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# Nasser Produced by Suez: Cinematic Middle Ages and Figures of the Dictator as Savior of the Nation

Walter Benjamin conceives of historiography as a practice closely related to danger. He argues that the materialist historian's task is to reflect on History when danger looms in the present[1].
Contemplating History in its material traces in film, particularly when it shapes the production of dictatorship, is indeed a task befalling to historians and to scholars of film who are aware of the danger posed by the vitality of dictatorships and the constant rise of the authoritarian and repressive temptations in so many parts of the world since the beginning of the 21st century. This article tasks itself with the reflection on the way cinema produces (i.e. figures, or represents) the Dictator in particular historical contexts.

This reflection, however, is about the conditions of possibility of dictatorship. This article is not primarily concerned with the exercise of dictatorship and does not dwell on the figuration of the Dictator having reached the peak of their power. Rather, it focuses on the historical and political/economic conditions constituting a context where the emergence of a dictator becomes possible, if not a historically determined "necessity".

# Dictators on Film

An abundant literature on dictatorship or dictators is available to scholars and to readers at large, chiefly in political science and history, and satellite disciplines. It often deals with specific case studies, either in the Euro-Americas or the post-colonial worlds. A quick search in any library catalogue will show numerous entries about despicable European/ "universal" individual monsters such as Hitler and Franco, controversial leaders such as Castro, or "oriental" (Arab) dictators such as Saddam and Qaddafi. The case studies may also include "collective dictatorships" such as Brazil's and Argentine's juntas in the 1960s and the 1970s where the public figure of the dictator was simply that of the representative of a junta, not that of a father of the nation, or of a guide to the people. Some case studies will address the specific issue of the representation of dictatorship, particularly in media, film and literature[2].

Michael Schoenhals and Karin Sarsenov's edited volume on *Imagining Mass Dictatorships: The Individual & The masses in Literature& Cinema*, is however one of the rare examples of transnational approaches to the representation of dictatorship. In their book, Schoenhals and Sarsenov and their contributors introduce a variety of national contexts which produced different types of dictators and analyze their respective representations in various media: audiovisual and in print[3].

From the perspective of arts and media studies, analyses of the figuration (i.e. representation) of the Dictator, particularly in media, film and literature extensively dwell on two artworks: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator*. Cesar would be here the tragic figure of the Leader whose authoritarianism and boundless ambition led him to become a resented dictator. Chaplin's *Dictator* is the more traditional image of the brutal despot only ridiculed by caricature. One may think that the popularity of these two artifacts in studies on dictatorship is due to their universality, i.e. them being associated with major European and North American politicians and authors. That may be true, but I would argue that both figures are stimulating for the scholar of dictatorship because they cover two major types of dictators: the beloved one, he who falls victim to his own ambitions (Shakespeare's Cesar) and the despicable one, whose ambition is so extreme it

borderlines ridicule (Chaplin's Hynkel). However, both dictators were already at the height of their exercise of power in the works reproducing their figures[4].

It should seem strange that a figure such as Napoleon's does not appear prominently in studies of dictatorship[5]. The reason may be that the autocracy of the French emperor is usually labeled as imperialism, and that some scholars may argue that Napoleon's policies were more authoritarian then literally dictatorial. Or that Napoleon's dictatorship was simply a type of practice included in the array of systems of empire, particularly during his time, in the early 19th century. Referencing Napoleon is the more relevant here because he has been appropriated by Arab nationalism as a precursor of Nasser, as the European Enlightenment prototype, which prototype generated Nasser: a strongman who has imperial ambitions but who constitutes a great figure because he is a unifier, a law and order leader, keen on establishing his nation's pride. Napoleon is not often discussed as dictator in French works. I would argue the same about Arabic works on Nasser.

These considerations are a first reminder to us that one person's dictator might be another person's champion. Napoleon, like Nasser, is rarely called a dictator when the author is sympathetic to his administrative and economic reforms or to his military and political victories. The same is true about Nasser. "Dictator" is a word charged with political bias. We call our enemies dictators, but leaders who are our friends and who adopt policies similar to those of dictators are called "strong", "centralizers" or "authoritarian".

# Defining a Dictator

In this article, the term "dictator" designates the technical literal meaning in political theory: he who dictates. In Marxist theory, the dictatorship of proletariat is often qualified by some authors as the manner by which the economy and the class struggle are directed in a revolutionary process. It is not understood here as tyranny – a concept applied to the Antiquity, Middle Ages and pre-Modernity- which is associated with violence, injustice and the absolutism of a monarch who abuses his power in the absence of checks and balances that would

temper and balance the monarch's actions. One may argue that "tyranny" has been replaced by the term "dictatorship" in modernity, especially after the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and the 1930s. Since fascism, the dictator (e.g. Hitler) has become a reference to a violent absolute ruler.

Originally however, in Roman Antiquity for instance, the dictator dictates policy in an exceptional political time period. A dictator such as Julius Cesar was supposed to exercise exceptional and extensive powers bestowed upon him by popular consent, but not for an indefinite period. Contrarily, in Antiquity, an Autocrat was a ruler –often a monarch- with absolute powers –sometimes powers he would abuse- which were not limited in time. While a dictator was originally some sort of head of the executive with exceptional powers, in the 20th century, the term has become associated with modern totalitarianism, like fascism. Fascism and Nazism gave the term "dictator" a new meaning, that of the modern tyrant.

In this article, I will not dwell on the example of a violent dictator in action, but more on the conditions of possibility that favor the emergence of one. In that sense, this article is about the making of a dictator – not necessarily as a modern tyrant- but as a strongman who receives massive popular support that translates into a symbolic political "proxy" to dictate policy. In the case of Nasser, it has happened -as in the case of General Bonaparte- that the dictator started to abuse their power and to act as a modern tyrant, after a few years in power.

Few studies address the phenomenon of the" inevitability" of producing dictatorship -or at least authoritarianism- within the process of nation-building, particularly in the context of decolonization and of a struggle for independence, or within historical moments where a nation is exposed to hegemonic attacks or invasion. This study addresses this inevitability, both as a result of material and historical conditions of possibility, and as materialized, let alone "prophesized" in cinema.

## Benjamin and the Cinematic Unconscious

Reflecting on the history of photography, Walter Benjamin introduced the concept of photographic unconscious. In the gaze of a woman whose photo was taken a few days before she committed murder, he surmises

that the unconscious of the killer-to-be, materialized in her own gaze, is captured and inscribed in the photo[6]. By extending this notion to cinema, one may propose the existence of a cinematic unconscious. In the interstice of film frames may lay the unconscious future. This concept may explain how the manufacturing of the Dictator/Savior coming from the military started even before the emergence of Nasser on the Arab political scene. A few years before Nasser and his fellow Free Officers staged the July 1952 coup that put them in power in Egypt, Arab cinema was already fantasizing about an officer who would solve the imperialist challenge faced by the Middle East in the aftermath of World War II. I have already addressed this phenomenon in my article on "L'arabité cinématographique" where I referenced a few films glorifying the young military and emphasizing their role in protecting, or saving the nation in the 1940s and early 1950s[7].

Benjamin conceives of the becoming in history as each era dreaming the following one. In materialist terms, one may explain this by the fact that before the historical becoming is achieved, its premises are already traceable, as if in a premonitory dream[8]. Arab cinema was -in a Benjaminian sense- "dreaming" of "a" Nasser to rise on the regional scene, before that specific leader rose to power. Similarly, I argue that western cinema too was "predicting" the emergence of a strongman in the Middle East before Nasser confirmed his international stature during the Suez crisis at the end of 1956.

Even though this is not a historian's scholarship, this study deals with the figuration of history in cinema and adopts a Benjaminian epistemological posture: indeed nowadays danger looms in the Arab World and the scholar of cinema –viewed to be the bearer of traces of the past – needs to analyze History as a strategy to fend off danger. In the following, I will analyze films materializing History. While they deal with the danger of war looming over the Arab World, the actual danger they seem to address –or forgo- is that of the manufacturing of the Dictator.

The major assumption I make is that the Dictator is manufactured or produced. The meaning of "production" here is twofold: first it refers to the enunciation of texts, speeches, political analyses -or films for that matter- that cast a person as dictator. The same way we understand an utterance as produced in the process of enunciation, I consider the process of enunciating utterances describing someone as dictator to be

one of producing or manufacturing a dictator. Second, "production" beyond describing a process refers here to creating a situation, a context, in short: conditions of possibility, for the advent of a role, a function that is to be filled by a historical actor, who then bears the label: Dictator.

## Suez and the Making of a Dictator

Analyzing the World order during the Cold War, Carl Gustav Jung has suggested that the (capitalist) West is producing the (communist) East as its own shadow[9]. One may phrase this suggestion as the Communist Block possibly being the incarnation of the dark forces, or the dark side, of the West's Unconscious. In that sense, a repressive dictatorship -such as the Soviet one- may be symbolically equated with the despotic, violent, repressive aspect of a collective Unconscious in the West understood as the "embodiment" of Capitalism.

What is at stake here is not the metaphor of the Dictator = Shadow, or "Evil". Rather, it is the suggestion that a dictatorship is by definition lurking in the Unconscious of a society, as a potential for violence, or as a (repressed) instinct. More explicitly, this understanding of the West's manufacturing of the Communist block as its "evil" other, means that the West is actually projecting its own hidden desires, its own longing for despotism, thirst for power, drive for destructiveness onto an imaginary Other, for the purpose of symbolically dissociating itself from the ethical burden of such desires and longing. Similarly, one may argue that the West has been projecting the "oriental dictator" as another "evil other" of its own. This projection is certainly palpable in Western cinematic depictions of the "Orient".

In this article, the example of the oriental dictator allegedly manufactured by the West -in cinema among other areas of the imaginary and fields of knowledge- is Nasser's. The West has manufactured Nasser as dictator, not just by producing him in political speeches, newspaper editorials and films as one, but by creating the conditions of possibility for him to become a dictator. A major contribution to the making of the dictator Nasser was the quasi universal acceptance in the West and in the Third World, particularly the Arab World, of the postcolonial leader –like many other leaders in Asia and Africa- as a metonymy of the nation.

Another contribution to that process of dictator-making was specifically western. When the imperial forces in the West apply excessive colonial pressure on a nation, such as by invading the latter, the conditions for the emergence of a dictator who would be tasked by the population to defend the nation become ripe. The dictator emerges when the population agrees to view the nation as incarnated in its leader. In the case of Nasser, the threat of war launched by France and Great Britain against Egypt, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, exerted such a tremendous pressure on the recently decolonized nation that it resulted in an exceptional and dangerous situation.

This historical peril incited the masses to call on a Savior/ Dictator to assume the responsibility of dictating the direction of the country. Being the champion of national dignity who orchestrated the negotiations with the former colonial power, Great Britain, which were concluded by the complete decolonization of Egypt, Nasser was naturally the man to be called upon to become the Savior, a position which automatically invites the latter to become a dictator. Nasser had emerged as a full-fledged dictator in 1954, two years before the Suez crisis in 1956. However, it was Suez that confirmed him as the idol of Arab masses and the incontestable leader/dictator/savior of Egypt.

The following account by an actor of the Suez crisis gives an eloquent insight into the coincidence of Nasser's discourse of dignity, popular emotionality and the assumption that Nasser's status as champion of national sovereignty equates him being a "metonymy" of the nation. A.J. Barker thus narrates the masses reaction to Nasser's announcement of the nationalization of the Suez Canal: "(...) the pitch of his voice rose and he became almost hysterical. (...) Egypt will run the Canal. The Suez Canal belongs to us... The Canal will be run by Egyptians! Egyptians! Egyptians! The crowd went wild with enthusiasm (...)"[10]. On the one hand, Nasser is introduced as being out of his mind when reiterating national sovereignty by nationalizing the canal, hence the use of "hysterical". On the other hand, his anaphoric use of "Egyptians" combined with the crowd's ecstatic reaction can be interpreted as a sort of patriotic-mystic fusion between the leader and the people that rhetorically performs the idea of Nasser incarnating the masses or that of him being an embodiment of the nation.

Both processes by which the West contributed to the manufacturing of Nasser's stature were similar to processes of dictator-making in other countries in Africa and Asia. More relevant to this study is the fact that both processes emerged in cinema, sometimes before they were actually materialized in the political arena. The unconscious of the West "calling" for an Arab dictator materialized first in fictitious rendering of history on film, before the advent of the dictator actually took place "in real life". One may surmise in Benjaminian terms that cinema here was dreaming of the future to become, on the actual stage of history. In short, western films dreamt of a Nasser-like dictator in the Middle East, before Nasser actually fully materialized as a dictator.

The following case studies are deliberately chosen to include films not directly depicting Nasser. They depict historical leaders of Egypt in the middle ages, but were produced at the time of Nasser's ascent to and exercise of power. Both films offer models of the manufacturing of the charismatic leader or that of the dictator, which are structurally similar to the patterns of discourses and political practices that produced Nasser as strongman and dictator in the 1950s and 1960s.

Rather than analyzing films representing the historical character of Nasser, such as Anwar Kawadri's *Gamal Abd El Naser* (1998) or Mohamed Fadel's *Nasser 56* (1996), or films referencing the Suez war which cemented Nasser's regional and international stature, such as Sayed Bedeir's *Giants of the Sea* (1960), I will analyze two films that do not figurate Nasser directly: *King Richard and the Crusaders*, (USA, 1954) directed by David Butler and *OIslam* a. k. a *The Sword of Islam* (Egypt, Italy, 1961) directed by Enrico Bomba. I will briefly refer to a third film: Youssef Chahine's *Saladin* (Egypt, 1963) because it is heavily influenced by Butler's film and has always been viewed by critics and audiences at large as a medieval metaphor of Nasser's handling of the Suez crisis and subsequent war. Primarily an American film and an Egyptian one to give Western and Arab perspectives on models of subjectivation of the masses or of the nation incarnated in one subject: the leader soon to become the Dictator. This deliberate choice of films -which do not reference Nasser "overtly"- allows me to argue for the pervasiveness of ideological models in film figurations of the "oriental dictator", both in the West and in the Arab World, even outside of the realm of the historical contingency of the Suez crisis as such.

# O Islam

In Arab popular culture, the film *O Islam* (Wa Islamah) holds a special place. Set primarily in medieval Cairo, more specifically in the 13th century, this biopic narrates the story of the tumultuous times through which the Middle East went in the transition between the Ayyubid's dynasty and the Mamluk Empire. This transition was even the more tumultuous that it coincided with an overwhelming Mongol invasion of the Arab East, led by one of the lieutenants of the legendary Ilkhan Hulagou Khan. However, the film's prominent place in popular culture is due less to its historical and political significance, than to some memorable lines and scenes.

In an iconic scene, towards the end of the film, Kitbuqa-Hulagou Khan's emissary- brings a letter to the court of Egypt. At that point, the palace was in chaos after the assassination of the Sultana. The Sultan who succeeded her had died a few days earlier, and the Mongol general is met by an improvised council dominated by Egyptian generals. Perplexed, Hulagou's lieutenantKitbuqa asks a question that has become widely referenced in Egyptian popular culture, particularly during and in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, when the power vacuum due to the demise of the dictator became obvious: "If I want to address the people of Egypt, to whom should I talk?" The answer promptly comes from the most powerful Egyptian general: prince Kutoz, who -after hesitating for a few seconds- replies: "To me". When Kitbuqa asks: "Who are you?", the soon-to-be Sultan simply replies: "A citizen from the people of Egypt". While the exchange seems to underline the future dictator's humility, it also emphasizes the non-democratic way through which the leader "assumed" power, in the strong sense of word.

Kitbuqa then pompously reads a threatening letter from a parchment, essentially warning Egyptians of imminent destruction if they did not surrender to the Mongol army. Kutoz's reply is silent but eloquent. In a medium shot, standing tall in front of the elevated throne, the Egyptian general withdraws his own sword. The following reaction medium shot shows the sword's shadow travelling through the screen from left to right, and crossing the bodies of the startled Mongol general and his officers. The camera cuts back to Kutoz who splits the parchment in two. This segment seems to foresee the outcome of the film's final battle, but

it is actually a cinematic understatement of the historical event it reproduces on the screen. While Kitbuqa's speech is quiet close to the actual one reported by contemporary historians, the fate of the Mongol emissaries as narrated by these historians was immediate public execution on orders of Sultan Kutoz. However, the emissaries in the 13th century did not count Kitbuqa among their delegation. It was a powerful dramatic device in the film though, to put him at the head of the emissaries, because it made the scene to be the clash of arch-generals.

Kutoz then addresses the crowd in the court and says that he has ventured into standing to the Invaders without knowing who is on his side and who is not. A few seconds belong to the cinematic unconscious: after Kutoz finishes his sentence, a resounding silence fills the frame, only to be interrupted by Kutoz' friend and lieutenant Beybars who takes two steps forward, stands next to the future Sultan and says: "I am with you" while looking around him scrutinizingthe crowd. His gaze actually appears menacing, as if he is not really attempting to gauge the mood among "The People". Rather, he looks like he is intimidating the crowd. The "unconscious" trope of intimidation is obvious in Beybars' gestures. He unsheathes his sword, as if to forcefully signify his support -both moral and military- to Kutoz. But his attitude, the look in his eyes, his tone, and the gesture with his sword replicating Kutoz' threating gesture towards the enemy with his own sword, all these reinforce the trope of military intimidation of the people, rather than that of popular spontaneous support for the leader.

After a brief awkward silence, in a medium long shot, the crowd in the palace cheers the new self-proclaimed sultan and carries him to the throne. In a way, this scene is a metaphorical recounting of Nasser's rise to power and of the consolidation of his own grip on the reins of government because of the tripartite attack on Egypt in 1956, labelled The Suez war in the West. Nasser came to power in a coup that overthrew the then king of Egypt, but stayed as prime minister for almost two years, before assuming the presidency in a second coup against the then president, General Mohamed Naguib. This historical palace intrigue is comparable to the palace intrigue in the film, by virtue of which the emirs surrounding the Sultana were killed leaving the scene for Kutoz and Beybars. The trope of power vacuum that was filled by Nasser was

popular in the official discourse of the 1950s and 1960s and is echoed in the scene I have just analyzed.

If we pursue the cinematic metaphor more in depth, the Mongol's invasion of Egypt in the 13th century would be the equivalent of Britain's, France's and Israel's invasion of Egypt in 1956. Kutoz' rise to power and victory over the Mongols would correspond to Nasser's political victory over the three aggressors in 1956. In the Middle Ages, the Mongol invasion "manufactured" the new Sultan somehow. In 1956, the Western invasion of Port Said and Suez perfected the conditions of possibility for Nasser to become the nation's savior, and by the same token, to be called upon by the people to assume the position of dictator. The fact that the film's conclusive battle is accurately set in historical Palestine adds a meaningful coincidence to the correspondence between the 13th and the 20th centuries. Nasser's legitimacy as dictator and pan-Arab leader is drawn in part from his claim to work towards freeing the Palestinian lands occupied by the state of Israel. A film where an Arab leader defeats an invading foreign army in Palestine can therefore be viewed as projecting the image of Nasser achieving in the future a victory over the state of Israel, which displaced Palestinians from their own lands.
Nevertheless, the supreme irony is that the film *O Islam* ends with the Egyptian victory in the battle of Ain Jallut, located in historical Palestine. What the film omits is that in the 13th century, Kutoz was assassinated by Beybars on his way back to Cairo after that battle and a tour in liberated Arab lands in the Greater Syria[11]. We only see a brotherly unity between the general-turned-sultan and his lieutenant and best friend in the last frames of the film. What we never see is the slightest reference to the actual historical events: Beybars and some coconspirators kill their Sultan and Beybars becomes the new Sultan of Egypt. That narrative would have contradicted the nationalist rhetoric of the film, which is one of unity: one people unified and incarnated as one, by a single leader, which rhetoric would be hardly supported by a tale of palace intrigues and generals hungry for power.

# King Richard and the Crusaders

It may seem incongruous to use *King Richard and the Crusaders*, a film set in medieval times during the Crusades to discuss the figuration of a modern dictatorship, particularly given that the film focuses on

European kings and nobility invading the Arab World in the 12$^{th}$ century. But scholars of the modern Arab World know too well that Salah-u-din, or Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt and Syria has more than once served as a model in cultural productions or in political propaganda serving the purposes of modern Arab dictators, namely Nasser in Egypt and Saddam in Iraq. Nasser had the fortune of sharing a name with Saladin; Saddam happens to be born, like Saladin, in the region of Tikrit, Iraq.

A major Arab biopic, *Al Nasser Salah-u-din* directed by Youssef Chahine in 1963 has instantly become the cinematic pendant of Egyptian propaganda to promote Nasser as the modern Saladin, the leader of a triumphant Arab nationalism and the most vocal supporter of Arab independence and of Palestinian rights. The choice of that historical figure as a political metaphor was convenient for both Nasser and Chahine, since Saladin's full name is Al Nasser Youssef Salah-u-din, referring both to the filmmaker and the Arab leader.

However, one is stricken by the strong similarities between Chahine's 1963 film and David Butler's 1954 film *King Richard and the Crusaders*, particularly when it comes to the figuration of Saladin's character. Hollywood has had a long tradition representing Saladin rather positively and Butler's Warner Studios production was part of tradition[12]. The positive depiction of the Arab medieval leader in the American movie made it easier for Chahine to draw inspiration from it. The Egyptian filmmaker fascination with some Hollywood genres is no secret, the musical and the biopic being among these. An American film introducing a decent, noble Saladin made sense for Chahine as a major source of inspiration, especially that is was based on Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman*, which depicts Saladin in a romantic sympathetic light as the epitome of the chivalrous spirit.

Nevertheless, Saladin was not entirely sympathetic in the American 1954 film. In his depiction of the role, Rex Harrison adopted a high pitched ridiculous voice, which will be reprised by Lawrence Olivier in his rendering of the Sudanese leader Al Mahdi in Basil Dearden's *Khartoum* (UK, 1966), as if major Arab leaders who resisted western imperialism had to always have ridiculous voices. However, it is fair to note that in the film directed by Butler, Saladin appears to be eccentric in his manners and fashion style, joyful, flashy and close to women. The ridiculous pitch in his voice may be attributed to this

eccentricity, rather than to a design to undermine the historical figure. It is striking that in his account of the scene where Nasser announces the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Barker felt that the high pitch of the Arab leader's voice was important to mention. He combined that description with the adjective "hysterical", which coincidently feminizes Nasser. It is worth noting that the feminization of the Arab World is a major trope in orientalist discourse and that Bulter's Saladin was described by contemporary critics as "effeminate", partly because of Rex Harrison high pitched voice.

In her article about "Depictions of Richard I and Saladin in Films and Television Series", Lorraine Stock adopts a commendable postcolonial attitude in her critique of what she deems a misrepresentation of Saladin's character played by Rex Harrison, which misrepresentation she describes as "ultimately demeaning" in the film. Indeed, Harrison's Saladin wears brown face paint, adopts a farcical accent as well as an exaggerated "artificial" voice and has rather comical gestures. She takes offence at what she perceives as the feminization of the Arab leader, in some of his gestures, in the color choice and design of his robes, and because of the troupe of belly dancers who seem to always accompany him, as if they were his own harem. Stock also criticizes Saladin's role in the plot, because he uses disguise and trickery[13].

*King Richard and the Crusaders* adopted some plot lines from Water Scott's novel that made their way to the Chahine version of Saladin, such as the episode where Crusader leaders plotted to assassinate Richard; Saladin disguising himself to heal Richard personally in a secret visit to the English king's tent; and the sub-plot of a romantic "cross-cultural" interest between an Arab leader and a high profile lady Crusader. All these elements are major features of Chahine's film but they are not always strictly copied from the Warner production. Recycling elements from an American film implicitly meant enjoying a sort of validation to the eminence of Nasser via that of Saladin. Furthermore, the validation is even stronger since it comes from the "West", i.e. the locus of contemporary highest forms of "civilization".

For Butler to create a positive image of Saladin in *King Richard* is, in itself, politically generous. But this process may have reproduced –or even predicted, or revealed– the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a modern dictator who would be construed on Saladin's

model, who therefore may be viewed as virtuous as Saladin, as long as he collaborates with the West. If we admit that the cinematic Hollywoodian Saladin was the precursor of the actual Nasser, we may assume that Nasser was a dictator even before Suez, and that he therefore was vilified after 1956 in the West, not because he was a dictator, but because he was an independent one. In a reverse orientalism mindset, a pro-Western dictator is ethically acceptable in the West, as an integral part of the radical otherness of the Orient.

Suppose the personality traits and behavioral model of Saladin in *King Richard* are projections of the expectations or the desires of the United States and /or the United Kingdom vis-a-vis the contemporary leader of Egypt and Syria (Nasser became the president of the United Arab Republic, i.e. Egypt and Syria united, four years after the release of the film). If we adopt the demeaning orientalist thesis, and assume that cinema reveals an unconscious and repressed western desire of authoritarianism, we may assume that western Anglo-Saxon powers wanted an all-powerful leader of the Eastern Mediterranean Arab regions who is not charismatic (hence Saladin's ridiculous voice), but who is friendly with respectable, powerful, Western leaders (hence his efforts to heal Richard and agree to a truce with him), and who agrees to maintain a clear cultural separation from the west (hence his resignation not to seek the love of the Lady Edith Plantagenet, the English lady he was courting during a sizeable portion of the film).

One may argue that, similarly to King Richard's attitude towards Saladin in the film, the Anglo-Saxon West was ready to concede Nasser's full authority over Egypt and its zone of influence in Syria, the same way the Crusaders conceded Saladin's authority over the same region. In exchange, the West expected Nasser to be friendly to them but was not prepared to accept Nasser's claim to cultural parity with-or to equal dignity to- the West. In *King Richard*, Saladin had many friends among the leaders of the Crusaders, felt himself to be equal to the English, but concluded he should not pursue his desire to marry Lady Plantagenet. This subplot could be interpreted as a materialization of the orientalist principle that constructs the Self and the Other, the West and the Orient as radically different from one another and irreconcilable, even if they were to be respectful of each other: "Equal but segregated" so to speak.

In Bulter's film as in Nasser's political struggle, the construction of the relative respect between the two realms of West and East entails a hierarchy. Saladin is tolerated and even respected by the Crusaders, but not to the point of deserving an English lady. Nasser can be accepted by the West as the president of Egypt, in spite of being the colonel who overthrew the legitimate king, and of becoming a dictator, but not to the point of being left completely independent and free to build a gigantic dam to increase Egypt's agricultural lands or to refuse western military hegemony in the Middle East. Nasser was tolerated by western powers because he was a shield against communism in the region, but he started to be called a dictator and even compared to Hitler, when he opposed western economic hegemony in Egypt and nationalized the Suez Canal to direct its revenues to the financing of the Assouan High Dam[14].

Chahine's Saladin is more progressive that Butler's, not just because the Arab leader is cast as the ultimate archetype of chivalry, but because of the transnational nature of his ethics of peace. The Egyptian film *Saladin* devotes many scenes to debates about the desire for peace, far more than does *King Richard and the Crusaders*. Chahine's film goes far in terms of intercultural interactions, since it devotes a major subplot to discuss "mixed marriages" and articulate the love relationship between an Arab officer and a female Crusader culminating in a union, whereas the equivalent subplot in King Richard features a one-sided love and the Arab character does not end up marrying the European character.

Lorraine Stock suggests that the casting of George Sanders as Richard in *King Richard and the Crusaders* was relevant to the era where the film was produced. One may add that the originally British star befitted the role of a major British monarch (even though, historically, we know Richard spoke French). Stock also suggests that the choice of the make-up and of a "grey-haired, avuncular" king, strengthens the image of the mature leader. I surmise that a mature Richard may be a sort of alter-ego for the contemporary leading political figures of the 1950s, such as Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower. This assumption adds relevance to the correspondence I claim between Saladin's character and Nasser, since it confirms other characters in the film are projected unto western leaders contemporary to the Arab leader. One can therefore conclude that *King Richard* is unconsciously criticizing the hunger for

colonial power manifested in Western leaders after World War II, by means of presenting a group of conspiratorial, looter, power-hungry Crusader princes, as opposed to the wise Saladin who legitimately seeks peace and the retreat of Western Crusader (colonial) armies.

## Reverse Cinematic Orientalism

Indeed what is at stake here is a critique of *King Richard and the Crusaders*' orientalism and its depiction of an "imaginary Orient". Furthermore, it is reverse orientalism that needs particular attention when addressing the film. Reverse orientalism makes it "acceptable" that an oriental dictator governs an oriental country or empire. Creating a positive image of Saladin in American films is commendable in itself because it goes against very powerful western imperial discourses belittling national symbols of colonized or formerly colonized societies. However, that orientalism in reverse creates the conditions of possibility of the emergence of a modern dictator in the "Orient", who would be viewed as "virtuous", as long as he collaborates with the West.
This particular strain of orientalism makes it acceptable for the West that an oriental dictator rules over the distant, exotic, radically other Orient. In a western-centric worldview, a manifestation of reverse orientalism is at work under the well-intentioned "tolerance" or its contemporary avatar, "multiculturalism". An ethics of generosity would dictate that the western Self accepts the oriental Other, even if the values of the latter are radically different. Hence, here, accepting an oriental dictator would be the ethical, generous, politically correct attitude to adopt. But this attitude is nevertheless an orientalist one, albeit of a special kind of orientalism, the reverse one. It purports to accept the radical alterity of the Other, but at the same time assumes this alterity to be the embodiment of the exact opposite of the western Self's moral ideals. In this specific example, reverse orientalism is not to depict the Orient as the realm of dictatorship, but to embrace the oriental as a radical Other and assume that the appropriate cultural characteristic of the oriental – to be embraced out of tolerance- is dictatorship.

To conclude therefore, one may assume that Nasser was not vilified in the West because he was a dictator, but because he was an independent one. He was not a pro-western dictator, or –as per the political speak of the postcolonial era- he was not a "moderate", i.e. a compliant

charismatic leader. In a sense, *King Richard and the Crusaders* produced the Nasser post WWII western powers desired: a dictator controlling his country, but who does not expect parity with and total respect from the West. On the other hand, the Egyptian films *O Islam* and *Saladin* produce an apology of the actual Nasser: a popular dictator enjoying a measure of legitimacy because of his leadership in the fight against western invaders.

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## Notes

1. W. Benjamin, 2006, p. 391.
2. Cf. for instance: S. Aburish, 2000; I. L. Horowitz, 2008; M. Marzuki, 2004; S. Mainwaring, A. Perez-Linan, 2014.
3. M. Schoenhals, K. Sarsenov (eds), 2013.
4. Cf. V. Johnson, 2011; R. Cole, 2001.
5. There are however, a few exceptions which address the question of whether Napoleon was a dictator. Cf. for instance: L. Joffrin, 2005; S. Harnay, 2002.
6. W. Benjamin, 1999.
7. W. El Khachab, 2002.
8. W. Benjamin, 2002.
9. C. Gustav Jung, 1966, p. 64-79.
10. A. J. Barker, 1964, p. 17. For an Arab perspective on the emergence of Nasser as the champion of Arab nationalism during the Suez crisis, cf. A. E. Hillal Dessouki, 1989.
11. Cf. J. E. Siouty, 1988.
12. The positive representation of Saladin as a model of chivalry in Western cinema spans at least from Cecil DeMille's *The Crusades* (USA, 1935) to Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (USA, 2005). This tradition goes back to literary depictions of the Arab leader.
13. L. Stock, 2009, p. 108.
14. Cf. for instance: A. Eden, 1960.