

World Cinema of Socialist Industrial Modernity

Kirill Razlogov, an important Soviet Russian film scholar and critic, used to recount a story of how he worked as a film interpreter at the Tashkent film festival when he was fresh out of the university. Once he was tasked with doing a live voice-over translation of an Iraqi documentary, working from French subtitles (a common practice at the festival). But when the film arrived, it turned out that one of the reels had no subtitles, so Razlogov had to improvise. Using his experience, he not only effortlessly inserted his own version of a standard celebratory narrative of the country's continuous path toward progress but was even able to, in real time, predict the order of sequences. In a pastoral sequence featuring a body of water, Razlogov concluded his improvised description of its natural beauty with the pronouncement of the importance of water as a source of energy. And sure enough, the next image appearing on the screen was a hydroelectric station!¹

This anecdote highlights many important aspects of the festival: films frequently arrived at the last minute, unseen by the organizing committee, which often left it to the live translators to interpret them to the public, at times regardless of their knowledge of the language or availability of a script. The prevalence of certain kinds of films at the festival made them predictable, but in this case Razlogov's prescience was due not only to his knowledge of Asian or African films; many of the same tropes as hydroelectric stations were a well-worn motif in Soviet cinema, all too familiar to its audiences. As Mariia Koskina argues—paraphrasing Katerina Clark's famous formula of the master plot of socialist-realist narratives “boy meets girl and gets a tractor”—by the 1960s an apt description of Soviet cinema could be “boy meets girl and they build a dam.”²

Beyond the general disdain of the genre of institutional documentary such as the one Razlogov was asked to translate on that occasion (an attitude certainly shared by film critics worldwide), the humor of his anecdote articulates the fatigue

that images of hydroelectric stations and other industrial wonders induced among Soviet intelligentsia and general audiences alike. The Soviet mediasphere was saturated with tropes of industrial modernization in newsreels and documentaries (regularly shown on television and before feature films in theaters) and frequently in the fiction cinema as well. Dams were especially common, as much because of their importance for the vision of modern industrial development as for their “photogenetic” visuality, effectively bringing together spectacular technology, the power of the elements, and heroic feats of human labor. Films highlighting industrial modernity of the socialist decolonial world thus served as manifestations of affinities, given the importance awarded to accelerated industrial modernization in all the areas of the world represented at the festival, as well as evidence of the supposed success of the socialist economic model of development and an implicit nod to the impact of Soviet aid to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

THE GEOGRAPHIES AND TEMPORALITIES OF SOCIALIST MODERNITY

In his discussion of oil films by British Petroleum (BP), Brian Jacobson argues for a complex but powerful relationship bringing together oil, film-, and world-making:

Working in an energetic feedback loop, film and oil, the last century’s most powerful media, co-constituted the world we have today.

From the floors of the Persian Gulf to Abu Dhabi, Zanzibar, Papua, Sicily, the Canadian Rockies, and even Antarctica, BP’s global prospecting efforts mapped out a new corporate world shaped by forward-thinking progress. Film . . . did more than just reveal this new world; it helped create it.³

Films featuring socialist industrial production (including but not limited to oil), like the ones featured at Tashkent, complement Jacobson’s world-building vision by showing how it functioned on the other side of the Cold War divide. This other, now somewhat forgotten, world of socialist extraction equally constituted the one we live in today. At the time, however, it was seen as an alternative to both industrial modernity’s colonial past and capitalist present, as a path to economic and political self-sufficiency for postcolonial nations that would guarantee an equal distribution of both revenues and benefits. By the late 1960s, however, the enthusiasm of earlier decades about centrally planned large-scale industrial projects in the Global South was diminishing: in tandem with ecological damage, concerns about the ineffective economics of these large entities and their human and cultural costs were emerging and finding some reflection on the screen. But even as central planning fell gradually into disrepute, the rise of OPEC and the leverage it gave its members provided another powerful geopolitical force that funded industrialization projects in favored countries. At Tashkent, over the decade of the 1970s films reflecting these

developments came from places as different as Iran and Zambia, Peru and Niger, Iraq and Armenia, India and Panama, Morocco and Siberia.

This chapter unpacks the logics governing the shared tropes of industrial modernity as seen through cinematic production across the socialist bloc and the postcolonial world and their functions within their respective national and international contexts. As in the previous chapter, I will take the Tashkent festival here as merely a starting point for a broader discussion of world socialist cinema, whose generic and stylistic explorations of industrial modernity ranged from ethnographic and tourist films to avant-gardist documentary celebrations of technology, to melodramas and musicals, all of which confront fundamental questions of negotiating life under the regime of rapid and often violent modernization. This chapter will take a closer look at the Syrian documentary *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (Muhammad 'an Sadd al-Furat, Omar Amiralay, 1970) and the two versions of Youssef Chahine's ill-fated Soviet-Egyptian coproduction *People on the Nile* (*Al-Nil wa-al-Hayah*, 1968; and *Al-Nas wa-al-Nil*, 1972). Even though their directors in many ways belonged to the same cinematic circuit, neither of these projects got to be screened at Tashkent. Both, however, serve as perfect demonstrations of a socialist cinematic perspective on industrial development—as well as both the potentialities and limits of internationalism underlying such projects.

The centrality of accelerated industrial modernity in the service of the people was an important affinity between the developmentalist ethos of socialist states and much of the decolonial world.⁴ It remained a sustained priority for state heads and elites throughout the Cold War period, deeply affecting the everyday lives of people. The productivist ethos inevitably found its manifestation on the screen and, more generally, formed the economic component of “the Spirit of the Bandung.” In the Soviet Union, the state plan for the electrification of the country (GOERLO) and, more generally, the industrialization of its western-central part in the postwar years was perceived as the model for development not only for the rest of the Soviet bloc and the friendly states of the Global South but also for the country's own peripheries, including Central Asia (although within this consensus there was room for debate during the Thaw and late Soviet period).⁵ Thus, by the 1960s, Soviet policies toward the developing world and its aid programs were inseparable from the developments in the Soviet's own “East.”⁶ Far from being imposed by either side of the Cold War, the ethos of accelerated industrial modernity was equally foundational for the leaders of the Bandung movement and all the independent states of the Global South because they understood their political autonomy and economic status as conditional on displacing agriculture as their chief economic support in favor of domestic industry. Rapid development on this scale required massive energy, ideally domestically produced—a policy clothed in the heroic rhetoric of science and technology, which could, in Nehru's words, be “added to the power of man to such an extent that for the first time it was possible to conceive that man could triumph over and shape his physical environment.”⁷

Modernization and development went hand in hand with the discourse of decolonialization in the Global South, and an understanding of development as a political category was often the driving force behind distinct and frequently shifting Cold War geopolitical alignments.⁸ This developmental logic was nonetheless predicated on the inherent contradiction between the distinctly socialist goals of industrial modernization, to which many decolonial leaders subscribed, and the slogan of “catching up” to capitalist development, which even the Soviet Union fully embraced. Samir Amin eloquently summarizes this conceptual conundrum, identifying two particularly problematic features of the shared decolonial and socialist industrializations: the underlying logic of technocratic rationality and exponential growth, which was indistinguishable from its capitalist counterpart, and the extreme violence of its impact, which made its human and environmental costs ultimately similar to those engendered by capitalist exploitation.⁹ These overlaps posed two representational problems—first, how to make socialist development look different from the capitalist one? And second, how to visualize the successes of these developmental projects in the face of their increasingly visible costs? In analyzing the regime of visibility of socialist and decolonial representations of industrial modernity, this chapter will wrestle with these questions in different national and cinematic contexts.¹⁰

SOCIALIST INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

While socialist industrialization also engenders technocratic rationality, it differs from capitalism in its value system. In economic terms, socialist industrialization undermined profit (and the capitalist system of financialization) as its foundation, often relying instead on barter exchange.¹¹ This privileging of the barter system was a particularly important factor for economic cooperation of the socialist bloc with the countries of the Global South, the latter hoping to escape the toll of debt that was becoming increasingly unavoidable when trying to become part of the global “free market” system. The anxiety over debts (and industrial self-sufficiency as its alternative) is palpable already in many films from the midcentury, most famously in Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (*Bharat Mata*, 1957)—which ends with a triumphant image of a dam—as well as Ousmane Sembene’s *Money Order* (*Mandabi*, 1968), which was such a success at the first Tashkent festival. As we will see, the emphasis on debt, and development as the solution to it, was hardly a coincidence—and with its failure, the Global South would get to know the debt regime and its radically uneven distribution of benefits all too well after the victory of neoliberalism in the 1980s, as brilliantly explored by that other famous graduate of VGIK, Abderrahmane Sissako, in *Bamako* (2006).

Symbolically, the value of these socialist industrial projects was predicated on collective ownership and equal distribution of both the commons themselves and the revenue stemming from their extraction and industrial production. The

commons as, on the one hand, collectively owned and shared and, on the other, as a resource for the purposes of extraction and manipulation (without which industrial modernization is impossible) is the duality that, as famously discussed by Michael Hardt, constitutes a major tension and division between anticapitalist and environmentalist movements today.¹² Further complicating this picture throughout the twentieth century was the conflict between traditional, especially minoritarian and Indigenous, cultures and centrally planned large-scale industrial projects, which not only physically displaced (or destroyed) these cultures but also posited a very different way of living in the world, creating a conflict that wasn't easy to resolve through promises of a more just future to come.

Thus, despite important differences, the utilitarian presupposition in both capitalist and socialist industrial modernization schemes made individual human and nonhuman life alike subservient to more abstract future goals. In socialist and postcolonial discourses on industrialization, the rhetoric of state nationalism often took the place of capitalist accumulation—its interests superseding those of capital. Aggressive and accelerated industrial modernization was driven not by the increase of profits but by the need to redress the severe geopolitical inequities and dependencies produced by the history of imperialist expansion. To planners and policy makers, the logic of survival, rather than increasing consumption, dictated the planning and carrying out of large-scale infrastructural industrial projects, the goal of which was to boost production to achieve economic autonomy. Avoiding the dependency trap of relying on Western capital, many newly independent states opted for central planning, putting the state in control of the economy to kick-start industry and put in place agrarian reforms.

Contrary to many contemporary assumptions guided by the retrospective neoliberal logic, this was neither unprecedented nor particularly unusual: in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, faced with the aftermath of the First World War and economic depression, most European states, as well as the US and Canada, similarly adopted various forms of state planning and large developmental projects. As Martha Lampland notes in her exploration of Hungary's gradual transition to a socialist economy, "during this period planned economies were found in capitalist and socialist societies, in fascist and liberal regimes, and in colonial states as well as in sovereign states."¹³ She demonstrates that in the 1920s and 1930s, embracing technocratic rationality and advancing the role of scientific experts in the areas of economic development was inseparable from various forms of state planning in much of the world. While the Soviet Union certainly provided the most radical version of this, the logic of state governance of large-scale modernization of industry and agriculture was more typical than exceptional. When the geopolitical and economic developments of the 1940s heralded new modes of liberal economic globalization, creating US-led hegemony of the "free market," the devastating impact of World War II on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union further increased their historical "underdevelopment," bringing their industrial and agricultural output on par with the postcolonial world.¹⁴ Aggressive industrialization, then, was not

merely an inevitable technological extension of the broader ideology of modernization that begun in the previous century. For much of the world outside North America and parts of Western Europe, it was experienced as a historical and moral necessity for survival. As an example, Lampland quotes from a speech of a Hungarian industry leader in 1947, who put this condition in the following terms: "If the state recognizes the rights of its citizens to life, then it must help them so that they can live. Whether one likes it or not, agrees or not with our design—theoretically, politically, economically, morally or philosophically—the conditions force us to have a target and planned economy. The road ordained by economic and social necessity is the one we must travel."¹⁵

Some version of a speech like this was given by policy makers in much of the postcolonial world in the 1950s and 1960s. This was the logic that brought together large-scale industrial projects, nationalist ideologies, Soviet and Eastern European aid programs to the "developing world," and state-sponsored filmmaking practices. By the early 1970s, the cinematic articulations of this socioeconomic turn became so predictable that Razlogov could easily reproduce in voicing-over an Iraqi documentary he'd never seen before.

INDUSTRIAL DOCUMENTARY: EAST AND WEST, NORTH AND SOUTH

That predictability was certainly not unique to the socialist world—as highly generic patterns are prevalent in nonfiction films, generally, and institutional media, in particular. And just as socialist technocratic rationality converges with that of capitalism, these films share many rhetorical figures and imagery with their capitalist counterparts. These extend to the tropes of the conflict of humans and nature (with man emerging triumphant), the future horizon of universal well-being, and the image of nature as a boundless resource to be used by human beings.¹⁶ Corporate media throughout the twentieth century propagandized for multinational industry and commerce. State media, as well, celebrated its industrial projects as expressions of national progress in the name of well-being of its citizens. While the capitalist industrial media created its vision of a "free-market" world (of multinational corporations with their variously positioned stakeholders and geographies of surveying and prospecting), its state socialist counterpart visualized the world of internationalist solidarities and centrally planned development.

As Hediger and Vonderau argue in their influential volume, such industrial media are "best understood as interfaces between discourses and forms of social and industrial organization. More often than not, industrial films are supposed to directly translate discourse into social practice (including political action)."¹⁷ In the case of global socialist cinematic production, this translation was assumed even when actual development was flimsy or fictitious. Timothy Nunan describes the dynamic in Afghanistan: "During the Cold War, even the best-informed experts could imagine an Afghan economy and state out of only a few conversations, or a

walk around the right couple of blocks of Kabul. Frequently, ‘development’ meant less building a state or economy than injecting meaning into fragments of both. Seen in isolation, however, and preferably with the interlocution of native informants, experts could read into a factory, a canal, a gas pipeline, a spreadsheet, or sawmill a functioning but in reality barely existent Afghan state.”¹⁸

Along the lines of the “experts” Nunan describes, these films frequently conjured images of state industrial development where there was none, doing so in competition with the West’s own world-building (which was also not averse to fantasizing the development of its client-states). The logic of instrumentalization that, as Hediger and Vonderau, as well as Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland, argue is crucial to “useful cinema,” tasked the cinematic apparatus in the socialist bloc and Third World with producing compelling models of development as alternatives to the imaginaries of both colonial media and contemporary capitalism. Thus socialist films needed to clearly reframe it as belonging to and serving the interests of the working class, not capital, and as profoundly national yet also internationalist. At the same time, socialism’s internationalist world-making had to be distinct from either multinational corporate or liberal international (such as UN or UNESCO’s) articulations.

The industrial documentary by the 1960s was a well-established genre in the West, and it evolved, indeed, in seamless continuity with colonial—especially British—media’s emphasis on development as part of the colonial project. State institutions (such as the Canadian National Film Board) and corporate film units (such as Shell or BP) produced a steady stream of documentaries. Their international reach should not be underestimated: Shell Oil Company alone, for example, had film units in Australia, Venezuela, Egypt, Nigeria, India, and all over Southeast Asia. Many of their films were shown in theaters and mobile units to audiences everywhere; thus “in 1951, there were almost 160,000 screenings around the world with an audience of more than 8.5 million. In 1960, the international audience had grown to forty-five million, and films were shown in some thirty countries.”¹⁹ Certain “prestige films” were produced specifically for high-profile international screenings at both general and specialized film festivals.²⁰ Similarly, Iraq’s British-controlled oil company in the 1950s produced at least two-dozen sponsored films and cine-magazine episodes. “These films and cine-magazine [episodes] worked to legitimate political acts of foreign exploitation and control of Iraqi oil, land and labour from 1951 to 1958 within a regional context of mounting anti-imperialist discourse and nationalist movement building.”²¹

Against this (neo) colonialist legacy, documentary makers in postrevolutionary Iraq and Syria produced their own celebrations of national industrial and agrarian development throughout the 1970s.²² The nationalization of major industries was a crucial act of postcolonial independence, merging the rentier state structure (dependency on oil rents) with state-socialism. These films performed a self-reflexive response to earlier colonial media while often operating along the

lines of the same genre conventions. In many contested countries on the boundaries of the Cold War binary, such as Egypt or India, documentary films dealing with industrial development were produced by endogenous sources—national state-sponsored organizations (such as India's Films Division or Egypt's Aid Organization for Documentary Film Production, replaced in 1963 with the General Egyptian Film Organization)—sometimes with the involvement of the exogenous ones from both sides of the Iron Curtain (with USIA looming especially large). When nationalization of industries forced the withdrawal of corporate or foreign film units, their still legacies loomed large: in Egypt, many documentarians who would later work for the National Documentary Film Centre received their education in Shell Film Unit's training program.²³ The Colonial Film Unit in West Africa, which specialized in development films, ran the West African Film School to "Africanize" film production, although its impact on local filmmakers after independence was more ambiguous.²⁴

We can therefore assume that both filmmakers and audiences in newly independent countries were familiar with the industrial development documentary genre, and attitudes toward these films varied. While certain decolonial film festivals, like Carthage or FESPACO, rejected state-sponsored industrial documentaries, this wasn't the case for pan-African cultural festivals. FESMAN in Dakar in 1966 (Senghor's celebration of Negritude), PANAF in Algiers in 1969 (intended as a radical alternative to FESMAN), and especially the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77) in Lagos (which "signaled Nigeria's triumphant emergence as a significant player in global capitalism)" showed a variety of documentaries, with industrial development in the mix.²⁵ While agriculture was still the largest economic sector for most countries in the Global South, the images of modernity were usually attached to large-scale infrastructural sites.²⁶ Thus, despite the fact that some attention had to be paid to the "agrarian problem" (such as, for example, the Algerian films on the agrarian reform of 1973), large-scale industrial projects were undoubtedly at the center of cinematic production, showcasing development, and those were the films that tended to be exported to international film festivals and other global venues.²⁷

THE SPECTACLE OF SOCIALIST INDUSTRIAL MODERNIZATION

Unlike many capitalist infrastructures, which are commonly characterized by their invisibility, with the notable exception of nuclear power, socialist iconographic celebration of industrialization was oriented toward revealing rather than concealing.²⁸ This was similarly the case for nationalist modes of representation throughout the Global South, where industrial imagery stood as evidence of the new states' modernity. Development was the mechanism of symbolic entry into the simultaneous global temporality as a way to refute the (Western) slur

of “backwardness” as a temporal lag, putting these new nations in sync with the contemporary world—while also showing their political effectiveness. The rhetoric of backwardness was continuously reinforced by the West; in 1953, a US State Department officially announced: “We must frankly recognize that the hands of the clock of history are set at different hours in different parts of the world.”²⁹ And Marxist-Leninist doctrine, while understanding this temporal lag in terms of capitalist exploitation, nonetheless embraced the same linear temporal logic, as did Bandung socialists. In consequence, the search for a “great leap forward” or “take off” necessitated an aggressively accelerated clock. “There is only one-way traffic in Time,” Nehru famously observed.³⁰ As we will see, showcasing industrial infrastructure—especially through appropriately spectacular cinematic technologies made all the more spectacular in the context of international film festivals—was an effective way to demonstrate successful catching up to the global “now” time.

This hypervisibility through festival circuits also served to highlight the dynamic between national(ist) and international(ist) aspects of this process, the latter being also important because of the external funding that often resourced such industrial projects. In Soviet contexts, it also signified the successes of its own system of international developmental aid against the US one. The more spectacular the infrastructural projects and the public sector economy connected to it, the more convincing was the evidence that the Soviet developmental model worked—even where in reality most countries were engaged in complex balancing of the needs and interests of local elites and competing sources of international support, whether across the Cold War divide, or across the Sino-Soviet split.³¹ The cinematic showcases of these large-scale projects were major currency in Cold War cultural diplomacy on both sides.

One mode of showcasing industrial modernity in documentary was by subsuming these images within the genres of ethnographic or tourist documentaries, which mirrored the reality that modern industrial sites often became tourist destinations alongside more traditional sites. For instance, tours organized around the Tashkent festival included such Uzbek historical monuments as Bukhara or Samarkand, as well as a panoply of factories and collective farms. The representational equivalent of this convention was extremely common. Thus, numerous African and Asian documentaries at Tashkent, produced to “introduce” their country to the rest of the world, followed a similar itinerary: a sequence of spectacular natural landscapes followed by a sequence of historical monuments and local artisanal production and, finally, a sequence of industrial and infrastructural “monuments,” such as bridges, oil refineries, or dams. By means of this metonymy, industrial infrastructures are absorbed into the “natural” flow that associates them with natural landscapes and sites of cultural heritage. Razlogov’s improvised commentary, which opens this chapter, is a perfect demonstration of the young critic’s keen awareness of this convention.

While such visual protocols, largely drawn on romantic and colonial genres, are aimed at creating an impression of temporal continuity between the natural and cultural past and the industrial present, a different aesthetic modality of industrial documentary draws on the iconographies of the 1920s cinematic avant-gardes. Here the stress falls on rupture and the experience of temporal acceleration of industrial development through visual tropes and narrative techniques that are best known from the Soviet and German documentary traditions. Chinese revolutionary documentaries also picked up this accelerated tempo and similarly looked to “defy the determinism of conventional developmental time.”³² The hallmarks of this style—such as montage and trick photography as means to manipulate time and space, or striking extreme low-angle shots—were also adopted, for example, by certain of India’s Films Division documentaries to organize many of the films that represent industrialization projects even into the 1960s and 1970s.

A distinctly socialist approach to this mode of representation was the emphasis on the process and human labor, bearing the mark of Marxist critiques of reification and image commodification of capitalism. Instead of erasing all traces of labor and the history of production to create a monumental effect, these films focus on the process. Yet the process is understood here not as a sequence of discrete production steps leading to the completion of the task (in the way that Salomé Skvirsky has recently defined “the process film”) but as a way to connect and epistemologically unify the divisions of labor, raw material, and its final product, which would otherwise appear as separate.³³ This includes the production of an industrial infrastructure, the sourcing of natural materials, and the production of the very machines and technology that enable socialist construction. With their own form of labor and production, these protocols are shown to form part of this overarching process. Cinema and other forms of cultural work are also included in this understanding of process: rather than serving as a marker of bourgeois artistic subjectivity, cinematic self-referentiality is used to underline the ways filmmakers and film technology participate in this larger process of modernization and socialist construction. In this way, the production of the film is both part of the industrialization and the building of socialism and internationalism. While Dziga Vertov’s work is both originary and exemplary of this cinematic approach, its vestiges are evident even in the most pedestrian socialist industrial documentaries.³⁴

Putting these two modes of representing industrialization side by side, it is easy to see a certain tension between the “tourist ethnographic” and “constructivist” paradigms. Where cultural diplomacy was at stake, the emphasis on labor and industrial processes risked ruining the monumentalist effect aimed at, which would be best served by spectacular images of completed projects. This was often framed as a question of aesthetics and legibility, since a worksite is by definition messy and its existence means the project is uncompleted, thus introducing contingency into the rational planning process and the speedy accomplishment of its goals. As early as the 1930s, Vertov was attacked for “disorganized” depictions (and aural

constructions) of the industrialization process of shock-workers' Five-Year Plan in Donbass.³⁵ In China in 1957, according to Carlo Lizzani, an Italian filmmaker making a documentary there, the authorities objected strongly to his filming anything that was still under construction, demanding that he shot only final products, making these sites look more like monuments and not as "work[s] in progress."³⁶

But across such divisions in approaches, socialist industrial documentaries more than their capitalist counterparts placed emphasis on labor, habitually placing the workers at their visual and narrative center—women workers in particular. This was especially the case when documenting geographically "peripheral" industrial projects, with their harsh natural conditions. Emphasizing these workers' femininity and their resilience in the face of these challenges, these documentaries simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed gender norms, acknowledged the extreme demands such labor placed on workers, and neutralized the impact of such demands by showing that even young physically fragile women were capable of them.³⁷

A CULTURE OF EXPERTS

But what kind of labor counted? In the earlier avant-garde, manual workers (i.e., "the proletariat") were the stars of the industrial process. In the postwar decolonial era, this emphasis was gradually replaced with the members of the technocratic professions: engineers, planners, geologists, and other "scientific experts," who formed an urban elite in cities as disparate as Dar es Salaam and Baghdad. In the course of the 1950s and 1960s in the Soviet Union, the celebration of workers was increasingly relegated to popular genres (comedies and melodramas). Even in those films, the characters were usually either highly skilled workers or continuing their education: Nikolai Rybnikov became the heartthrob of the popular movies of the late 1950s and early 1960s by playing an exemplary and fearless worker performing feats of bravery and productivity in dangerous work conditions at various "projects of the century" (*Spring on Zarechnaya Street / Vesna na Zarechnoi ulitse*, Marlen Khutsiev, 1956; *Heights/Vysota*, Alexander Zarkhi, 1957; *Gals/Devchata*, Yuri Chuliukin, 1961). But in the more ambitious and "serious" cinema of the Thaw (which, incidentally, was most likely to circulate internationally through the film festival circuit)—from *The Poem of the Sea (Poema o more*, Iuliia Solntseva, 1959) to *Nine Days of One Year (Deviat' dnei odnogo goda*, Mikhail Romm, 1962), *Letter Never Sent (Neotpravlennoe pis'mo*, Mikhail Kalatozov, 1960) to *Brief Encounters (Korotkie vstrechi*, Kira Muratova, 1967)—the main heroes were scientists, engineers, and geologists.

Geologists, in particular, became the romantic heroes of the Soviet 1960s—at once brave adventurers, battling against the elements in faraway places and builders of communism, whose scientific knowledge grounded the industry of the future. In fact, the romanticization of geologists became such a cliché that the plot of the Soviet musical comedy *The Restless (Neposedy*, Viktor Ivanov and Abram Naroditskii, 1967) revolved around it.³⁸ Its protagonist, a spunky but

politically immature young woman from a small town, joins a cohort of Soviet (and international) enthusiasts on their way to Siberia to work at a hydroelectric station. Unlike most of the Soviet “romantics” heading to Siberia, she has a more traditionally romantic goal—she is going purely in hopes of meeting a geologist to marry. The geologists are, as she knows from the movies, the biggest catch and will also sweep her away to the capital. The film even features a fantasy sequence where a crowd of men are climbing a mountain to get to Zoya, the protagonist, with one particularly handsome bearded young fellow saying to her, “I am a geologist, you know me from the movies!” In addition to the overall hammy tone of the film, the fact that Zoya ends up with a clumsy but adorable crane operator rather than a geologist adds to the impression, frequently noted by critics and audiences alike, that the film belonged to an earlier era of the 1930s Soviet comedies.

Even in the face of the overarching rhetoric that proclaimed that the masses in a classless society were all working toward the same goal (of building socialism), the 1960s was the era of specialists. For the Soviet republics in particular, it was all about the upward mobility that could be leveraged through acquiring technical skills or a specialized education. Expertise could even help Soviet citizens work or study abroad, a rare privilege.³⁹ In fact, most international exchanges and interactions (including the military ones) were framed as scientific research and technical assistance, imposing a technocratic framework on the broader relationship between the socialist bloc and the developing world, which was mirrored in cinema, albeit in complicated and often ambivalent ways. Developmentalism and accelerated large-scale industrialization formed the technological side of this process, while its institutional aspect was manifested in the growth of professionalized policy makers in state bureaucracies (culminating in state planning). Cinema and other media were also overseen by a cultural bureaucracy, which often included filmmakers. The image of the filmmaker in the mold of a technocrat, which figures in Peter Hopkinson’s *The Role of Film in Development*, published by UNESCO in 1971, shows how pervasive the administrative mind-set was on both sides of the Iron Wall: the filmmaker was conceived as a “social engineer who has chosen film as his tool, and totally mastered its methods.”⁴⁰

The emphasis on the creation of the technocratic elite and the class of scientific experts, however, was not perceived by many participants of these projects within socialist contexts as an expression of classism or exclusionary hierarchies. Instead, just as in the 1930s, as Stephen Kotkin demonstrates in his majestic account in *Magnetic Mountain*, those involved in the 1960s and 1970s large-scale industrial projects, such as the High Dam in Aswan, understood themselves as contributing to a “revolutionary truth.”⁴¹ As recent work demonstrates, a more bottom-up methodological approach to the experiences of industrial modernization reveals that for its participants, the affective communities and forms of collectivities created by these projects were often more transformative than their industrial outcomes.⁴² As Kalinovsky summarizes one of his Tajik subject’s accounts, “The dam—and by extension, the Soviet Union as a whole—helped him transform

himself, and he in turn helped build the dam and transform his community, contributing to the larger goal of building a new world in the process. I would hear variations of this narrative many times over the coming months.”⁴³

At its best, cinema was able to represent and reflect on the complex responses and transformative effects these massive projects engendered. While many of the industrial documentaries relied exclusively on stereotypical images of “the people,” many of which were deeply rooted in colonial imaginaries and other statist iconographies, others looked to evoke the new collectivities and imaginaries that emerged from the people themselves—and not by state dictate. To tease out these divergent strands and internal contradictions, this chapter will turn to a discussion of one documentary and two versions of a fiction film (an Egyptian-Soviet coproduction), in which the focus on dams and hydroelectric stations demonstrates the complexities inscribed in the socialist path to modernization from different perspectives.

FILM ESSAY ON THE EUPHRATES DAM

What would a distinctly Marxist dam building film look like? The answer to this question emerges when we compare *A Village Smiles* to a film like the Syrian Omar Amiralay’s *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam*, about the Baath government prestige project, the Tabqa Dam in the Euphrates Valley. Called “the centrepiece of Eastern bloc economic assistance,” the Tabqa Dam was built between 1968 and 1977, receiving around \$150 million in funding from the USSR, which also sent 850 specialists to assist 10,000 Syrian builders.⁴⁴ This construction project was part of the second Five Year Plan of the Baath government, which depended increasingly on the socialist bloc despite the Assad’s rejection of scientific socialism.⁴⁵ The Soviets were eager to extend cinematic relationships with Syria as well, with tireless lobbying not only for organizing Soviet film screenings but also for the filming of a Soviet-Syrian film about the construction of the dam. The Soviet suggestion never received the green light from the Assad government, which turned instead to Omar Amiralay to immortalize the Tabqa Dam construction.⁴⁶ The cameraman on the film was Kais al-Zubaidi, whose extensive ties with the Soviet bloc and participation at the Tashkent festival we explored in previous chapters.

Soon to become Syria’s most renowned international filmmakers, eventually becoming an opponent of Assad’s policies and leaving the country for France in 1978 after his films were banned, Amiralay was funded to make *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* by the Syrian National Film Organization. Unlike his two subsequent films in what became known as the Euphrates Trilogy (*Everyday Life in a Syrian Village / Al-Hayat al-Yaomiyyah fi Qaryah Suriyyah* [1974], a Marxist critique of the failed socialist revolution, and *A Flood in Baath Country / Tufan fi Bilad al-Ba’th* [2003], a detailed indictment of not only the Baath Party’s regime but also of the environmental and social impact of the dam he’d celebrated), *Film Essay* is an ode to industrial modernization, which explains Amiralay’s later lament over this “error of [his] youth” in the opening of *A Flood in Baath Country*.

Despite its director's disavowal, however, *Film Essay* does give us an important example of Marxist vision of development. This is not accomplished by celebrating Soviet assistance and expertise (which is erased in the film's imagery) but through an emphasis on the work on the dam and the new and old collectives it mobilizes. Amiralay, a great admirer of Vertov, alludes to the latter not only in his employment of montage (a staple of leftist documentary avant-garde of the 1960s everywhere in the world) but, more importantly, in highlighting the link between technology and human labor. From its distinctly constructivist photography, with extremely low- and high-angle shots of the dam's construction sites and the people working on it, and rhythmic montage match-on-action moving-crane sequences, it is clearly operating in the Kino-eye vein of uniting the machine (whether it's a crane or a camera) and the worker (metallurgist or cameraman), intercutting these images with a long shot of groups (of, presumably, workers) kneeling down together in prayer at the construction site. The camera here sways slightly along with the crane, leaving us with the impression of their integration—among themselves and within the landscape and its machinery, including the camera eye. A series of visual rhymes is constructed using the similar texture of the mud-covered hands of the man building a fence, the parched earth (familiar from just about all dam documentaries), the thorniness of the cattle's fur, the bristle of the bushes, the wrinkles on the face and hands of the woman making bread, the walls of the hut where a younger woman is cooking, the folds of the clothes of the two women (one with a toddler, the other breastfeeding a baby), culminating with the cracked feet of the older man and, finally, coming full circle through a close-up of cracks in the parched earth. The total effect is to make clear the rhetorical point concerning the harsh arid conditions of the countryside, which a more effective system of irrigation would liberate.

Amiralay does not present the people in these sequences as symbols of "the old" preindustrial society but as subjects, aware of the filmmaker's presence (many of them look inquisitively into the camera), their expressions and gestures both purposeful and affectionate; here the children are smiling. Moreover, they are clearly presented as a community, linked by harsh natural conditions as well as by labor itself (whether domestic or agrarian). Both labor and technologies are, furthermore, linked to art: thus, when the spectacular machinery is visually reintroduced into the narrative, these images are mediated through close-ups of the clay figures of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization of the Euphrates, followed by close-ups of children hard at work, concentrated on creating their own art—which, in the final images of the film, is shown to be the drawing of the construction site and the people working at it.

The juxtaposition between the children's drawings of the dam and the relics of ancient civilizations (as artistic creations equally bound to the conditions of living and working on the Euphrates) creates a temporal link that reinforces the perception of the dam construction not only as manufactured by the state but as mediated through and embedded in popular experiences and imaginaries. The

children's drawings expand the domain of how the dam is perceived and the way it can serve as a trigger for artistic creation, which allows for a story that could be quite different from official accounts. Of course, children's productions are easy to see as a deliberate and direct result of ideological indoctrination—of a modern industrial postcolonial state ideology that treats its subjects as children to be shaped into model citizens (and soldiers) or, more specifically, of a socialist state with its emphasis on the formation of a “new man” through its civilizing educational mission. Nonetheless, their screen presence points to an artistic methodology mediating between the subjective (as children's art is often understood to be the freshest and most original expression of an individual vision) and the collective, between informal artistic practices and highly codified and state-sponsored ones.

Indeed, as recent work demonstrates, dam-building projects generated an enormous amount of media, both official and informal.⁴⁷ From amateur films made by the workers themselves to journalistic and cinematic projects, media-making in this context can be seen as an important extension of popular participation, creating a different and more varied vocabulary for the narrative of modernization. Many filmmakers saw their task as giving voice to ordinary everyday experiences. But acknowledging the complex range of affects and beliefs of the people who participated in these projects could, indeed, reveal a less triumphalist perception of these projects, ultimately leading to an outright critique. As Amiralay's artistic trajectory demonstrates, extensive interviews about the experiences of the people impacted by industrialization would inevitably speak to centrally planned modernization's costs, turning cinema into an instrument of the critique of the state. But focusing on the experience of the people, their motivations and their work, was itself a crucial aspect of socialist ideology, thus always generating the potential that the filmmakers working in the service of socialism could find themselves on the outs with the state's idea of its immediate priorities—a situation that befell more than one Tashkent participant and many other Third-Worldist filmmakers.

Cinematically, this set of complex contradictions in the experiences and ideologies of socialist industrial modernization is perfectly captured in the history of what should have been the most famous dam film ever made, Youssef Chahine's ill-fated Soviet-Egyptian coproduction *People on the Nile* and its two—1968 and 1972—versions. The film was originally intended to be exhibited at the opening of the first Tashkent film festival, in 1968, following its intended Moscow premiere, and the first in a series of Soviet-Egyptian coproductions, overseen by Chahine. Tashkent was meant to provide the ideal space not only to show the film but also to discuss and negotiate these future plans.⁴⁸ But this is not what happened, and the remainder of this chapter will focus on the vexed production, exhibition, and reception history of this project, as well as a comparison of the two versions (both in different ways failed), which resulted from it.

BUILDING THE HIGH DAM

Nasser's most daring, demanding, and dangerous enterprise, the centerpiece of the Egyptian revolution and, he assured the nation, the way to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency and industrial stability, rested in his plan for the Aswan High Dam. Its erection is an exemplary Cold War case study as initially both superpowers pledged money for the building of the dam, but the US and UK withdrew their offers when Egypt signed an arms deal with the Soviet bloc. To raise funds, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and turned to the USSR, which provided a low interest financial loan, heavy machinery, and technological assistance for the dam. Egyptians accepted the Soviet design of the project, and construction began in 1960.⁴⁹ The completion of the first phase of the project—in May 1964—was an international news story, with a ceremony presided over by Nasser and Khrushchev and attended by many representatives of the Non-Aligned nations, with Algeria's Ben Bella as a special guest. In distancing itself from the US and the UK, the project confirmed Nasser's anticolonialist stance and leadership of the pan-Arab movement, while also putting Egypt in line over Iraq, which the Soviets had previously favored as a major aid recipient. For the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, the High Dam was "a showpiece of their superior technological, engineering, and logistical resources and a demonstration of Moscow's willingness to take on even the most ambitious development schemes."⁵⁰ The grandiose vision of the Aswan Dam so influenced the leaders of Algeria and Syria that they signed on with the Soviets for similar cooperative projects.⁵¹

As Elizabeth Bishop demonstrates, in actuality the story of the Soviet-Egyptian cooperation on the Aswan Dam was one of mutual frustrations and miscalculations, creating conflicts among the administrators that led to Egypt's gradual removal of all Soviet expertise from the project.⁵² Alia Mossallam's account of the workers' recollections of that experience tells a slightly different story: one of comradeship and shared aspirations, however tragic or disappointing the outcomes.⁵³ Both accounts show the degree to which Aswan was envisioned as a social and political experiment by all involved: Bishop emphasizes the way Soviet cooperation entailed not merely a transfer of technological/scientific know-how but of production culture as well, while Mossallam illustrates powerfully how Egyptian construction workers understood their work on the dam as realizing a genuinely liberating vision of a socialist future (fig. 6.1). This vision was less centered on material well-being than on belonging and the hope for a future of social and professional mobility combined with a sense of justice and equality. The experience of building the dam was meant to be the future in microcosm: "on the High Dam, the 'new man' was free of imperialism, having challenged the world and built the Dam despite meager resources; he was the worker who overcame his inhibitions and fear of the Nile as a peasant, and educated himself, overcoming ignorance."⁵⁴

At the same time, this vision was instrumentalized to override the enormous costs, justifying losses and sacrifices and normalizing violence and military



FIGURE 6.1. Builders of the Aswan Dam: Egyptian electric welder Muhammed Abdel Menen (*left*) and Soviet specialist and two-time Hero of Socialist Labor Alexei Ulesov. Photo used by permission of Sputnik.

discipline as necessary conditions of the struggle. Such revolutionary enthusiasm also exacerbated a constant sense of fissure between the present and the future: the promise of ownership (of their country, of the production process, of their own lives) and belonging (to the nation, to the world beyond the nation) was achievable only after the constant delay of the present—a sense that was very familiar to Soviet builders of socialism and dams. Cinematically, this dialectic is perfectly captured in Youssef Chahine's Soviet-Egyptian coproduction *People on the Nile*. Its history demonstrates the ambivalent and complex dynamics behind internationalist industrial modernization projects (of which the High Dam was the most emblematic), extending into the similarly contradictory relationship between filmmaking and the state in the Cold War.

THE FIRST SOVIET-EGYPTIAN . . .

The first Soviet-Arab feature film coproduction intended to show the friendship of the Soviet and Egyptian peoples, cemented by this tremendous joint project—a friendship that was also meant to infuse the filming process itself and to be evidenced by it.⁵⁵ Indeed, *People on the Nile*'s production and reception history does mirror its subject in the most uncanny way—grandiose, full of inspiration and political commitment on the part of its makers, demanding iron discipline and

high tolerance of physical conditions on the part of all the participants, technologically advanced but not easily adaptable to local conditions, extremely expensive, with equal Egyptian and Soviet state funding, shot entirely on location, with larger-than-life personalities, and bearing the mark of endless bureaucratic and political conflicts leading, ultimately, to failure.

Moreover, just as the first phase of the High Dam construction was dominated by Soviet production culture, whose failures resulted in its replacement with Egyptian experts in the second phase of the project, the two versions of the film represent different visions of the Soviet-Egyptian cooperation and the relationship between colonial legacies and internationalism.⁵⁶ Just as the dam's construction witnessed Egypt's newly found postcolonial confidence, evident in the second version of the film, there came a price: the abandonment of the very socialist aspirations that were so crucial to the builders of the dam themselves.

Chahine, who had by the early 1960s established himself not only as an internationally renowned auteur with films screened major international festivals, East and West, but also as a filmmaker who could manage equally well political anticolonialist subjects (*Jamila*, 1958), grand spectacles (*Saladin / Al-Nasir Salah al-Din*, 1963), and social realism (*Cairo Station / Bab al-Hadid*, 1958), appeared to be the perfect choice for such an endeavor. *Struggle in the Valley / Sira' fi al-Wadi* (1954), in particular, was widely shown and very popular in the Soviet Union, and *Jamila* was an enormous success at the first Moscow international film festival.⁵⁷ In fact, in 1964, Chahine started shooting his own film on the topic of the dam on location, but after a confrontation with Egypt's deputy Minister of Culture over his script (entitled *Tomorrow Life Begins*), he abandoned the project to shoot a musical comedy in Lebanon, starring Fairuz. Only then, on Nasser's personal orders, was he called back to Egypt—this time to direct the coproduction.⁵⁸ Chahine's vision was of a film that would reflect on the "long and hard struggle to build the dam, and the symbolic meaning it [held] for the people of Egypt and for all third world countries."⁵⁹ This sense of global significance, rendered through very personal affective experiences of the characters, ended up somewhat overwhelming the pathos of nationalist developmentalism in the original version of the film, much to the displeasure of Egyptian officials.

Meanwhile, the Soviet side likewise originally had a different conception of the coproduction, which was initially intended as a documentary made using existing archival footage. But in 1967, when the Soviet film delegation in Cairo reviewed the extensive footage shot at the dam by the Egyptian documentarians, it made a harsh judgment: the footage lacked "any artistic attempt to understand the people, their new worldview and the changes taking place in UAR—as reflected in the lives of the many people brought together, united as a collective in the building of the Aswan dam."⁶⁰ Worse, Soviet involvement was totally missing from the footage.⁶¹ To address these problems, it was decided at this midpoint to change the coproduction to fiction, with Chahine directing. In retrospect, it is remarkable

how much Chahine's original version was able to respond to these Soviet criticisms while still retaining his personal cinematic vision.

The contract with Mosfilm was quickly signed, with a release date tentatively planned for the fall of 1968.⁶² The script was to be written by the celebrated author Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi and Chahine himself. The film was shot in 70 mm cinemascope on location in Aswan, Cairo, Moscow, and Leningrad by the veteran Soviet husband-and-wife team Alexander Shelenkov and Yu-Lan Chen. Devoted communists, the couple was famous for their sweeping camerawork in historical epics (*Glinka*, Lev Arnshtam, 1946; *Admiral Ushakov*, Mikhail Romm, 1953; *The Communist*, Iulii Raizman, 1958; *Five Days, Five Nights / Piat' dnei, piat' nochei / Fünf Tage, Fünf Nächte*, Lev Arnshtam and Heinz Thiel, 1960; and *War and Peace*, Sergei Bondarchuk, 1965–67), which clearly indicated the Soviet ambitions for the film, if not exactly matching Chahine's authorial style. Given the high technological demands of the 70 mm film, it was to be developed in Moscow and edited there by Chahine himself.

The Soviet team remembers the grueling conditions of the shooting in Egypt and Chahine's iron discipline and exacting orders.⁶³ Early in the process, Chahine kept insisting on deviating from the script to best express his own personal vision, which greatly alarmed the Soviets, who were not accustomed to such liberties and were concerned about the ideological consequences. But these disagreements were eventually resolved, and the film was completed on time by July 1968, with all its production team and the Soviet film authorities satisfied with the final result.⁶⁴ Chahine's main concern at that point appeared to be securing sufficiently prestigious exhibition venues in Egypt to counter the upcoming slate of Hollywood releases.⁶⁵ Soviet film officials pronounced the coproduction an overall success and an effective propaganda vehicle of Soviet-Arab friendship, and they began developing a plan of three future coproductions with Egypt, with scripts ready for approval by the end of the year.⁶⁶

PEOPLE ON THE NILE, 1968

People on the Nile (its original title in Arabic was *Al-Nas wa-al-Nil*; in Russian *Liudi na Nile*, which in English was referred to alternately as *People on the Nile*, *People of the Nile*, or *People and the Nile*) starts with a series of familiar constructivist-inspired tropes: sweeping images of the desert with silhouettes of camel-riders, an electricity tower, and a montage of close-ups of parts of the hydroelectric station and the dam equipment, including the iconic image of the bright orange turbine (fig. 6.2), which features in so many memoirs of the builders of the Aswan Dam, followed by the rapids of the Nile.⁶⁷

The narrative begins on the day of the opening of the dam, at the conclusion of the first phase of its construction, and interweaves in flashback the stories of several Egyptian and Russian characters from a wide range of backgrounds—from common builders to engineers, managers, and intellectuals. These include several

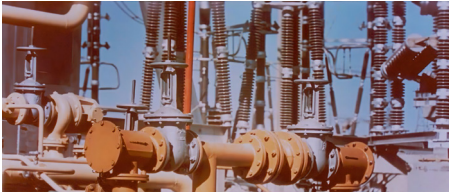


FIGURE 6.2. The orange turbine, vividly remembered by many builders of the Aswan Dam (opening sequence of the 1968 version of *People on the Nile*). DVD screen grab.

love stories, as well as a very affectionate friendship between a handsome young Russian worker, Nikolai, and his Egyptian-Nubian counterpart, Barak, whose relationship in many ways frames the film. The flashback structure begins with Barak drowning in the Nile after making a daring and foolish bet to be the last person to swim there before the dam shuts it down, and, Nikolai jumps in to save him, and as the two wrestle in the water, the narrative bifurcates into a series of flashbacks, underscoring parallels between the Soviet and Egyptian characters. From that point on, the binary structure continues to weave through pairs of Russian and Egyptian colleagues, with linked themes tying together the stories that unfold in their two respective national contexts. On both sides, families worry about their sons' work assignments, while the sons, although deeply rooted in their families' traditions, try to find a space for themselves. The women on both sides are looking for independence and self-realization, while bearing up under the impact of the men's work on the family circle. The men, at work, display a military bravery in the face of the danger and possible death posed by the project. These parallels mutually amplify both similarities and differences between the Soviet and Egyptian characters and their contexts.

There are two love stories—one of the Russian engineers, Alik (Aleksei), and his wife, Zoya, also an accomplished engineer, who comes with him to Aswan but is denied the possibility to work there. Frustrated by enforced domesticity, she leaves but then comes back to Alik. Despite this happy ending, the film openly acknowledges the masculinist homosocial environment of the dam, and Zoya's frustration is depicted with considerable understanding. The other love story is of Yehia, a writer who had been in prison for what is implied was the anticolonial stance of the journal he was publishing and who now works as a common builder at the dam. He falls in love with Nadia, the young daughter of the dam's Egyptian chief, and proposes to her. The father approves, but the daughter, despite being attracted to Yehia, rejects his proposal because she doesn't want to settle down and give up on her own aspirations. The two endings of these love stories—one happy, the other melancholic—conclude the film, with a beautiful and whimsical long take of the rejected Yehia watching a street boy balancing on the rails of Cairo's embankment of the Nile to the sounds of a Russian song celebrating the friendship between the Soviet and Egyptian people.

These love stories, however prominent, do not dominate the film, which is more concentrated on the working life of the characters. The flashback that immediately follows the introduction of the other pair of friends—Alik, Zoya's husband, and his

Egyptian counterpart, Saad—shows the two engineers disregarding direct orders from the Soviet chief, Platonov, and executing a daring explosion to avoid a flood that is threatening to destroy the dam. Platonov had rejected the plan because Alik and Saad had not come to seek his approval, but they do it anyway. This episode not only capitalizes on the much-commented-on builders' experiences of "the monstrous sounds of machinery, the explosions of dynamite, [and] the crumbling of tunnels" but also introduces an important autogestion narrative strand within the film, with the builders (both engineers and common workers) demanding control over the construction process and higher management's ambivalent refusal.⁶⁸ Connected to this is another strand of the story, dealing with the other Soviet-Egyptian couple, Barak and Nikolai: when Barak finds out that Nikolai is leaving the project because his contract has come to an end, although he doesn't want to, Barak collects signatures from his fellow workers and petitions to keep Nikolai. He tries to explain to management that Nikolai is a better worker and treats his Egyptian fellow workers better than the man replacing him. But the Egyptian boss dismisses Barak's appeal without reading the petition, which Barak tears up and throws in the Nile. Platonov, seeing this, is sympathetic in a patronizing way, but Nikolai ultimately is sent back nonetheless. This captures with surprising accuracy the dynamic of the production culture of Aswan described by both Bishop and Mossallam—namely, the struggle between the workers' repeated attempts at direct participation and management's resistance to autogestion.

Similarly, there is a long sequence toward the end of the film depicting an absurdly comical bureaucratic ordeal of ordering some much-needed additional equipment for the dam—a sequence on par with such classic socialist bureaucratic comedies as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Death of a Bureaucrat* (*La muerte de un burócrata*, 1966). Another recurrent routine concerns the incompetence of the Russian translator and an attempt by an inept journalist to interview people who are busy working. The focus on Barak's family and other Nubian villagers displaced by the dam is also quite extensive, their representation ranging from comedic to tragic, as when an old man describes the new dwellings provided by the government to the displaced Nubians. Their old houses, he explains, were all different "like fingers on one's hand," while the new houses are all the same, like barracks. Yet in the same breath, he dismisses his own complaints and praises Nasser in a moment that captures exactly the historical dynamics of this process as it emerges from recollections.⁶⁹

One of the unexpected extended flashbacks in the film recounts the Battle of Stalingrad, where Alik fought as a nineteen-year-old, and his experience of "fear, love, and death" as he falls in love with a nurse who is killed on the battlefield the next day. This war reference taps into the formative experience of World War II for the Soviet builders, embodying the oft-repeated claim that Dam building on this scale is comparable to fighting a war—both in terms of its dangers and its symbolic pathos. In 1968, when the film was finished, it also evoked Soviet military support for Egypt in the 1967 war, and the air of resignation with which the film ends is

perhaps best understood in the context of this defeat. "I wish I could have met you before," says Nadia to Yehia, referring to his political past, which he has now renounced. "Those were difficult years," he responds. "The best years of your life!" she retorts, conveying at once the sense of loss, disappointment, and her unwillingness to accept defeat. Reading this romantic exchange in the context of Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war helps guide us through the enigma of why, in 1968, when the film was completed, it was rejected, reshot, and finally released in quite a different version in Egypt in 1972—to scathing reviews.

PEOPLE ON THE NILE: TAKE 2

The details of the story behind the rejection of the 1968 version of the film have only begun to emerge, after decades of silence and the film's lack of availability.⁷⁰ The only detailed published account of what happened is included in the memoirs of Victor Sytin, a Goskino representative involved in the making of the film, yet his recollections seem rather confusing.⁷¹ Chahine himself, while often referring in interviews to the disastrous experience, never fully explained what happened. What becomes clear from the Soviet archives is that political events in August 1968, particularly the invasion of Czechoslovakia, influenced the official reception of the film. Although in the spring of 1968 it was fully approved and formally accepted by the Soviet side and the Egyptian embassy in Moscow, once Chahine and the Soviets returned to Cairo, the film was prescreened in Cairo to a group of industry insiders and select journalists (a screening that did not include either Chahine or the Egyptian Minister of Culture, who had been the guarantor of the project). Their review was scathing. Chahine was accused of pandering to the Soviets and representing Egypt as a backward country, a "civilization of camels" (fig. 6.3).⁷²

Within a few weeks, the head of the Soviet state cinema committee, Romanov, received an official telegram from the head of the Egyptian film center that shut down the release of the film based on "differences between the film and the script previously accepted."⁷³ Significant modifications were demanded, and under pressure from the Soviet embassy in Cairo, Soviet film officials quickly sided with the Egyptians.⁷⁴ The Moscow and Tashkent premieres were canceled. Magda (the star and producer of Chahine's *Jamila*) represented Egypt at the Tashkent opening, but *People on the Nile* was fated not to enjoy that success. Instead, at the next session of the festival, the Egyptian selection included a much older film made about the Aswan Dam, *The Naked Truth* (*Al-Haqiqah al-'Ariya*, Atef Salem, 1963), a romance starring Magda and Ihab Nafie, the intelligence-officer-turned-actor (their relationship, onscreen and off, was rumored to have begun at a party at the Russian embassy in Cairo).⁷⁵

Under pressure from both countries, Chahine ultimately agreed not merely to reedit but to reshoot the film to conform to the official Egyptian critique. This was quite an exceptional step for Chahine. In the 1970s, he would make films funded by Algeria to avoid this pressure, under the same impulse that made fellow



FIGURE 6.3. “The land of camels” (opening sequence of the 1968 version of *People on the Nile*). DVD screen grab.

filmmakers Tewfiq Saleh and Salah Abu Seif turn to Syria and Iraq for work. As he has explained, he was influenced by the fact that “the Soviet market involved more than seventy thousand movie theaters. The Soviet bloc also represented an opportunity to connect with hundreds of millions of people within the socialist bloc as well as a solid grass root[s] following among progressive people around the world.”⁷⁶ But the new version came out in 1972, after Nasser’s death, at the precise moment that Sadat’s government chose to break its ties with the Soviet Union. As a result, the film, intended as a compromise to be played in the Soviet market, ended up pleasing no one: the Egyptian press criticized it, on the one hand, for underrepresenting the power of the workers and, on the other, as insufficiently patriotic. “Fuzzy and dramatically unfocused” was the general judgment.⁷⁷ In the Soviet Union, the 1972 version was screened outside of competition at the Moscow International Film Festival that year but was never released commercially, generating virtually no media attention except for a one-paragraph-long write-up in the journal *Iskusstvo kino*, whose very trailing title, lacking a definite subject—“The First Soviet-Egyptian . . .”—seems to underscore the unsigned author’s uncertainty about the film.⁷⁸

Chahine managed to sneak the original 1968 version of the film into the hands of Henri Langlois, the director of the Cinémathèque française, where it was subsequently restored and screened with the French title *Un jour, le Nil*, while Chahine himself referred to it by the Arabic title *Al-Nil wa-al-Hayah*, literally *The Nile and the Life*. The multiplicity of titles, along with the film’s deliberately obscured history, generated confusion among critics and audiences alike.⁷⁹

THE TWO VERSIONS: WHAT CHANGED?

An exact reconstruction of the history of the two versions remains somewhat speculative, although Soviet archives provide some clues. While it may be easy to attribute the film’s rejection by the authorities to its many criticisms, it is worth noting that such digressions from the strictly celebratory mode of representation were in fact common elements of the socialist ethos of many Egyptian films of the public sector era, as well as of Soviet films of the 1960s and 1970s (Cuban or Eastern European films saw similar treatment during that period). The victory of the “common man” over the bureaucrat, and of people’s vigilance against enemies of the revolution and its original commitments, were common tropes. Also, the

emancipatory representation of women in Egyptian melodramas of the Nasser era was something of a “litmus test” of modernization in both socialist and postcolonial cinemas of the period. Acknowledgment of the destruction of the Nubian village and politics of resettlement of its inhabitants and its ancient monuments were also common motifs in the Egyptian representations of the High Dam, subsumed to the narrative of the sacrifice for the sake of progress and national cohesion, which Chahine’s film ultimately embraces, if with a markedly melancholic tone.

Instead, it was the overweeningly leading role awarded to the Soviet characters, which by comparison made the Egyptians seem backward—a metaphor that was literalized and inverted by the Egyptian censors, who demanded that the Soviet characters should walk behind the Egyptian officials—that constituted the biggest problem.⁸⁰ Indeed, Chahine’s 1972 version of the film complies with the Egyptian complaint, allotting more screen time to the Egyptian characters and showing their contributions to the project as primary. Overall, Egypt is represented in the new version as considerably more “modern,” erasing all the markers of “backwardness” and focusing on the urban Egyptian elites and their commitment to the project.⁸¹ The autogestion theme in the film was also deemphasized. It is worth looking in detail at some of the changes made by Chahine for what they say about the code of postcolonial industrial development in its explicitly socialist internationalist iteration and its nationalist post-Nasserite imaginary.

The 1972 version introduces new characters, all of them Egyptian professionals: the daughter of the dam’s director (played by a different actress, the star Soad Hosny) in the second version is an accomplished artist; her lover is a doctor, albeit a son of peasants, whose social rise is due to the successes of Nasser’s social mobility program. A major new character in this version, he comes to the dam to work on the effects of bilharzia on the local population (schistosomiasis was a major concern for the inhabitants of the region, and “conquering” it was seen as a great triumph of Egyptian medical science, although the victory proved to be illusory).⁸² Much of the action of the first part of the film takes place in a Cairo depicted as a modern metropolis, featuring Mercedes-Benzes, offices equipped with state-of-the-art technology, and forward-looking Egyptian industrial leaders. Unlike in the earlier version, the viewer is introduced to the dam from above, in an extensive sequence of aerial shots as the characters arrive in Aswan by plane. This foregrounds the modern technology of air travel and Aswan as a grandiose spectacle of nature and technology, both ideas subsumed under the regime of visual mastery of an all-seeing eye of the camera instead of the fragmented montage of the close-ups of the desert, electrical towers, and turbines in the original opening sequence.

As implied by the inclusion of air travel, the film’s class positionality is also turned significantly from the 1968 ensemble piece, with characters of different class and national backgrounds, to the new version, which has as its center Nadia, the daughter of the boss of the dam project. Her love story has changed, as

well: resenting her boyfriend, a patriotic and devoted doctor, for having left Cairo to work at the dam, Nadia is considering Yehia's attentions, who in this version is a minor character entirely stripped of his former political backstory. Nadia's reconciliation with the doctor in the end mirrors Zoya's return to Alik—both decisions dictated by the dual logic of patriotism and patriarchy.

In the new version, the Russian characters are flattened out, functioning primarily as props to give the contours of their backstories and showcase the tourist views of Leningrad and Moscow (including ballet at the Bolshoi Theatre—that “intrinsic part of the official pantheon of Soviet achievements”).⁸³ All linguistic nuances are erased, with all the characters fully dubbed into standard Arabic and no voice-over narration. All sequences showing cultural misunderstanding or miscommunication are purged, including a lovely scene in the original version when Alik unexpectedly pays a visit to Saad, who quickly tries to make himself and his house look more presentable to the foreign guest by putting on more formal (Western) clothing over his home *galabiya* and hiding his whole extended family in the closet—maneuvers to which Alik, absorbed in his personal drama, is completely oblivious. In the new version, Saad is married and lives in a modern apartment with his wife and two children, and his interactions with Alik lose all the intimate homosociality of the original version. The relationship between Barak and Nikolai is reversed: it is now Barak who jumps into the Nile after Nikolai—a scene that is now a semicomical insert instead of a jumping-off point for a divergent series of flashbacks. The simplification of the narrative structure does make the film more accessible but at the cost of reducing the original set of thematic resonances between the Egyptian and Russian characters. Their relationships lose both their complexity and their affective power.

Similarly, the new version removes all traces of workers' self-governance and autogestion. Instead, the project apparently springs from the head of the dam's chief (which is literalized through the title sequence, where the title is superimposed on the design as he is explaining it to his daughter), is operationalized by a team of professionals, and is executed by faceless Egyptian work crews. No friction between these levels is rendered visible, and of all the Soviet characters, it is now Platonov, the Soviet production head, who is most visible in the film, although clearly “following behind” his Egyptian counterpart. Ironically, we know from Elizabeth Bishop's account that the Soviet top management of the dam was hoping to “reverse” the bottom-up dynamics of the 1950s–1960s Soviet production culture, in which highly skilled workers could regularly challenge their superiors, for a top-down culture restoring managerial authority and enforcing a class and culture hierarchy on the Egyptian laborers.⁸⁴ But the upper Soviet management hadn't reckoned on the rank-and-file Soviet specialists, who brought with them norms similar to what they were accustomed to in the postwar Soviet context: where continuous acquisition of new skills and initiative were not only encouraged but expected and where general cultural education (through music, literature, and other extramural activities—common in the Soviet Union from the

“houses of culture” where workers were expected to socialize) were also part of this socialist production culture, valuing the workers’ broader interests and leading to the formation of more informal relationships.⁸⁵ In turn, the Russians also went into their experience as a learning opportunity, which was appreciated by their Egyptian peers.

Overall, Mossallam’s interviews with the dam builders confirm the tenor of the work-life captured by Chahine’s 1968 version of *People on the Nile*—pointing to the formation of an affective community, which grew out of a mutual understanding of their work culture despite the complicated but powerful experiences and remnants of colonial dynamics. Unsurprisingly, this historical fact is purged entirely from the reworked 1972 version of the film, which was heavily supervised by the equivalent top management of the Soviet and Egyptian film industries. It is significant that while most sequences dealing with the dislocation of the Nubians remain in the new version, just like the Russian subplots, they are significantly shortened—sacrificing all texture and detail.⁸⁶ In small details and large, the new version effectively erased all traces of the everyday discourses and cultures around the dam, just as the management of the dam gradually replaced Soviet production culture with “entrepreneurs with experience in construction sites in the Arabian Gulf” as part and parcel of Egypt’s turn away from socialism.⁸⁷

SAVING THE NUBIAN MONUMENTS

Both versions of Chahine’s film feature visual allusions to the other, well-publicized massive infrastructural project that accompanied the Aswan Dam’s construction: the relocation and preservation of the archaeological sites in Nubia under the threat of inundation by the newly built reservoir. The plans for saving the archaeological sites (not fully excavated at that point) began at the same time as the plans for the building of the dam, following Egypt’s appeal to the international community for assistance. Consequently, like the dam itself and Chahine’s film(s), the project of “saving the Nubian monuments” became the site of Cold War rivalries. In this case, the internationalism on display was framed by liberal multilateral terms: a coalition of state and nonstate actors, central to which was the partnership between Egypt and UNESCO, laying the grounds for the formalization of the World Heritage system at the World Heritage Convention of 1972.

The two projects, the industrial and the cultural, have traditionally been represented as corresponding to the two Cold War formations, with one commenter seeing the Aswan High Dam as “a veritable iron curtain neatly dividing the Nile Valley between Eastern and Western blocs,” with, on one side, “Russian engineers working downstream at the dam and its associated power stations” and, on the other side, “Western archaeologists and engineers working upstream in Nubia under the auspices of UNESCO to survey and salvage hundreds of monuments and sites.”⁸⁸ At the same time, this imagined binary, which attributes industrial modernity’s destructive impact to the socialist side and the preservation of our World Heritage

to the Western liberal side, presents a counterpoint to the understanding of the project as fully subsumed under the logic of Egyptian nationalism (the perspective reflected in Chahine's 1972 film and in some scholarship on Egypt). Yet these large classificatory gestures are ultimately misleading. The Aswan Dam was not simply the product of the Soviet experts' vision and practices as conjured by Cold War phobias, nor was the Nubian monument project a harmonious unity of liberal initiatives. Far from being devoid of Cold War politics, UNESCO in the 1960s brought together divergent—and often competing—notions of “world culture.” As Bojana Videkanić demonstrates, the coalition behind the project tilted, originally, toward the Non-Aligned Movement: “of the forty-five UNESCO members that participated, twelve were Western countries and thirty-three were either members of NAM or other non-Western countries.” India, Yugoslavia, and Cuba all donated considerable funding and expertise to the campaign.⁸⁹ While the Western press highlighted European, British, and American experts, the USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland all sent teams of archaeologists to work on the site as well. The Polish expedition, in particular, made some of the greatest discoveries, uncovering an eighth-century cathedral with more than one hundred frescoes.⁹⁰ And as Louis Porter details, during the early phase of the campaign, the Soviet UNESCO Commission also dispatched several archaeologists to Egypt—although anti-Soviet backlash in the Western press led the Soviet side to refuse to commit resources to the project: “The campaign, in the final analysis,” the Soviet permanent delegate wrote in 1961, “had an anti-Soviet tendency since the preservation of monuments has been juxtaposed to the construction of the Aswan Dam, which, as is known, will be erected with the participation of Soviet specialists.” The campaign therefore amounted to “an attempt to use the organization to counter the growing influence of the Soviet Union in the weakly-developed countries.”⁹¹

Indeed, the final project of saving the Nubian monuments, as compellingly demonstrated by Lucia Allais, was governed by the logic of what she terms “calculability”—“the potential . . . to be incorporated into a project of [capitalist] economic development.”⁹² The decision to salvage the monuments by cutting them into some 7,047 blocks, which were then removed to a storage area, and then reconstituted piece by piece on a hill less than a mile away, was convenient for the US to fund without allocating much additional resources. The high labor costs of this solution could be absorbed by the US by converting its surpluses of Egyptian pounds acquired through earlier US aid programs (which the US could not spend otherwise, given the tense political relations with Nasser), into payments to Egyptian laborers. This made the US the most generous supporter of the project, restoring its considerable political clout. Cutting also allowed for an even easier system of converting architectural sites into museum artifacts: for their contribution to the campaign, the US, Spain, Holland, and Italy all received four “minor” Nubian temples as “gifts of appreciation.”⁹³ Thus for UNESCO the upshot was that the Nubian monuments were presented in the media as items of “universal cultural

heritage” positioned beyond the Cold War binary, which obscured any economic or geopolitical rationale.⁹⁴ This conception of reclaiming the past, as we will see in the next chapter, was far from unique: a similar logic of establishing a shared cultural heritage (in this case, articulated as a unified “Black Civilization”), Apter argues, was instrumental for the FESTAC festivals in Nigeria in the 1970s: “The rationalization of tradition . . . , linking the past to the future in programmatic statements which assimilated cultural difference to a singular Black Civilization, is perhaps best understood as a mode of bureaucratic rationality which established the authority of the petro-state through the logic of FESTAC’s administration.”⁹⁵

Conventionally left behind within the logic of bureaucratic rationality is the impact of these projects on ordinary people—the human costs of labor, cultural and physical dislocation, and the environmental impact.⁹⁶ In the end, after Nasser’s death, the builders of the dam were paid significantly less than promised and stripped of their benefits once they retired; their hopes of professional and social mobility went unrealized in the post-Nasserite era.⁹⁷ Nor was the money dispensed for the relocations of the Nubian people anywhere close to what was spent on the monuments—further illustrating the institutional logic that configured cultural heritage and industrial development alike as disembodied processes, existing, as it were, outside the lived experiences of the groups effected. Socialist production cultures were generally more oriented toward workers’ issues and broader stakes, as Kalinovsky observes in his history of the Nurek Dam in Tajikistan:

In their interactions, local residents, managers, and party activists tried to find a way to make reality approximate stated ideals of Soviet equality and welfare. On the one hand, just as the typical problems of disease, boredom, and labor turnover convinced managers of the wisdom of investing in better facilities and housing for workers in Nurek, so did complaints from villagers lead those same officials to invest in infrastructure and facilities for the surrounding countryside. On the other hand, the way that these individuals approached both sets of problems reveals the powerful hold of utopian ideals of equality, internationalism, and urban and rural life.⁹⁸

These ideals, however, relied heavily on the demand for sacrifice imposed on or internalized by the workers, whose military logic in reality undermined the very humanist foundations of socialist ideals. In Egypt, this military mind-set excused the high number of accidents during the building of the High Dam as much lower, in comparison, to “typical war casualties.”⁹⁹ It is documented that even during the 1964 inauguration of the dam, which forms the center of Chahine’s film, many people were swept away by the flooding water, causing many casualties in the midst of the celebration, as is visible in some of the documentary footage.¹⁰⁰ This footage was not used in Chahine’s film, but our knowledge of this filmed disaster gives additional symbolic power to the narrative structure of the 1968 version inasmuch as it is unleashed by flashbacks from the sequence showing Nikolai and Barak struggling in the water.

Overall, the enthusiasm for industrial modernization, which set the tone for postcolonial cinematic representations of the 1950s, gradually gave way to a growing sense of loss or melancholy. Even in Tashkent, despite the nominal celebration of industrial modernity, the films presented at the festival began to tentatively offer an environmental consciousness of costs, which emerges especially in the cinemas of the Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics. Central Asian New Wave of the 1960s (with Tolomush Okeev's *Sky of Our Childhood* [*Nebo nashego detstva*, 1966] as the most famous example) offers many examples of a deep ambivalence toward the modernization process as many of these films are marked by melancholy and a sense of loss. The environmental and human costs of industrialization are addressed directly in two of Armenia's festival selections: *The Canyon of Abandoned Fairytales* (*Ushchel'e pokinutykh skazok*, Edmond Keosayan, 1974) and *White Shores* (*Belye berega*, a.k.a. *Voda nasha nasushchnaya*, Arman Manarian, 1975). If in the first film the ecological critique of industrialization is melodramatically inflected as the conflict between tradition and modernity in family relations (with woman, once again, presented as an agent of change), *White Shores* addresses the problem head-on by focusing on the ecocide of Lake Sevan.¹⁰¹ The hero of *White Shores* is a man who hopes to redeem his past participation in ecologically disastrous industrialization by leading attempts to save the lake.

In fact, Armenian intellectuals were some of the first people to take a public stance calling on the state to provide environmental protection: in 1975, one of the leading figures in the Union of Architects of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, A. Grigorian, called for the creation of a nationwide committee for nature protection that would coordinate all environmental management activities. Consistent with their heightened self-understanding as agents of social conscience, writers in the Soviet Union played a particularly important role in pushing the state toward a more active role in environmental protection—with the Union of Soviet Writers taking an environmentalist stance in 1977.¹⁰² The involvement of cultural and artistic figures in the late 1970s showed the convergence of the question of cultural patrimony and environmentalism in Soviet discourse.

The history of the Aswan Dam and the Nubian monuments campaign illustrates the bind between industrial modernity and cultural heritage, both being subject to Cold War international negotiations and constitutions of different communities while also being foundational for national(ist) ideologies of postcolonial states. Dialectically constructed as “modernity” and “tradition,” both depended on the new class of technocratic experts, but in the process, both produced new forms of belonging and commons, which do not fully coincide either with the logics of nationalism or with Cold War binaries. Initiated by our discussion of the UNESCO Nubian project, the next chapter will investigate the ways this same dialectic plays out in the cinematic constructions of national heritage in socialist contexts.