body of work by Ibn Daniyal. Kahle and his co-authors claim that this edition is distinct because nothing of the original work is left out and no judgment is passed on Ibn Daniyal or his writing.

In a paper commenting on the poem *Tayf al-khayal* [The shadow of the spirit], Li Guo tells of the ways in which the complicated structure of the poem satirizes the prohibition of smoking hashish while providing insights into its centrality to the fabric of the story. This takes place at a meeting of all 'vice patrons'—hashish eaters, prostitutes, beggars and vagabonds, all lamenting their losses when Iblis (Satan) is announced dead following the introduction of the new laws enacted in Egypt under Mamluk rule between 1260 and

1517, which brought with them severe punishment for smoking hashish, drinking wine and general indulgence in vice. In fact, Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (r. 1261–1277) had a man crucified in public for being caught drunk. Ibn Daniyal witnessed the crucifixion and wrote about it in the opening pages of *Tayf al-khayal:*

> before his crucifixion, punishment in our religion was light,
> but when I saw him crucified I told my friend, repent,
> punishment has gone beyond all limits[2]

He then goes on to describe the uprooting and burning of cannabis from public gardens in Cairo:

> Where are his eyes, as the plants are burning
> In flames that frighten even a Zoroastrian
> They uprooted them from the gardens
> When they were still green sprigs.[3] (Ibn Daniyal 1994: 6)

Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi (1364–1442), the well-known Arab historian of Egypt, mentions in his famous work, *al-Mawa'iz wa al-i'tibar*, gardens where cannabis was cultivated. He quotes from a book by Hasan Ibn Muhammad entitled *al-Sawanih al-adabiyya fi mada'ih al-qinabiyya* [Literary compilations in praise of cannabis] in which the great thirteenth-century Sufi, Shaykh Ja'far al-Shirazi al-Haydari, talks about the attraction of the plant to the fakirs. Shaykh Ja'far replied by saying that his master, Shaykh Haydar, discovered the plant one day when he was in the desert and ate from it because it was the only green thing around. When he came back, he was in a good mood, so his disciples went and ate from the plant, and they, too, felt joyous and at ease, and when their master saw them he ordered them to take care of this plant and to tell poor people about its qualities. This story might provide an explanation as to why cannabis was referred to as '*haydar*' in medieval Arabic literature. Although al-Maqrizi's account was generally accepted, Iranian scholar Farhad Daftary[4] provides a compelling account that credits the Ismailis for using hashish long before Shaykh Haydar. The Isma'ilis, according to him, were influenced by mystical elements from India, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism;

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[2] al-Safadi, al-Wafi bi-l-wafiyat. http://www.alwaraq.net/index2.htm?i=280&page=1 in the phrase the poet plays on the word '*hadd*' which means both 'limit' and the performing of punishment including executions, so what he says, in a way is, 'the *hadd* has gone beyond the *hadd*'.

[3] My translation.

[4] Farhad Daftary, *Khrafat al-hashashin wa asatir al-Isma'iliyin*, trans. to Arabic, Sayf al-Din al-Kasir (Beirut: al-Mada, 1996).

it was through their connections with India that cannabis traveled to the Muslim world. Avicenna, cited above, also mentions Indian *qinnab* in his *Canon of Medicine,* supporting Daftary's reading that it came to the Arab world from India.

Decades later, the Egyptian historian 'Abd al-Rahman b. Hasan al-Jabarti (1753–1825) provided descriptions of hashish-eating parties on the Nile involving the French and locals; he wrote *Aja'ib al-athar fi-l-tarajim wa-l-akhbar* (known in English as *al-Jabarti's History of Egypt*). Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1805–1887), a major figure in the nineteenth-century Arabic literary revival, was a Lebanese Maronite who fled to Egypt in 1825 after his brother was tortured to death by Maronite Christians because he converted to the Protestant church; he also talked about hashish and Egypt. Later, in 1857, he traveled to Tunis where he converted to Islam and became known as Shaykh Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq. In his book, *al-Saq ala al-saq fi ma huwa al-faryaq* [One leg crossed over the other], he has the following entry:

> Many of her [Egypt] people see that having too many thoughts in one's head can bring unhappiness and vice versa. A large[5] mind can reach faraway things the way a tall man reaches a higher tree, but those bounties can be the reason for decline, and this length can be the reason for a short life, and they have good proof for that. They say that the mind in the head is like light in a wick, for as long as it is lit the wick will be used up, and it cannot be kept unless the light is turned off. Or like water in a stream, for as long the water is running it is bound to finish unless it is blocked… and so they [Egyptians] came up with a way to stop the running of the mind in the brain for some time by having some hashish, by smoking or eating it, or by looking at it or mentioning its name. When they have it, it does away with their anguish, and it brings them joy. Sadness is gone and the places start to dance and whoever sees them like this even if it was the grand judge, wishes to become one of them. (Shidyaq 1920: 115)

These accounts, as well as others, suggest that H&M had long been associated with sub-cultures, be they libertines, Sufis, Isma'ilis, assassins or poets, as well as men of letters writing against the grain, like Ibn Daniyal.

Before a discussion of hashish in film, I conclude this historical perspective by outlining some facts about the use of hashish in Egypt nowadays. According to a recent study by the Institute of National Planning (INP),[6] Egyptians spent

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[5] In Arabic he uses the word *tawil* and not *kabir*, which would translate to 'big mind'; *tawil* refers to length, not volume. I think that he was thinking vertically, the tall mind meaning the mind that reaches higher states.

[6] The study is reviewed in the Egyptian newspaper *Good News*. See http://www.akhbarsarra.com/news.php?Id=1287 (20 March 2007).

16.3 billion Egyptian pounds (over 3 billion US dollars) on illegal drugs (mostly hashish, marijuana and cocaine) in 2006, compared to 15 billion EP in 2005. This figure is three times higher than Egyptian exports and equal to 4 percent of the gross national product. The review points to another report that predicts that spending on drugs will reach 22.6 billion EP in 2012. The INP report points out that 16 percent of all Egyptians use drugs (over 11 million given the total population of over 70 million). According to the same report, during the last ten years, Egypt spent 178 billion EP on drug rehabilitation and prevention. When Egypt is compared with with other Arab countries, the report says that Egypt has the highest number of drug related arrests and prosecutions. In 2002, Egyptian police confiscated some 59,283 kilograms of *banjo* (marijuana), which, by world standards, means that the confiscated amounts total 10 percent of the hashish in circulation. Prices, too, indicate an increase in the demand; in 1993 a kilogram of hashish was worth 12,000 EP; in 1994 this figure was 20,000; and in 2002 it was 50,000 EP. In 2005, the price of a kilogram of *banjo* was 2,000 EP, rising from 850 EP for the same amount in 1998. Of all drugs consumed in Egypt in 2001, 62.6 percent was *banjo* (marijuana), 34 percent was hashish, and other drugs totalled only 3.4 percent.

Hashish in Cinema

An important shift can be noted in the portrayal of H&M consumption in Egyptian films from the 1990s onward. In fact, almost all negative connotations of these hallucinogens disappear in favor of a more socially accepted, playful, funny and inspirational image of the herb. Almost all new comedy films rely, to some extent, on H&M as a vehicle for laughter, as in the newer comedies starring Adel Imam such as *al-Safara fi-l-amara* [The embassy is in the building] (2006) and *Murjan Ahmad Murjan* (2007), *Yaqubian Building* (2006) and *Bobos* (2009). In *Lailat suqout Baghdad* [The night Baghdad fell] (2006), director Muhammad Amin reconciles religion with H&M and constructs a fantastical hero whose creativity is totally constructed in hallucinatory space infused by the hallucinogen. H&M are also present in social dramas such as *al-Kharij 'an al-qanun* [The outlaw] (2007), *al-Jazira* [The island] (2007), *al-Safara fi-l-amara*, *Awqat faragh* [Spare time] (2006), *Weeja* (2006) and *Khalli al-dimagh sahi* [Keep your mind sober] (2005). The phenomenon has become so widespread that it has prompted televised debates, a number of lawsuits and numerous articles in newspapers in Egypt and other Arab

countries.[7] Hussein Amin and Hanazada Fikri (2002) note that parents protested to the local authorities against film advertising billboards depicting youngsters in the streets of Cairo enjoying drugs.

In the earlier Egyptian cinema of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, H&M use was always associated with villains and crime, such as in *al-Batniya* (1980) and *al-'Ar* [The disgrace] (1982); as being behind the demise of the middle class, as in *Tharthara 'ala al-Nil* [Chitchat on the Nile] (1971), or for being the plague among the poor, as in *al-Kayf* (1985). In all these films, and despite all the pleasure and humor H&M may induce, consumption was almost always portrayed as the reason behind social ills. In addition, there was a sense that the pleasures induced by H&M are guilty pleasures, like having sex outside of marriage, or pleasures that are redeemed through the punishment of one or more of those who are involved in such practices. In the films of the new millennia, the smoking of H&M is portrayed with no guilt, no gangs or police squads. H&M consumption is no longer only for the poor, who just want to forget their misery, but also for the 'cool' middle class, as in the films *Weeja, Awqat faragh*, *al-Safara fi-l-amara, Lailat suqout Baghdad, al-Kharij 'an al-qanun,* a*l-Jazira* and *Ehki ya Shahrazad* [Speak Shahrazad] (2009), to mention only a few. In new Egyptian cinema, known in Arabic as *'cinema al-shabab'* [cinema of the youth], H&M consumption is seen as liberating and as subverting inhibitions. In this new cinema, H&M are smoked not in underground dens, but in living rooms, as in caption 1 from the film *al-Safara fi-l-amara,* where engineer Sharif Khayri (played by Adel Imam) returns to Cairo after twenty-five years working in Dubai, only to find his middle-class friends exactly as he left them, in the living room, gathered around a water pipe smoking hashish. In *Yaqubian Building,* father and son smoke together, and in *Ehki ya Shahrazad,* a couple smoke together before making love.

The film *Khalli al-dimagh sahi* opens with a scene of a genie in outer space who spots a cloud of smoke coming from the earth, sniffs it, immediately feels happy and descends toward the source of the smoke, only to land in Cairo, in the living room of a house where four men have gathered to smoke hashish. They crack jokes and go into hysterical bouts of laughter while talking about the things they wish for. The genie grants the men their wishes: The first wish is for a big lump of hashish for all of them; the second is for a roast leg of lamb;

[7] See, for example, *al-Bayan*, The Return of Drugs Phenomenon to Cinema (9 November 2008); *al-Ahram Weekly*, Leisure for Leisure (22–28 June 2006); *al-Ahram Weekly*, A Question of Habit (23–29 October 2008) and discussions on http://www.hwazn.com/vb/showthread.php?t=107696, http://www.6rp.net/post/76 and http://blogs.albawaba.com/theoutsidersomali/65938/2008/08/29/96173, all accessed 14 November 2008.

the third is for two girls to satisfy one of the men's sexual fantasies; the fourth is cash for the man who asks for 50,000 dollars and the final wish is to arrange the marriage of the lead character Kamel to the daughter of the butcher shop owner. As the four men leave the room with their women and their cash, the genie tells us: 'I love this country Egypt'. The film then shows us the reality of these men's miserable lives, and ends with the genie leaving the men and flying away to outer space, while shouting at everyone, 'wake up people, wake up'.

One immediate effect of introducing H&M in these films is that it instantly brings the film into the realm of the satirical and the comical. Whenever and wherever there is H&M smoking in a film, there is the joking and laughter. Henri Bergson says laughter must have social significance, as it always occurs in a group and stands in need of an echo. Through laughter, we are 'able to break away from logic, yet continue to string ideas together' (Bergson 1911: 82). For Bakhtin, carnivalistic laughter is directed toward 'a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders' (Bakhtin and Emerson 1984: 127). Laughter marks one's transfer or travel from the 'monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict, hierarchical order full of terror, dogmatism…' to the spirit of the carnival that is 'free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred… and obscenities' (Bakhtin and Emerson, 1984: 129–130). These two worlds, or lives, are legitimate, but separated by 'strict temporal boundaries'. The hashish setting in a film extends temporal boundaries, while the characters seem to exist in both temporal orders at the same time. In all these films we glimpse the serious and gloomy world of law and order, on one hand, and the location from where this seriousness is subverted, on the other.

Hashish as Guilty Pleasure

Tharthara 'ala al-Nil, written by Naguib Mahfouz in 1966, less than a year before the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, has a prophetic nature, as Samia Mehrez writes in *al-Ahram Weekly*.[8] The satirical political hallucinations in the film brought Mahfouz into direct confrontation with the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1971, the book was made into a film by Hussein Kamal. Here, an actor, a writer, a newspaper critic and a government employee all meet to get high in a houseboat owned by the protagonist Rajab al-Kadi

[8] Samia Mehrez, No More Chitchat on the Nile, *al-Ahram Weekly*, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/564/2sc2.htm December 2001, accessed 23 March 2007.

(played by Ahmad Ramzi). Women join to get high and indulge in sexual promiscuity rarely seen on the Egyptian screen before. When Anis (played by Imad Hamdi), the Ministry of Health employee, first meets the people in the boathouse, they immediately abolish all references to their actual identities and invent new rules for each of them in their fictional kingdom. After a few puffs, they run out of hashish, and when Anis presents them with his own big lump of hashish, they go wild and appoint him as '*Wazir al-kayf*' [minister of pleasure or hashish]. This acted ritual is similar to what Bakhtin calls the 'primary carnivalistic act' which expresses the 'creative power' for the renewal of social relation, a joyful relativity of all structures and orders'. In the carnival, all hierarchies and all forms of 'terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette' are suspended (Bakhtin and Emerson,1984: 123).

In the film, we see Rajab in an absurd scene where the set has a big wash basin (*tusht* in colloquial Arabic), encircled by a group of women dancers. Rajab is dressed as a drag queen, but there is nothing in the dance or in the whole scene that calls for such reversal of rules. Instead, the scene is made to invite humor and mock the realities of the outside world and the trashy movies Rajab makes. This is the kind of triviality that dominates real life outside the boathouse: a feminized man in Arab culture signifies weakness and passivity, impotence and the loss of pride and dignity. Every time we step outside the boathouse, we do so only to discover the senselessness and hypocrisy of the world outside. In the opening scenes, for example, we see Anis going to work and we hear his monologue commenting on the absurdities he encounters everywhere. At work he is scorned for not producing a report that challenges allegations by newspapers regarding shortages in medicine. Anis writes the report, but only the first line is legible because the pen runs out of ink, but Anis continues to write. He then hands in the much-needed report to his supervisor who fires him on the spot. Back on the street, Anis comments on the uselessness of those reports and how they are used as cover-ups. When the group ventures out of the houseboat to go on a road trip, they first encounter a group of peasant women praying by a statue of the Pharaoh for a young woman to get pregnant with a boy. Madame Susu tells the peasant woman to see a doctor instead, but they go into a museum where a statue of Ramses is displayed and the group performs a sensual orgy, ranging from total adoration to complete ridicule.

One of the men asks that they smoke hashish in honor of the great pharaonic grandfather Ramses, and the group exchanges comments about this: '*He* doesn't need it, he is stoned already, why do you think he's been sleeping for three thousand years?' 'That must be some serious stuff he smoked'. 'I think history is stoned too'. 'If history was not stoned it wouldn't let people like us

do this to him'. They leave the museum, and on the way back they run over and kill the same peasant girl who was praying to get pregnant. They convince each other that it was her fate. In another scene outside the boathouse, we see 'Ali, the critic, dictating a profound review of the trashy film starring his friend Rajab. We also see Madame Susu going home only to lie to her husband, whom she accuses of cheating on her with their servant. The houseboat, in contrast, appears to be the only transparent place where everything happens in front of everyone else: there are no lies or deceits, no hierarchies or privileges; it is a floating utopia. The only place, however, that stands starkly different to reality outside is the war zone. Anis joins a group of journalists in a trip to the war zone; the scene of destruction by Israel awakens him. The film ends with Anis calling on everyone to stop taking hashish and to wake up. We see him walking down the streets shouting almost hypnotically: 'People, you must wake up'. The war zone causes an instant transformation from total desire to strong rejection of hashish—also a quality of the carnivalesque, as Bakhtin writes,

> The passing from excessive praise to excessive invective is characteristic, and the change from one to the other is perfectly legitimate. Praise and abuse are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin. The praise, as we have said, is ironic and ambivalent. It is on the brink of abuse; the one leads to the other, and it is impossible to draw the line between them. Though divided in form, they belong to same body, or to the two bodies in one, which abuses while praising and praises while abusing (Bakhtin 1984a: 165).

In the final scene, Anis returns from the war zone and confronts his friends at the houseboat and demands that they take responsibility for killing the peasant girl. The group dismisses him and throws him out of the houseboat. Outside, he walks around shouting: 'The peasant girl is dead and we have to surrender', 'people, wake up, we have to stop smoking hashish', 'we have to wake up, wake up'. Anis clearly is not only addressing the people in the houseboat, but others on the streets; in fact, he calls for people to wake up from their 'hashish-induced hallucinations', and respond to the social and economic ills. This contrasts with the opening scene of the film, when Anis is scolded by the general director of the ministry for handing in a blank report and told that he needs to distinguish between 'the *ghurza*' (joint) and his government job. Perhaps this statement is telling of the whole film, that the criticism of hashish smoking is only a masqueraded criticism for a dysfunctional government. But paradoxically, it is only through a hashish setting that such criticism and commentary are made possible.

In *al-Batniya* (1980) by Hussam al-Din Mustafa, the story is told from the perspective of Warda, the femme fatale gypsy woman (played by Nadia

al-Jundi) who owns a *ghurza* and falls victim to a drug lord. She continually entertains her hashish-smoking customers with jokes and song and dance, yet at the same time she curses hashish or the 'black poison', as she calls it. In fact, although the film is about the evils of drug traffickers, it never mixes those who smoke hashish with those who sell it. The film is set in two spaces: the warm, smoky, hazy, erotic, funny space of the *ghurza*, and other spaces that appear threatening, serious and gloomy. The film constantly switches back and forth between the two worlds. None of the smokers in Warda's *ghurza* is implicated or take part in any of the evil doings of the dealers and their cover-ups. In fact, Bura'i (played by Mahmoud Yasin), the loyal right hand for al-Batniya's godfather al-Aqqad, is the only one of the traffickers that we see smoking hashish while dancing and flirting with Warda. *Al-Batniya* was one of the most successful films in the history of Egyptian cinema, and the first film to directly address the drug problem in Egypt. Its title is the name of one of Cairo's most notorious neighborhoods, al-Batniya, which used to be known as a haven for drug traffickers, criminals and thieves. Yet, in its dramatic treatment, the film maintains a clear distinction between hashish itself and those who trade in it and use it. It is not what hashish does to the body or mind that is bad or evil, but the drug lords who seek the maximum profit from the trade that are evil. The hashish setting itself remains playful and innocent, giving temporary shelter to people from the cruelty of the outside world.

Al-Kayf[9] (1985), directed by Ali 'Abd al-Khaliq, is another film that focuses mainly on hashish, and, like *al-Batniya,* seeks to criminalize drug traffickers. However, it pays more attention to the inner world of smokers and their 'carnivalesque' state of mind. Jamal (played by Mahmoud 'Abd al-'Aziz), a street-smart bachelor hashish smoker, and a failed musician, gets into trouble one day, and his brother, Doctor Salah (played by Yahya al-Fakhrani), bails him out of jail. Salah tries to talk Jamal out of his hashish habit, but Jamal is too immersed in it. Salah is convinced that Jamal's fascination with hashish is only an illusion. To prove that, he manufactures a piece of hashish in his own lab, one that does not contain any of the 'poison' found in hashish, as he puts it. He passes the manufactured piece to his brother without telling him of the change. Then we see Jamal in his living room with a group of men smoking hashish and they like it. Salah makes a point to his brother, that his attachment to hashish is only an illusion—proven by the fact that they all enjoyed and got high on fake hashish. Jamal seizes the opportunity and convinces his

[9] The Arabic word *kayf* refers generally to being in good mood. It is also used as a name for hashish.

brother to manufacture more and more, which they sell to a major drug lord and the two brothers become rich. When Salah starts smoking, we see him in a funeral, paying respects to a friend whose father had just passed away. Right there in the grim and serious atmosphere of a funeral, Salah bursts into uncontrolled laughter, resulting in a bizarre scene when the host comes and asks him to leave. Suddenly everyone in the serious crowd bursts out laughing, as if they were all high, as if they were in a *ghurza* and not in a grieving house, a 'carnivalesque moment par excellence', when a moment of sobriety and rigidity is subverted into comical laughter, a re-ordering, or a breaking of strict social codes and the transformation of gloomy seriousness into playful laughter.

A brilliant way through which the carnivalesque is constructed in *al-Kayf* is through the prosaic and the nonsensical, where words are utterances whose value is not in the meaning (which are, sometimes, nonsensical), but in the effect they produce, in the music, the rhythmic flow and the images they invoke. Jamal uses strange and meaningless words or sounds to communicate his state of mind, unlike his educated brother, who is always articulate, polite and coherent. We continually hear Salah commenting on the lowly and incomprehensible way Jamal speaks. Jamal's singing and his choice of lyrics belongs to the grotesque and the nonsensical as well, not the poetic or the logical. His most famous song in the film is about 'buttocks' and his other songs consist mostly of incomprehensible words. In his reading of the prosaic, Gardiner writes, 'Speech as Oliver Sacks puts it, does *not* consist of words alone, [but] consists of *utterances*—an uttering-forth of one's whole meaning with one's whole being'[10] (Gardiner 2000: 58). Utterances are *impulses*, as the editor of Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* writes, a sensual weaving, a movement, or, as Deleuze writes, a 'trampling, a to-and-fro' (Deleuze 1989: 128). In the film, Salah would start to 'utter' like Jamal, but Salah was not imitating Jamal or just performing; he was living the moment by resisting it. In contrast, his serious wife, who is constantly reminding him that he cannot come up with money to pay for his son's school, exemplifies order and neatness. Salah's prosaic stance completes his shutdown from reality and his slippage into another mode of existence, since it is mostly through language that we sustain our relation with people around us in a coherent, sensible and understandable way.

In the other film, *al-'Ar* (1982), the protagonist is Hajj 'Abd al-Tawab, a rich merchant and an honest man who fears God and refuses to take interest from the bank because Islam forbids it. In the opening scene he is ordering his

[10] Emphasis in original.

employee to give a woman the merchandise she wanted for the price she can afford, although the prices have gone up. The filmmaker makes every effort to show us Hajj 'Abd al-Tawab as a good husband and father. But soon enough we discover that he deals in H&M. He dies in a car accident on his way back from Alexandria, after paying a large amount of cash for a shipment of Hashish. His family finds out about the shocking news from Kamal, the son who was assisting his father in his shady business. The other sons, a physician and an attorney general, are tormented by this fact. However, in order for them to keep their financial security, they must assist Kamal in carrying out the last drug deal in which their father had just invested most of his cash.

The ensuing struggle is between, on the one hand, a fusion of religious and social codes that moralize against drug use and, on the other hand, one's personal need for financial gains and comfort. A number of messages can be read in this film, the most obvious of which is not to trust appearances. However, the film recycles arguments and viewpoints that justify the use of H&M. The rejection of, and struggle against, H&M in the film are articulated through the two educated sons, the physician and the attorney general. These two characters represent a good deal of the moral force in society, yet they both end up involved and dealing in the very matter they moralize against. Kamal, the younger son who managed his father's drug business from the beginning comes across as an honest person. He is the only one in the film that we see smoking hashish. He smokes it when he goes to see his girlfriend, where we see him as funny, charming and caring. The father, too, seems to be at peace and knows what he is doing. He is dedicated to God and his life is structured by his religious duties. For a man like this to be dealing in H&M, he must be convinced that it was not against his religious beliefs and practices.

In the films I discussed so far, one finds a common ambivalence toward hashish. It is both desired and condemned. The fact that there is no clear and specific reference to the prohibition of drugs in the Qur'an, such as there is for alcohol, has caused confusion about its status and use. Egypt has stringent laws against the use of drugs, yet also has the highest population of drug users and the most articulate drug culture in the Arab world. In these films, as in the stories of Naguib Mahfouz, hashish presents a problem, not a solution. There is never a pronounced attraction and there is always a negative consequence related to it. In the stories of Mahfouz, hashish is a labyrinth—it takes people into worlds and spaces that are otherwise inaccessible to them, though these worlds might be bad for them. H&M seems to reflect guilty pleasures, like sex outside marriage, but these perceptions have changed in the Egyptian cinema of the last two decades.

In the new cinema or '*cinema al-shabab*' (youth cinema) or 'mall cinema', as some Egyptian critics would like to call it[11] there is no ambivalence about hashish, and no negative aspects to it. On the contrary, its use appears as cool, inspirational and empowering. In the 2005 hit political comedy starring Adel Imam, *al-Safara fi-l-amara* [The embassy is in the building], a lawyer, a doctor and a journalist carry their hashish with them in their briefcases. We never see them without their *'gosah'* (water-pipe), with which they smoke H&M. When their friend Sharif Khayri (Adel Imam) returns from the Gulf after twenty-five years, he finds his friends doing the same old thing, smoking. When the lawyer offers his friends a lump of hashish, he explains to them that he got it as a gift from the dealer he had just defended in court.

The change in attitude can also be found in the new '*sha'bi'* (folk) music, where the character of the '*mastool*' (one who is high or stoned) lends itself to many situations, from the lowly to the profound. In a review of the new '*sha'bi*' music, Muhammad al-Assyouti[12] mentions a very telling incident. Referring to Mahmoud 'Abd al-'Aziz, the lead actor in *al-Kayf* (1980) who played Jamal, the failed singer and musician whose songs in the film represented the epitome of bad taste, al-Assyouti writes, 'He became the very *sha'bi* character he had moralized against fifteen years before'. The change in the image of the good hashish smokers and dealers has not gone unnoticed. In the last few years there have been a number of lawsuits against the screening of films such as *al-Kharij 'an al-qanun* (2007), *al-Jazira* (2007) and *Lailat suqout Baghdad* (2005), on the grounds that these films demoralize society.

Lailat suqout Baghdad is presented as a comedy, a genre that has dominated box office returns in Egypt for the last two decades, but it is also one of the first Arab films to reflect on a matter as serious as that of the American invasion of Iraq and subsequent reactions in the Arab world. For its dramatic treatment, writer and director Muhammad Amin weaves his comical effects from serious discussions of sex, war, fear, masculinity, patriotism and nationalism. It is the seriousness of these matters and issues contrasted with the satirical and comical effects produced by hashish smoking that make this film a good sample to study. The film tells the story of a school principal who decides that Egypt should build defensive weapons to avoid the humiliation of what happened in Baghdad and so he recruits a former bright student, Tarek, to do the job.

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[11] See, for example, Tarek Ali, Films for Fast Food, *al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 439, 22 July 1999.

[12] Muhammad al-Assyouti, Man on the Street, *al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 520, 8 February 2001, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/520/sc1.htm.

The student is found in a *ghurza* smoking hashish and wasting away. The principal brings him to his home and offers him all he needs in order to invent the system. In the meantime, the principal and others watch the news from Baghdad as America threatens Syria and Iran. Tarek begins work on his new invention but he cannot concentrate; he tells the principal that he needs marijuana. The principal agrees and he personally goes to fetch him some from a dealer that Tarek knows. On his way there, the principal encounters three of his students going for the same thing, so he explains to them that he is doing it for the sake of national security. We see Tarek, excited, looking through the window; the principal is still outside walking, and the *muezzin* calls to the prayer; upon hearing him, the principal stops, hesitates for a moment, then walks toward a trash can and takes out the marijuana to throw it out. Tarek yells at the principal from the window, begging him not to throw it out — he shouts at the principal, 'Why? Remember, new thinking, Machiavelli?'

The principal puts the marijuana back in the basket and goes home. This moment is significant in the film because it hints at a clarification or resolution to the religious ambiguity about hashish. What it says, or pretends to be saying, is that there is no contradiction between prayer (religion) and hashish.

Next we see Tarek smoking with much joy and elation; he offers some to the principal to smoke, but of course the latter refuses. They then sit in front of a computer, where Tarek explains his theory to the principal. Tarek is smoking constantly, in some shots we see a close up of the computer screen with the joint between his fingers pointing, and after he explains his program, the principal is so impressed that he takes the joint from Tarek, and smokes it. This is a major shift in the overall imaging of the hashish setting, as it does not take place in the hazy, smoky, alluring, underground joints. Here is a school principal with his brilliant student, a computer and a plan to create a complicated weapons system to resist American military power and aggression. Whereas in previous films a group of men would get together, smoke hashish, crack jokes and laugh, in this film they get together and smoke hashish in order to undertake a serious matter.

But Tarek does not proceed and we learn that he is obsessed with sex. He keeps porn magazines and he starts having sexual fantasies involving US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (played by a lookalike belly dancer). The principal decides to solve the problem by marrying him to his own daughter Salma (played by Basma), the beautiful young activist who decides to marry Tarek as a sacrifice for the sake of her country. They get married, but Tarek cannot consummate the marriage. We learn that he and all other men in the film are impotent, until one night Salma masquerades as a US marine and Tarek is able to have sex with her and consummate his marriage. In a montage

sequence, we see the principal and other male characters in the film sleeping with their wives, who are dressed like US marines.

Lailat suqout Baghdad is not a film that advocates hashish, as some critics and conservatives pointed out. In fact, the film is not about hashish or drugs, but about national fantasies of power and how to overcome impotence and fear. Through hashish, people are transported to a different temporal order where such fantasies can be pursued and achieved. The carnival world that is celebrated in this film is not in Egypt, but one that exists between Egypt and the United States. The film shifts the object of hashish subversion from Egypt and morality to global imperialism, reflecting a wide range of pressing issues in the lives of Egyptians and other Arabs. Despite moral and health issues raised against hashish in Egypt and other Arab-Muslim societies, it remains important to treat the phenomenon of hashish in film and literature as a reality, not of the real world, but a reality of the virtual world, where our desires and fantasies are always at play. I have suggested earlier that hashish gives people some power even if only to overcome noise with noise, or, as Jamal says in *al-Kayf*, even if it were 'power of the false', it remains power that brings about tension and resistance in highly structured spaces, dominated by uncompromising regimes of power, tyrannical rulers and police states.

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