



Beyond the Voice of Egypt: Reclaiming Women's Histories and Female Authorship in Shirin Neshat's *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017)

Marija Antic
Monash University

Abstract

By drawing on postcolonial feminist discourse and Hamid Naficy's (2001) notion of 'accented' cinema, in particular his approach of combining the interstitial position of exilic and diasporic filmmakers with concepts of authorship and genre, this paper explores the intersection between biographical film, gendered rewriting of history, and self-narrative as a site of resistance to nationalist and patriarchal ideologies in Shirin Neshat's *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017). I argue that Neshat's authorial style and her position as an exilic artist inflect the biographical film in its traditional form, showcasing an innovative perspective on the genre, restructuring it to reveal the constructedness of not only a cinematic process, but also of history and historical figures. Blending the stories of a present-day Iranian woman filmmaker and the professional life of the legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum, Neshat displaces the biopic from its Western-centric roots by explicitly opening it up to a discourse of contemporary gender politics in the Middle East. In doing so, she exposes the social forces that shape the production of the biopic in relation to the notion of female authorship in the context of the transcultural circuits and feminist reclaiming of Oum Kulthum's international stardom.

Keywords: 'accented' cinema, biopic, female artist, authorial self-inscription, rewriting history

Resumen

Basándose en el discurso feminista post-colonial y la noción de ‘*accented* cinema’ de Hamid Naficy (2001), en particular su enfoque que combina la posición intersticial de cineastas exiliados y diaspóricos con conceptos de autoría y género, este artículo explora la intersección entre el cine biográfico de ficción, la reescritura de la historia según el género, y la auto-narrativa como un lugar de resistencia a las ideologías nacionalistas y patriarcales en *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017) de Shirin Neshat. Sostengo que el estilo autoral de Neshat y su posición como artista exiliada modifican la noción tradicional de cine biográfico de ficción, mostrando una perspectiva innovadora sobre el género, reestructurándolo para revelar la construcción no sólo de un proceso cinematográfico, sino también de la historia y personajes históricos. Combinando las historias de la cineasta Iraní y la vida profesional de la legendaria cantante Egipcia Oum Kulthum, Neshat desplaza la producción biográfica de sus raíces occidentales al abrirla explícitamente a un discurso de la política de género contemporánea en el Medio Oriente. Al hacer esto, expone las fuerzas sociales que dan forma a la producción del cine biográfico en relación con la noción de autoría femenina en los circuitos transculturales y la reivindicación feminista del estrellato internacional de Oum Kulthum.

Palabras claves: ‘*accenting*’ biopic, artista femenina, autoinscripción, reescritura de la historia.

Apstrakt

Oslanjajući se na postkolonijalni feministički diskurs i pojam ‘*accented*’ filma Hamida Nafisija (2001), posebno njegov pristup koji kombinuje međuprostornu poziciju filmskih stvaralaca u egzilu i dijaspori sa konceptima autorstva i žanra, ovaj članak istražuje secište između biografske filmske fikcije, rodnog prekrajanja istorije i samonarrativa kao mesta otpora nacionalističkim i patrijarhalnim ideologijama u filmu Širin Nešat *U potrazi za Um Kultum* (2017). Tvrdim da Nešatin autorski stil i njen položaj umetnice u egzilu modifikuju tradicionalni pojam biografskog filma, pokazujući inovativnu perspektivu žanra, restrukturirajući ga kako bi otkrili konstrukciju ne samo kinematografskog procesa, već i istorije i istorijskih ličnosti. Kombinujući priče o iranskoj rediteljki i o profesionalnom životu legendarne egipatske pevačice Um Kultum, Nešat istiskuje biografski film iz njegovih zapadnih korena izričito otvarajući diskurs savremene rodne politike na Bliskom Istoku. Time razotkriva društvene snage koje oblikuju biografsku filmsku produkciju u odnosu na

pojam ženskog autorstva u međukulturnim krugovima i feminističke pretenzije na međunarodnu slavu Um Kultum.

Ključne reči: ‘accenting’ biografski film, umetnica, autorska inskripcija, prekranje istorije.

Known as the ‘star of the East’ and ‘Maria Callas of the Orient’, even ‘Egypt’s fourth pyramid’, Oum Kulthum is considered one of the greatest musicians in the Arab world, holding a paramount cultural significance in the Middle East. Born in 1904 in a small village in the Nile Delta, she moved to Cairo in the 1920s to pursue a singing career. Her popularity increased in the 1930s and 1940s due to her use of the burgeoning mass media: commercial recordings, radio, and film. She sang a wide repertoire of classical and popular Egyptian music, and her public concerts on the first Thursday evening of every month were broadcast live, which cemented her position as a beloved and authentic (*asil*) Egyptian artist.¹ Moreover, she attained an impressive prominence in Egypt’s socio-cultural and political life, forging connections with powerful national leaders such as King Farouk and Abdel Nasser. However, it was her musical style, the evocative power and emotional impact of her voice that generated *tarab*, ‘the state of enchantment wherein her listener is completely engaged with a performance’² that enabled her to sustain popularity over a long period. The length of her performances, which echoed Arab singing traditions, and the worldly beauty of the poems she sang, evoking a sense of lost love and longing, produced entranced audiences who lost sense of time and place, while Oum Kulthum preserved her emphatically dignified presence on stage.³ Even nowadays, forty-five years after her funeral in 1975 that was attended by close to four million people, her monumental contralto voice can be heard coming from cafes, teahouses, radios and taxis all over the Muslim world.⁴ *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017), by Iranian American visual artist turned filmmaker Shirin Neshat and her partner and long-time artistic collaborator Shoja Azari, pays homage to the singer by reviving her memory in the artistic, political, and (trans)national cultural arena, while simultaneously reflecting Neshat’s own investment in the construction of strong female characters and establishing a gendered mode of address in the film.

Yet *Looking for Oum Kulthum* does not follow an established model of biographical film. Rather, using the device of a ‘film within a film’, *Looking for Oum Kulthum* centres on the plight of fictional Iranian exilic female director Mitra Vaziri (Neda Rahmanian), and the challenges that she encounters in her attempt to make a film about Oum Kulthum. As Belén Vidal notes, the biopics are often regarded as formulaic, old-fashioned narratives that constrain filmmakers’ creative vision.⁵ This largely stems

from expectations regarding the creation of verisimilitude in the representation of well-known public figures and historical periods that biopics conventionally strive to achieve. By contrast, Neshat’s and Azari’s film belongs to the cycle of contemporary biographical films, such as *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) and *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006), which revise the tropes of the classical biopic, challenging the narrative structure which facilitates spectatorial identification with the biographical subject, as well as the imperative of accurate representation of historical events and public personalities, to convey a sense of truth about real life stories.

The film opens with Mitra following the elderly Oum Kulthum (Najia Skali), who is elegantly dressed in a green silk dress, walking through the hallways of a large mysterious house. Steadicam shots slowly track down the hallway in dim lighting, evoking a dreamlike atmosphere that conveys a sense of mystery surrounding the elusive figure of the Egyptian singer. The images of staircases and multiple rooms and doors in this sequence belong to the labyrinth-like *mise-en-scène* that can also be seen as symbolising the filmmaker’s research on Oum Kulthum’s life, art, and career path. When the older Oum Kulthum enters one of the rooms, she meets her younger self, who appears as an angel-like girl (Nour Gmar) holding a doll with natural light falling on her. Through a secret passage behind the window curtains, the young girl takes Mitra back in time to the village of her childhood in rural Egypt in the early twentieth century to see her first singing performance, which shows her outstanding singing talent. Due to the prohibition against women singing in public at the time, she can only sing on stage as a boy, accompanied by her father and brother. Through Mitra’s eyes, we see Oum Kulthum’s mother dressing her as a boy and her father throwing away her doll, before they leave for her performance. This transition into what seems to be Mitra’s entry into Oum Kulthum’s personal memory is reflected in the change in visual language, which shifts from a deep, saturated palette to a washed-out colour scheme depicting the past: a contrast to the isolated, observing figure of Mitra, the modern artist fully dressed in black.

As the opening sequence shows Mitra’s imaginary recreation of Oum Kulthum’s early life, we come to realise that the film does not provide biographical details of the Egyptian singer using the genre conventions of canonical biopics. Instead, it is the subjective perspective of Mitra, an Iranian female filmmaker in exile, largely modelled on Neshat herself, that guides us into the complex world of Oum Kulthum’s professional life, which is contextualised within the tumultuous history of twentieth-century Egypt.

Set in the present day, *Looking for Oum Kulthum* follows Mitra, showing her challenges in producing a biopic on Oum Kulthum called *Voice of Egypt*, which closely align with Neshat’s own concerns as a female, non-Arabic artist embarking on a project that aims to turn the life of the iconic Egyptian singer into a film subject. Instead of striving to provide a historically accurate portrait of Oum Kulthum, Neshat resorts to the postmodernist devices of authorial self-inscription and the story within a story, thus foregrounding the parallelisms between the filmmaker, the actresses playing Oum Kulthum and the actual singer. In this way, by exposing the processes of cinematic reconstruction of historical periods and merging the real historical personalities with contemporary fictional characters, Neshat rewrites the official national narratives surrounding Oum Kulthum’s legacy. In the process, she reframes some of the issues central to the biopic genre in relation to the representation of history, thus aligning the past with the viewing expectations of modern-day cosmopolitan feminist audiences.

By drawing on postcolonial feminist discourse and Hamid Naficy’s (2001) notion of ‘accented’ cinema, in particular his approach that combines the interstitial position of exilic and diasporic filmmakers with concepts of authorship and genre, this paper argues that the film’s self-reflexivity closely relates to the feminist project at the centre of the film. *Looking for Oum Kulthum* reviews recent Egyptian history through a postcolonial feminist lens and interrogates the historical and contemporary position of the female artist in a conservative, male-dominated society. I argue that Neshat’s and Azari’s authorial style and Neshat’s position as an exilic artist inflect the traditional notion of biographical film, restructuring it to reveal the constructedness of not only a cinematic process, but also of history and historical figures. Blending the stories of the present-day Iranian woman filmmaker and the professional life of legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum, Neshat displaces the biopic genre from its predominantly Western-centric roots by explicitly opening it up to a discourse of contemporary gender politics in the Middle East.⁶ In doing so, she exposes the socio-cultural forces that shape the production of the biopic in relation to the notion of female authorship in the context of the transcultural circuits and feminist reclaiming of Oum Kulthum’s international stardom.

Moreover, Neshat contributes to the feminist discourses which foreground women’s perspectives of the changing socio-political realities of the Middle Eastern region and draw attention to women’s issues, in particular their demands for full participation in political life, economic equality, and creative autonomy. Yet, the rise of feminist consciousness and a focus on Middle Eastern women’s narratives draws on the long tradition of women’s life-writing, starting in the late nineteenth century,

when journals and biographies of famous women were first published in Egypt.⁷ More recently, such attempts to recover female voices and disrupt gender and cultural stereotypes are reflected in the surge of women’s biographies such as *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (1996) by Cynthia Nelson and *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (1997) by Virginia Danielson, but also women’s memoirs, from Huda Sha’arawi’s *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879-1924* (1993) to Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Unlike women’s (auto)biographical writing, however, the biopic film in the Middle East has remained predominantly androcentric. The exceptions are mostly biographical documentaries, among which notable examples are *Umm Kulthum, A Voice Like Egypt* (Michal Goldman, 1996), *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (Rania Stephan, 2011), *He Named Me Malala* (Davis Guggenheim, 2015), and *May Ziade: The Life of an Arab Feminist Writer* (Mohsen Abd El-Ghani, 2018).

In what follows, I will first explore the context of *Looking for Oum Kulthum’s* inception and reception, and the film’s own self-reflexive comment on its distinctive position within transnational cinema in relation to Oum Kulthum’s internationally celebrated status and Neshat’s cross-cultural artistic background. Secondly, I will interrogate the role of the film’s experimental form and the circumstances surrounding its production that propelled Neshat to deviate from the traditional biopic. The third section centres on the postcolonial feminist project of revising Egyptian history from a gendered perspective, while the final section demonstrates how the film’s focus on female authorship and Neshat’s semi-autobiographical self-inscription as an exilic female filmmaker work to articulate the intensely personal nature of the film, bringing together the struggles and concerns of historical and contemporary women artists.

Context of production and reception

Neshat recalls that the idea to make a film about Oum Kulthum came to her following a conversation with the Iranian documentary filmmaker Bahman Giarostami (the son of a world-renowned Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami), whom she met at the 2010 Amsterdam festival while listening to Oum Kulthum’s music.⁸ It is clear how Oum Kulthum’s trajectory as a historical figure, whose rejection of traditional gender roles did not prevent her from reaching the high levels of popularity that transcended her country of origin, aligns with the transcultural dimension of Neshat’s creative output and her focus on contested sites of female subjectivity and women’s resistance under

Islamic rule. As an Iranian-born visual artist and filmmaker based in New York, Neshat became internationally renowned in the 1990s for her photography series and video installations tackling the complex relationship between gender, identity, and Islam. She frequently describes herself as a nomadic artist, both in terms of her geocultural mobility and by adopting various artistic media, from photography to video installation to feature film. However, she is best known for her debut feature *Women Without Men* (2009), for which she was awarded the prestigious Silver Lion for Best Director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. In discussing Neshat’s oeuvre, one cannot but address the complex nature of her hybrid cultural position, her performative authorship, as well as the rich layers of intertextuality and intermediality she creates by including poetry and music in her art. Her attention to formal aspects of filmmaking reveal ‘the synaesthetic potential of film as a medium’,⁹ foregrounding her desire to challenge existing cinematic conventions. With her second feature *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, Neshat departs from invocations of her native homeland, focusing instead on the Egyptian cultural past and its contemporary society, while still preserving the predominant thematic concerns of her work: the politics of displacement and exilic loss, as well as the focus on women’s resistance to patriarchal discourses.

Looking for Oum Kulthum premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival. It was well-received in the world’s art cinema circuits and by prestigious circles of international film festivals. Shown at the 2017 Venice Film Festival in the section devoted to auteur cinema, it was praised for its unconventional take on Oum Kulthum’s life from the viewpoint of a contemporary female artist, as ‘a biopic that thinks outside the box, interweaving cinema and metacinema’.¹⁰ The film also opened the 2018 Museum of Modern Art’s ‘The Future of Film Is Female’ series, screening recent feature and short films by both American and international female filmmakers in an initiative advocating gender parity in the film industry. However, it had limited screening in Oum Kulthum’s home country, where it was shown only at the 2018 Aswan International Women Film Festival and Cairo Cinema Days festival. The film’s experimental form combined with Neshat’s background in the visual arts contributes to the cultural elitism of the film, which arguably does not resonate with Oum Kulthum’s mythical status as a popular artist loyal to her roots among ordinary Egyptian people. This has resulted in fierce criticism of the film by Egyptian audiences who oppose an Iranian artist directing the film, while also pointing out the Orientalist portrayal of Oum Kulthum’s village and inaccuracies of the film’s representation of historical reality. The film does, however, display an awareness of its own conditions of production and reception, and most importantly, of Neshat’s outsider status as a

non-Arabic female filmmaker. By integrating anticipated criticism into the film, Neshat initiates a discourse around the national appropriation of Oum Kulthum’s art and legacy and the question of who has the right to make a film about the Egyptian singer.

In fact, the film makes an intervention into these polemics at the level of production. As an international co-production between Germany, Austria, Italy, Lebanon, and Qatar, it reflects the transnational nature of exilic film production by bringing together artists and technicians from across the world. Much like Oum Kulthum, whose fame transcends national borders, Neshat’s film is situated in what Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim identified as ‘the in-between spaces or the interconnectedness of cultures’ in transnational filmmaking. As already stated, the most idiosyncratic aspect of the film is its self-reflexivity. Many important facets of the film’s production, including the interplay between national and transnational, cultural and economic forces shaping the film, are rendered on screen in the course of Mitra’s making of the biopic. In revealing the filmmaking process, we witness the multiple shooting locations in Egypt and Morocco and an impressive array of languages spoken on the set, from English to French to Arabic and Persian, reflecting the cultural diversity of the cast and crew in the cross-cultural co-operation of filmmaking. *Looking for Oum Kulthum* thus foregrounds the singer’s legacy as a site where the tensions between national and extranational appropriations of the historical figure are recognised, problematised, and potentially reconciled.

Neshat’s own status as an exilic, transnational artist and the way her personal experience is reflected in the film resonates with Naficy’s concept of ‘accented cinema’ by which he describes a body of films produced by exilic, expatriate and immigrant filmmakers whose liminal positions enable them to challenge the canonical practices of the dominant mode of film production. According to Naficy, the aesthetics of ‘accented’ film largely emerge from a director’s personal experience of displacement, which he posits as a factor that deeply influences film directors’ identity formations and frequently ‘accents’ their filmmaking styles.¹¹ Neshat’s position, marked by ‘liminal subjectivity and interstitial location in society and the film industry’,¹² is apparent in her innovative visual language, which feeds on the Euro-American art-film tradition and Western conceptual art as intensely as it does on Persian Sufism and the Iranian New Wave cinema, which is celebrated for its self-reflexivity and rich allegorical film language. In many ways, *Looking for Oum Kulthum* exemplifies an ‘accented’ aesthetics which, in addition to its metacinematic approach and authorial self-inscription, encompasses the tensions of the director’s dwelling in this space of in-between cultures by the use of fragmented narrative, genre hybridity,

multilingualism, and disintegration of temporal and spatial continuity. Moreover, accented filmmakers often set their films in the interstitial, ‘transitional and transnational sites, such as borders, airports, and train stations, and transportation vehicles’¹³ to emphasise the liminality of exilic experience. In *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, these transitional spaces are instead rendered through Mitra’s dreams and dreamlike visions, whose ambiguity assists in bridging the intimate lives of two women, the artist and her subject, producing atemporal, imaginative projections of Mitra’s creative mind.

‘Accenting’ the biopic

With *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, Neshat’s initial intention was to add to the recent resurgence of the female artist biopics, which Vidal describes as ‘films that put under the spotlight women artists at odds with political hierarchies and social conventions’.¹⁴ Perpetuating the familiar myths of the suffering female artist in the male-dominated art worlds and patriarchal societies, female artist biopics vary in their level of experimentation, from mainstream female biopics including *Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs, 2003) and *La Vie en Rose* (Olivier Dahan, 2007) to the more unconventional representations of female artists’ journeys, such as Todd Haynes’ *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) and the more recent *Camille Claudel 1915* (Bruno Dumont, 2013). According to Hilary Radner, the female biopic ‘constitutes one of the most obvious legacies of second-wave feminism, occupying a privileged place with regard to contemporary cinema addressed at a female audience because of the way that they overtly address issues that have been the considered focus of feminist discussion with regard to important aspects of the past that continue to influence the present’.¹⁵ Arguably, Oum Kulthum’s life and career demonstrate a subversion of gender norms in conservative Egyptian society, which makes her an attractive subject for the women-oriented and feminist-fuelled biopic as a genre privileging the exceptional lives of well-known female historical figures. However, it is not only Oum Kulthum’s iconic status and the tumultuous 20th century Egyptian history in which her life is situated that deems her an interesting subject matter for a biopic. Rather, it is her continually successful career despite the fundamental socio-political transformations of the country and her active political engagement, which contrasts the current stereotypical assumptions in the West of gender oppression under Islam, that frame her life story within the transnational circuits of feminist representations of Middle Eastern women challenging masculinist and colonising discourses. As Oum Kulthum’s biographer and ethnomusicologist Virginia Danielson provocatively asks: ‘Is it possible that “fifty years” in Arab societies, where women appear to outsiders to

be oppressed, silent, and veiled, could be represented by the life and work of a woman?’¹⁶

Nevertheless, Oum Kulthum’s almost sacred position in the Egyptian cultural pantheon and the secretiveness surrounding her personal life, in particular the rumours pointing to her lesbian sexuality, make her a highly controversial subject matter in the current political climate of the hegemonic Islamic regimes in the Middle East. These tensions might have contributed to Neshat’s creative metafilmic solutions, allowing her to withdraw from biographical and historical fidelity in her modern feminist reclaiming of Oum Kulthum. Instead, the film’s fractured narrative shows episodic vignettes of the singer’s life, underscoring her transformation into a great artist owing to her artistic vigour and regal bearing on stage. The film’s depiction of the very first concert of young Oum Kulthum, played by an Egyptian actress Ghada (Yasmin Raeis), is reminiscent of Neshat’s critically acclaimed two-screen video installation *Turbulent* (1998). The iconography and framing in shooting Oum Kulthum’s performance resembles that of *Turbulent*’s lone female vocalist (Sussan Deyham), who enchantingly sings in an empty auditorium to draw attention to the oppressive discourse of gender segregation and prohibition of women’s public singing in Iran. In *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, the camera similarly circles around Ghada as Oum Kulthum, exposing her performative space and the audience to create a filmic equivalent of her poignant melismatic singing, inducing a state of trance in the listeners. This camerawork highlights Neshat’s authorial fascination with Oum Kulthum’s power to engage with and deeply move the audience through her performance. For this reason and due to the constraints surrounding the cinematic rendition of Oum Kulthum’s private life, Neshat provides a compelling, multi-perspectival depiction of Oum Kulthum, using the fictional frame of ‘the film within a film,’ which allows her to insert her own obsession with the legendary singer, but also to acknowledge the limitations and challenges in attempting to shoot a biopic about her.

Looking for Oum Kulthum thus consists of multiple layers – the actual biopic Mitra is shooting, the process of film production, archival footage, and imaginative hallucinations revealing Mitra’s most profound preoccupations and fears – presented in a way that enhances the film’s gender politics and its postmodernist aesthetics. Similar genre hybridity and the high levels of self-reflexivity emerge as a central strategy of many recent auteur biographical films about music stars, most prominently in Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* (2007) and Mathieu Amalric’s film *Barbara* (2017). However, Neshat not only challenges the generic boundaries of the traditional biopic by revealing the filmmaking process, but also showcases the filmmaker’s

intensely personal approach to fictionalising her subject’s life. By doing so, Oum Kulthum’s biography is overshadowed by Mitra’s personal and professional concerns, and becomes more a reflection of female authorship and the position of female artists today. Moreover, by overtly pointing to Mitra’s self-projections and aligning the actors’ life stories with lives of the real historic subjects they play in the biopic, the film imitates and multiplies the ‘original’ story of Oum Kulthum’s life. For instance, the way in which Mitra and her collaborator Amir (Mehdi Moïnzadeh) discover Ghada serves to mirror Oum Kulthum’s own humble beginnings as a singer. Although not being a professional actress, but rather a modest school teacher with a sublime voice, Ghada becomes the star of their film, having been plucked from obscurity at an audition in Cairo and convinced to act in their film. The metacinematic narrative device is reminiscent of Abbas Kiarostami’s self-reflexive cinema, marked by the implicit interconnection between his films which often include open-ended narratives and stories within stories. *Looking for Oum Kulthum’s* narrative multiplicity and ambiguity about what is true and what is fabricated about Oum Kulthum specifically brings to mind Kiarostami’s film *Certified Copy* (2010), made in Europe with French actress Juliette Binoche, that focuses on the playful relations between ‘real’ and ‘copy’ to challenge the preconceived value ascribed to the ‘original’ in the context of the European art tradition.

Undoubtedly, Neshat’s use of self-reflexive cinematic practices allows her to avoid taking responsibility to accurately represent Oum Kulthum as the famous singer and national icon. Moreover, the set-up of ‘the film within a film’ highlights the ways in which Mitra’s trajectory intersects with that of her historical subject. Not unlike Oum Kulthum herself, she is a female artist in a male-dominated industry, surrounded by men who question her authority and authorial decisions. The price Oum Kulthum had to pay to obtain artistic recognition by leaving her family behind resonates with sacrifices Mitra has made in her own private life, having abandoned her son in Iran for seven years. The questions of guilt and the price paid for transgressing gender roles dominate an affiliation between the life stories of the two women. Hence, Mitra and Oum Kulthum are united in their sacrifice of traditional ‘feminine’ values, which are perceived as incompatible with artistic endeavours and professional success. However, as already suggested, Neshat underlines that the perception of Oum Kulthum as a woman who sacrifices everything to reach artistic recognition is mediated via Mitra’s perspective, thus creating a multifaceted portrait of the singer, without representing her as a coherent, unified female subject. This becomes apparent in a scene immediately after Oum Kulthum’s concert in honour of King Farouk, showing a collision between Mitra and Ghada regarding their conflicting visions of

the singer. Mitra interrupts the scene in which Oum Kulthum turns away from her brother and father on her way to meet the King, asking Ghada whose golden, bejewelled dress and cape suggests her dignified presence, to embody the star status of the singer and not to be insecure. She argues:

Oum Kulthum is a star now... That moment when she turns her eyes from her father, her brother... after that, there is no going back. From this point on, she doesn't belong to her family, her home, not even to herself.

For Mitra, her own feelings of conflict between professional aspirations and her family in Iran provide a point of similarity with Oum Kulthum, inspiring her desire to fictionalise the singer's life through the prism of her own. However, Ghada disagrees, arguing that Oum Kulthum was always loyal to her family and her origins, which reflects Ghada's own life story and the official representation of Oum Kulthum's public persona in the Egyptian media and oral history. In this way, instead of revealing the real person behind the iconic status of Oum Kulthum in the biopic, Neshat further obscures her through the interactions between Mitra, her visions of Oum Kulthum, and actresses who play Oum Kulthum at different stages of her career, thereby blurring the boundaries between subject and object, real and imaginary, self and other, past and present. *Looking for Oum Kulthum's* metatextual commentary on the process of its own production and its filmmaking practices thus makes visible the construction of the filmmaker's fictional Oum Kulthum as a person and performer, pointing towards the constructed nature of biographical film and history.

Feminist revisions of history

In a similar way to how the extratextual and intertextual identities of the author and actors become interconnected with the real historical subjects in the filmmaking process, the factual and fictional elements of Oum Kulthum's public life are interwoven with the history of colonial Egypt, the aftermath of the 1952 Revolution, and the emergence of Arab nationalism under Nasser's presidency. *Looking for Oum Kulthum* revisits Egyptian national history through the recollection of fragments of Oum Kulthum's personal history, through archival footage and filmic reconstructions of pivotal moments of the national past. However, Neshat is not concerned with authentic cinematic reconstructions of Egypt's crucial political and historical moments. Instead, the film operates as a commentary of the political movements by giving visibility to the contribution of women, including Oum Kulthum's cultural

legacy, to the projects strengthening the nation in the process of its anticolonial struggle. In this way, the gendered rewriting of history that the film delivers not only serves as the second-wave feminist project of calling attention to women’s histories, but also reclaims women’s political struggle from both feminist and postcolonial perspectives.

Neshat portrays the women’s participation in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution in a way that lacks historical accuracy, as she isolates the Egyptian women’s campaign and represents it as a feminist movement taking place in the year 1914, thus erasing its deep entanglement with the national movement of 1919, which sought liberation from British occupation.¹⁷ Instead of showing Egyptian feminists joining a unified Egyptian population protesting against British rule, Neshat represents Egyptian women’s participation in civil society primarily as a form of resistance to the patriarchal regime, focusing on their demands of political equality, right to education, and free sartorial choice. In so doing, she blurs the boundaries between contemporary feminist aspirations and the historical representation of Oum Kulthum’s historical life to initiate a modern re-evaluation of women’s resistance to patriarchal values within a postcolonial feminist context. This becomes evident in a scene that takes place in the screening room where Mitra, her producers, and collaborators watch the archival footage which shows historical subjects and events along with photographs and documentary excerpts of the real Oum Kulthum, after which we see how her crew films the feminist marches in which the young Oum Kulthum participates. The original photographs are followed by the newly made ones leading to a seamless transition to Mitra’s filming of the scenes in which the Egypt’s feminist leaders publicly remove their veils during their speech. By reimagining Cairo streets at the start of the century taken over by women protesters demanding equal political rights and independence, Neshat points to ‘an awakening of a feminist consciousness in Egypt’,¹⁸ largely marginalised by official historical discourse. Foregrounding women’s activism in the Egyptian feminist movement and young Oum Kulthum’s fictionalised participation in it, amplifies localised gendered politics and Oum Kulthum’s immediate relationship with national history. Chandra Mohanty describes this process of ‘rewriting and remembering history’ as not only ‘a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history’, but also as a practice that ‘leads to the formation of politicised consciousness and self-identity’.¹⁹ This is important because ‘to unframe histories is to undo official and dominant accounts that exclude or marginalise subjects, creating gender, racial, ethnic, and linguistic alterities’.²⁰ Since voice and political participation have traditionally been denied to Middle Eastern women, Oum Kulthum’s voice and influential public

persona come to symbolise feminist yearnings in modern Middle Eastern societies. Neshat’s cinematic reimagining of the Egyptian women’s movement thus fits into what Julia Erhart calls the ‘relational component’ of contemporary women’s historical cinema as a site where filmmaking, history, and present-day audiences meet.²¹ Neshat’s rendition of the past is clearly manipulated to bring ‘new representations of agency and activism to the screen, often in ways that mobilise the past for the present, and often filtered through the lens of contemporary feminisms’.²²

In her exploration of the 1919 Egyptian movement for women’s rights, Nabila Ramadani makes clear that ‘radical calls for change being made by a pioneering women’s movement strengthened the nationalist cause’,²³ fostering the nation-building project in Egypt throughout the twentieth century. However, as Anna Ball argues, ‘alternative narratives of postcolonial experience’ are ‘often “written out” of dominant, often male-authored narratives’.²⁴ In the film, the takeover of the anticolonial movement by masculine narratives is mirrored symbolically in the biopic production by Amir temporarily replacing Mitra in the role of director on set. After learning of the disappearance of her son in Iran, Mitra collapses, and briefly withdraws from the film’s production. Amir steps into her directorial position at the moment which coincides with the filmic depiction of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. At this point, Neshat portrays elderly Oum Kulthum as a firm, emancipatory figure in fashionable Western attire with a modish coiffure, whose charismatic voice possesses tremendous power to influence the masses. Her cultural and political significance in unifying the nation was certainly recognised by Egyptian political leaders King Farouk and Nasser, with whom she closely collaborated, securing her status not only as a popular performer, but also as a cultural leader and symbol of national pride. Moreover, as Laura Lohman highlights, her influential image and voice have been used for diverse ideological purposes beyond Egyptian national politics. Lohman points out the recent rediscovery of Oum Kulthum’s songs in contemporary Middle Eastern media that continue to serve conflicting political agendas.²⁵

However, in Neshat’s film we also witness how Oum Kulthum – as both a citizen and a public personality – was at the mercy of this turbulent period of political change, when without explanation she is escorted from her home by the military, and assumes she is being arrested under the new Nasserite regime. She (Najia Skali) is shown with Oum Kulthum’s iconic dark sunglasses and pearls in the back seat of a car, with the camera in front of her and Amir giving her instructions for a close-up shot. His suggestions ensure that despite her stoic demeanour and impenetrable black sunglasses, the fear and uncertainty are visible on her face. However, as Oum

Kulthum walks into a conference room, we see Nasser giving a speech to legitimise his power after the Revolution. He invites Oum Kulthum, ‘Egypt’s fourth pyramid’ as he names her, to sing in honour of the liberation of the Egyptian nation. As we hear her contralto voice broadcast, the film transitions to the local teahouse where men look up to the radio in an act of worship, enchantedly listening to her beloved classic ‘Enta Omri’ (‘You Are My Life’, 1964). Neshat’s articulation of Oum Kulthum’s cultural leadership in the process of reimagining national history foregrounds how her voice was utilised to support different political ideologies of the state, while acknowledging her ubiquitous presence in the cultural memory of Egypt and beyond. Oum Kulthum’s cult status in the political, historical and cultural imaginary of the Middle East thus enables Neshat’s historical revisionism through a present-day feminist consciousness.

Female authorship and authorial self-inscription

The iconography of glamorous Oum Kulthum at the peak of her fame shown in the scene when she is taken to Nasser’s inauguration is mirrored in a post-audition scene set in Cairo showing Mitra sitting alone in the backseat of a car with her dark sunglasses on. A wide shot tracking the taxi she is riding in exposes the overpopulated cityscape of traffic jams and people begging for money on the streets. Mitra is looking out of the window when a car full of passengers comes from the opposite direction and stops parallel to her taxi. While the car is stopped, all of the passengers, including both adults and children, simultaneously stare at the camera. This scene produces a feeling of discomfort, drawing attention to the class issues and problems of contemporary Egypt, and revealing a glaring socio-economic gap between the director (by extension also the viewer and Oum Kulthum herself) and ordinary Egyptian people. It also emphasises the social space to which Mitra does not belong, again foregrounding the issue of her outsider status as a non-Arabic female artist.

As previously noted, Neshat uses her own challenges to construct Mitra’s character as a career-driven female artist, thereby bringing to the surface the intricate connections between her position and Oum Kulthum’s sacrifices on the road to stardom. As an outsider to Egyptian society, she encounters disapproval from Egyptians who question her ability to understand Oum Kulthum’s art and legacy. For instance, when in a scene halfway through the film, an unknown Arabic woman approaches Mitra at a party and asks her what inspired her to make a film about Oum Kulthum as an Iranian director, her question corresponds to the anticipated criticism of the film by the Arabic-speaking audiences. The woman points to the paramount

importance of knowledge of the Arabic language for understanding Oum Kulthum’s songs and how with her singing ‘she turned poetry into ecstasy’. Furthermore, Mitra is judged by the Arab cast on set, in particular by a supporting actor, Ahmad (Kais Nashif) playing Latif, a journalist from Oum Kulthum’s village who disapproves of her elite-oriented concerts. Not only does he exhibit sexist prejudice against Mitra as a female director, but he also points out the inadequacy of a European film production about an Egyptian star. Whereas Ahmad’s behaviour can be interpreted as a backlash to the reversal of traditional gender roles, Mitra’s directorial position is also severely questioned by her European producers who threaten to replace her with Amir.

When Mitra returns to the set, her perspective toward her own art and Oum Kulthum has undergone a significant change. This transformative arc is instigated not only by her realisation of failure as a mother, but also by her conversation with Ghada, who visits during the course of her recovery and encourages her to complete the film. In a wide shot showing the two of them on Mitra’s balcony surrounded by the vastness of the ocean, their dialogue, accompanied by the turbulent sounds of the waves, centres on Mitra’s avid pursuit of greatness in her art which, Ghada suggests, is like that of Oum Kulthum. Seeking to demystify the mythical image of Oum Kulthum, and to understand her as the woman behind the famous public persona, Mitra revises the script adding a final sequence into the film. The sequence depicts Oum Kulthum during one of the most significant concerts of her late career, where she fails to complete her singing performance for President Nasser. The concert starts with an instrumental played by violins, cellos, and traditional Middle Eastern instruments – the oud, the santur, the ney and the riqq – while showing the president and his entourage in the balcony lodge. Oum Kulthum takes centre stage, glowing in a shimmering turquoise dress. However, before she reaches the refrain ‘Enta Omri’, she loses her voice and her ensemble ceases to play. To everyone’s surprise and Nasser’s visible discontent, when she attempts to resume singing, her vocal abilities betray her, and she ultimately fails to perform. It is clear that this sequence primarily serves as a potent authorial statement. However, as it is not rooted in biographical fact, it is not well-received by Mitra’s producers, who threaten to withdraw financial support and replace her with Amir if she refuses to cooperate. In this way, the moment of Oum Kulthum’s fictional resistance to politicians’ appropriation of her tremendous influence and cultural power over the Egyptian nation, coincides with Mitra’s decision to leave the set, choosing not to depend on producers who do not trust her authorial vision.

Moreover, Neshat uses Mitra’s disagreement with her producers to insert her own experiences as a filmmaker and criticise the financial censorship of women’s

narratives in the West, as they are often regarded as commercially unviable. It thus becomes evident, as Naficy suggests, that the function of semi-autobiography and self-inscription in ‘accented’ filmmaking transcends masculinist notions of authorship, implying an eminently performative engagement of the author within the text.²⁶ However, although this contention plays an important role in Neshat’s construction of her fictional surrogate, the inscription of her own authorial presence does not fully conflate her autobiography with Mitra’s subject-position. As an author, Neshat both exposes herself, including her tribulations about Oum Kulthum, and simultaneously hides behind a fictional director. As Cecilia Sayad notes, the authorial presence often ‘combines disparate impulses towards exposure and masking, seeking a balance between painful self-analysis and studious self-fashioning’.²⁷ This fictionalisation of authorship produces ambiguity about what is real and what is fabricated in the fictional construction of the authorial self. Fusing her personal trajectory with that of the fictional director and Oum Kulthum as the biopic subject exemplifies the cinematic strategies which, as Naficy notes, are deployed by ‘accented filmmakers who live in various modes of transnational otherness [and] inscribe and (re)enact in their films the fears, freedoms, and possibilities of split subjectivity and multiple identities’.²⁸ Moreover, the accented filmmakers’ tendency to subvert generic boundaries and conventions relates to Neshat’s merging of various ontological levels and filmic practices in *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, including fiction, documentary, and fantasy.

In frames carefully composed as *tableaux vivants*, showing deeply saturated red labyrinthine spaces inside the theatre, located behind the scenes where the creative process takes place, we witness Mitra’s inner world marked by self-doubts. Similarly, she is shown in solitude in her hotel room by the ocean, torn by the guilt she feels over the competing demands of her family and her career. Mitra’s son appears in many of her picturesque, but agonizing dreams and fantasies, symbolising not only the traumatic reminiscence of renouncing her family, but also her exilic loss and nostalgia for her motherland. The diegetic sounds of waves and the framing of Mitra’s personal spaces when she is alone, communicate a sense of agony and struggle, while also pointing to the subjective experience of her exilic liminality. The melancholy of these scenes is reminiscent of Oum Kulthum’s musical style, which reverberates with emotional loss, longing, and regret. When Mitra withdraws from the film’s production, she returns to her room and starts removing photographs of Oum Kulthum from a board covered with images and references for her film. Through the glass, she is startled by the apparition of Oum Kulthum in a green dress on her balcony, gazing at the ocean. Mitra approaches her in bewilderment when the singer starts speaking in Arabic in her hoarse, vehement voice: ‘You know, I really like your

fire, I like what’s eating you up. The craziness – all the things you are questioning about your films and your life – is the artist in you.’²⁹ Shown in the medium close-up standing next to her heroine, Mitra finally reaches out to Oum Kulthum who turns from a historical figure to a real person with whom Mitra can enter into dialogue. Mitra’s fantasy scenario thus climaxes in her exchange with Oum Kulthum, which underscores the interactive, dialogic potential of film as a medium. The encounter stages the film’s central issue of female authorship and artistic self-awareness, not only by subverting power relations, but also by challenging or ‘accenting’ generic, technical, and aesthetic conventions. Therefore, by inscribing the fictional female author’s presence and revealing the cinematic apparatus, Neshat reflects on the issues of female authorial agency and authority by redefining the mythical discourse surrounding Oum Kulthum and her legacy for a new generation of Middle Eastern female artists.

Conclusion

Following Naficy’s contention that exilic and diasporic filmmakers’ personal experience of displacement ‘accents’ their film aesthetics and influences their thematic concerns, I have shown how Shirin Neshat’s intercultural position and authorial style reconceptualise the classical biopic by adopting alternative cinematic strategies, which allows the merging of contemporary feminist discourses of female agency, art, and authorship with Oum Kulthum’s exceptional achievements as a woman artist in the Middle East. Rather than solely providing a fictional account of the legendary Egyptian female singer through a traditional biopic, Neshat’s film focuses on the process of turning Oum Kulthum’s extraordinary life and career into a filmic subject. *Looking for Oum Kulthum* thus offers an account of the female filmmaker struggling to make a personal film in a conservative, male-dominated film industry, exposing the production of the biopic together with the socio-cultural and economic forces at play. Neshat deploys the complex narrative structure of ‘the film within a film’ to explore the links between history, gender, and cultural identity to provide resistance to nationalist and patriarchal discourses. By merging her own interpretations of Oum Kulthum’s life and image with historical events, Neshat revisits Egypt’s modern history from the point of view of postcolonial feminism, rewriting masculinist historical narratives of the anticolonial struggles and reclaiming the contribution of Egyptian women to national liberation. In doing so, Neshat foregrounds a gendered mode of address in purposefully conflating the plight of women, both today and in the past, when seeking to achieve personal autonomy and creative freedom. Finally,

Neshat deploys the self-reflexive process of filmmaking to forge a personal relationship with her filmic subject, merging the instances of fantasy, film production, and reconstructions of the past in her exploration of the position of the historical and contemporary female artist. Her characteristic authorial self-inscription in *Looking for Oum Kulthum* forms part of a discernible ‘accented’ aesthetics that reverberates in the narrative plurality of the film’s language, paving the way for alternative discourses and representations of Middle Eastern femininity.

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About the Author

Marija Antic is a teaching associate and a Ph.D candidate at Monash University working on Iranian diasporic women’s cinema. She has also delivered a series of lectures at the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy. Her research interests include feminist theory and women’s filmmaking with an emphasis on representations of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity in contemporary transnational cinemas. Previous scholarship on Iranian cinema and gender has been published in *Genero: Journal of Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies*.

Notes

¹ Danielson, Virginia, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 (3).

² Idem (139).

³ Idem (137).

- ⁴ Faber, Tom, “‘She Exists Out of Time’: Umm Kulthum, Arab Music’s Eternal Star”, in: *The Guardian* (28 February 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/28/she-exists-out-of-time-umm-kulthum-arab-musics-eternal-star>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.
- ⁵ Vidal, Belén, ‘Introduction: The Biopic and Its Critical Contexts’, in: Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, London: Routledge, 2014, 1-32 (2).
- ⁶ It is important to note here that the film does not reify the rigid binaries between the notions of Western culture and the Middle East seen as homogenous terms, but points out Neshat’s interstitial, yet outsider position as an Iranian American artist who offers alternative, multiple representations of Umm Kulthum, raising the problem of authenticity at heart of the biopic genre.
- ⁷ Booth, Marilyn, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 (1).
- ⁸ Neshat in Enright, Robert, ‘Pivotal Moments: Shirin Neshat and the Art of Tragic Euphoria’, in: *Border Crossings* 36: 2 (2017) 20-34 (28).
- ⁹ Butler, Alison, *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen*, Wallflower: London and New York, 2002 (16).
- ¹⁰ Scara, Vittoria, ‘Looking for Umm Kulthum: Being a Female Artist in the Middle East’, in: *Cineuropa* (3 September 2017), <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/333850/>, date accessed: 22 August 2021.
- ¹¹ Naficy, Hamid, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001 (10).
- ¹² Ibidem.
- ¹³ Idem (154).
- ¹⁴ Vidal, Belén, ‘Feminist Historiographies and the Woman Artist’s Biopic: The Case of *Artemisia*’, in: *Screen* 48:1 (2013) 69-90 (69).
- ¹⁵ Radner, Hilary, *The New Woman’s Film: Femme-Centric Movies for Smart Chicks*, New York: Routledge, 2017 (157).
- ¹⁶ Danielson (4).
- ¹⁷ See Ramdani, Nabila, ‘Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution: From Feminist Awakening to Nationalist Political Activism’, in: *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 14: 2 (2013) 39-52 (39).
- ¹⁸ Ibidem.
- ¹⁹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (ed.), *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003 (78).
- ²⁰ Ponzanesi, Sandra and Marguerite Waller (eds.), *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2012 (12).
- ²¹ Erhart, Julia, *Gendering History on Screen: Women Filmmakers and Historical Films*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018 (3).
- ²² Idem (9).
- ²³ Ramdani (39).
- ²⁴ Ball, Anna, *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective*, New York: Routledge, 2012 (8).
- ²⁵ Lohman, Laura, ‘Preservation and Politicization: Umm Kulthūm’s National and International Legacy’, in: *Popular Music and Society* 33:1 (2010) 45-60 (46).
- ²⁶ Naficy (4).
- ²⁷ Sayad, Cecilia, *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in Cinema*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013 (37).
- ²⁸ Naficy (271).
- ²⁹ Enright (20).