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A Wanderer Seeking the Words of Love in Impossible Cities / ندملا يذبحلا عامس نء اثجيري مئاھ

يطلبخ سييخ عم راوح : "نوئفملا ةمامحلا قوط" تليحتسملا

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# A Wanderer Seeking the Words of Love in Impossible Cities: Nacer Khemir

Interviewed by Khemais Khayati

Introduced and translated by Maggie Awadalla

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This interview with the Tunisian film director Nacer Khemir was conducted by the film critic Khemais Khayati, during the shooting of Khemir's film *The Lost Ring of the Dove* (Tawq al-hamama al-mafqud, 1990). The interview was originally published in Arabic in the weekly journal *Al-Yum al Saba'*.<sup>1</sup> The importance of this interview lies in the clues and insights it offers the reader into the intrinsic world of the film director Nacer Khemir. The interviewer, Khemais Khayati, who is a prominent film critic and one renowned for having always championed alternative cinema in the Arab world, poses questions that are both relevant to this specific film and to the whole of Nacer Khemir's works that have an established and recurring theme and structure.

*The Lost Ring of the Dove* was directed and written by Nacer Khemir, and produced by Tarek bin Amar in cooperation with Hassan Daloul. The cast includes Ninar Asper, Walid Dakash and Neviene Shoudry, with George Parsky as director of photography.

The film is set in the tenth or eleventh century and depicts the Arab-Islamic world from Andalusia to Asia. As Khemais Khayati explains in his introduction to the interview, the film revolves around a search for the essence of "love": the love of books, poetry, beautiful things, Andalusia, Baghdad, *The Thousand and One Nights*, miniatures, Arabic writing and chivalry.<sup>2</sup>

The film is about a young boy, who saves the first page of Ibn Hazm's book, *The Ring of the Dove*, from a devastating fire. Not knowing from which book it comes, the boy sets out in search of that volume. The book, which is about love, includes on its first page a miniature inscription of a Samarkand princess. The young boy falls desperately in love with the etching of the princess, journeys through many lands that are threatened with destruction and devastation, both

in his search for the book and for the partially real and partially fictional princess.

Nacer Khemir is one of the most prominent film directors in Tunisia, and he has created a unique style of alternative cinema in the Arab world. In his films, the visual plays an extremely prominent role in contrast to the “spoken” cinema of most other film directors. Likewise, his story line is intricate and, as in the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*, his film narratives are interwoven into a magical web, that lures the audience into a world of magical realism. As he recounts his story, the reflections in the mirror multiply: “he searches the subterranean memories, like a labyrinth of mud architecture, to reach the core.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, his characters sway between the real and the fantastic, and as in *The Lost Ring of the Dove* the young princess is part fantasy and part real, part female and—with her boyish looks—partially male. The whole film is a quest journey into a “far away” land, full of nostalgia for a “once upon a time” Andalusia.<sup>4</sup>

This fantastic world of Nacer Khemir is carried on from his earlier film *The Drifters* (al-Ha'mun), to which he owes his fame as a director with unique style and vision. In *The Drifters*, the fantastic is part of the real and vice versa, as we are carried into a world where the real and magical become one and the same; and as the Arabic title suggests (it could also be translated as “the wanderers”), it is both the world of “wonders” and “wandering.” A teacher who is sent to a village on the borders of the great desert encounters strange and fascinating myths and tales of the comings and goings of the villagers. Again in this film, as in *The Lost Ring of the Dove*, a mysterious and beautiful girl—who could also be taken for a handsome boy—holds an enticing book in her hands, appearing and disappearing in endless doorways and corridors.

This film, as with *The Lost Ring of the Dove*, is a quest for knowledge, knowledge of lost legends and an idealized culture. The intertwining streets and corridors that never end, the people with no names and strange costumes, the frenzied search for something that is never really named, and the well of wonders are all part of an atmosphere Nacer Khemir uses to create an “other world,” one of magic and fantasy, a recreation of a lost Andalusia, a mystic realm of love and wonders. This quest is not only a search for something outside of ourselves, but it is also an internal journey of self-reflection: where the well functions both as a mirror, reflecting

inwards and outwards, and also as a passageway into the underworlds of myth and legend.

As Nacer Khemir points out, in the interview below, the use of actors of various nationalities and locales that do not belong to any specific Arab country helps him to recreate his own world that defies any precise location in reality. The outlandish costumes, head turbans and make-up also add to the exotic and dreamlike atmosphere the director seeks to produce in his films. In addition, the constant use of wild track in his films, such as the noise of the desert and footsteps on the sand, or the noise of feet shuffling while the actors are moving around, help the audience concentrate on the visual aspects of the film instead of relying on the use of dialogue. The slow pace of the film also helps in recreating a world of its own, and the takes are of medium to long shots, helping to enhance the feeling of “distance” in his films. In the rare cases when the director uses close-ups it is usually to show us the faces of the actors, giving us a glimpse that soon vanishes into another set of takes that move through interwoven and curling side-streets and alleys. Furthermore, his use of blending colors (browns and yellows and occasional blacks), enhances the dream-like atmosphere that he is seeking to create. Nacer Khemir’s talent as a painter is well manipulated to form, out of each frame in the film, a piece of art work that can be appreciated both in terms of form and color.

If alternative cinema in the Arab world were to be divided into two separate categories, with neo-realism in one camp (Muhammad Khan, Atef al-Tayyib, Khairy Bishara, etc.), together with the cinema of socio-political “ideas” (Youssef Chahine, Yusri Nasralla, Nouri Bouzid, Mirzaq ‘Alwash), and the “visual” cinema in another category (Shadi Abdel Salam), Nacer Khemir would certainly lie in the last category, together with films like Shadi Abdel Salam’s *The Mummy*. Indeed, even though the two film directors differ greatly in their vision of the world, they share much in common both in terms of their camera work, their use of costumes and their preoccupation with a by-gone world that was once flourishing.

Nacer Khemir was born in Tunisia, and he has studied architecture, philosophy, history, painting, sculpture, theater and cinema both in Tunisia and France. He is the author of a number of books, including *Le conte des conteurs*, *L’ogresse*, *Le soleil emmuré*, *Shéhérazade*; and has held several art exhibitions in France and Spain. He is the director of a number of films, including *The Story of God’s*

*Countries* (Hikayit bilad milk rabi, 16 mm, 1975), *The Ogre* (al ghou, 16 mm, 1977), *The Drifters* (al-Ha'mun, 35 mm, 1984), *The Lost Ring of the Dove*, (Tawq al-hamama al-mafqud, 35 mm, 1989) and a TV FR3 film, *A la recherche des 1001 nuits*. He has won several international awards for two of these films, *The Drifters* and *The Lost Ring of the Dove*.

#### TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

- 1 Khemais Khayati, "Ha'im Yabhath 'an Asma' al-hob fi al-Mudun al-Mostahila," *Al yum al Saba'* (2 April, 1990): 34-35.
- 2 Khemais Khayati, "Introduction," 34.
- 3 From a text of a pamphlet, "Nacer Khemir raconte les mille et une nuits" (Paris: Bibliothèque Rouault, 1992) 3.
- 4 Hussam Olwan, in "Al cinema li zahir wa-batin" *Al Kitaba al-Ukhra*, 10/11 (April, 1995) 305, has labeled Khemir as a film director who belongs to a "cultural cinema" or a cinema that attempts to represent a culture as an essence; Khemir has been accused by many of taking an orientalist point of view toward the Islamic heritage. Although conducted several years earlier, Khemir, in the interview below, answers this accusation which was also mentioned by Khemais Khayati.

## A Wanderer Seeking the Words of Love in Impossible Cities: Nacer Khemir

Interviewed by Khemais Khayati \*

**After you accomplished your two first films, *The Story of God's Countries* and *The Drifters*, what does it mean to continue your intellectual and artistic trajectory on the same foundation, and with a unified artistic trend? As I attended the shooting of your third film, *The Lost Ring of the Dove*, I noticed the recurring base in your dramatic and aesthetic structure.**

Actually *The Drifters* is the prelude, or the introduction; and I consider *The Lost Ring of the Dove* the first in a cycle of films that gives a clear idea of Arab-Islamic civilization in a general way, as if I were the very same storyteller of the ninth or tenth century who contributed to the materialization of the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* ... I consider myself a *hakawati*, a storyteller, not only of stories and narratives but also that of a culture, one who tries to add to *The Thousand and One Nights* other stories that cover the past and express the present—and I hope—embrace the future. *The Thousand and One Nights* incorporates everything, and Baghdad in that period was the “eye” of the world. What I am trying to do today is to tell a new story, one of authentic components but used in a new and different manner, making the introduction to the culture simpler and more accessible to us than it is now, closer to both the Eastern and the Western audience, making it become a mirror that reflects both inwards and outwards, at the same time.

**There are various points of view, incidents and ambiances linked together in *A Thousand and One Nights*, what are the essential things that can be extracted from your film and added to *A Thousand and One Nights* ?**

This is a difficult question, because what is available is of a sensitive nature, both on the level of general discourse and on the

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\* *Alif : Journal of Comparative Poetics* thanks Khemais Khayati for permission to translate the interview “A Wanderer Seeking the Words of Love in Impossible Cities,” *Al yum al Saba'* (2 April, 1990): 34-35.

level of fine points. For I am free of any given discourse. For example, my feelings about the aesthetic components of Arab-Islamic culture cannot be expressed except through artistic interpretation and through making the audience sense it. One may delve into the aesthetics of the Arab-Islamic civilization through mysticism, for example, or through architecture or within the general framework or through color and its utilization as a means of expression and not as an ornament. As for characterization, it exceeds its social frame to become a sign of various significations both within and outside the film. The viewer, who relates to and is sensitive towards this Arab-Islamic culture, can reread the film several times, each time in a different manner; since each viewing will be a renewed discovery of the film's specificities. The object is static in its essence, but transformative in its signification.

**The readers know that *The Ring of the Dove* was written by the Andalusian Ibn Hazm, and Ibn Hazm is no invention, but actually existed, and that in itself carries significance. Is there a relationship between your film *The Lost Ring of the Dove* and Ibn Hazm, and to what extent is this relationship?**

The relationship of my film with *The Ring of the Dove* by Ibn Hazm is a relationship ... [silence]. I will explain this in other words: my problematic is with the issue of love, which I put into a cultural framework that expresses a flourishing period. During each period of cultural prosperity, people get interested in probing into the essence of love, trying to comprehend it, since they consider it the cornerstone of civilization. This happened in Andalusia. In my first film I was searching for this Andalusia; as for my second film, even though I started off from the idea of Andalusia, I then—bit by bit—departed from it until nothing was left from Andalusia but its title, and likewise this is what happened with Ibn Hazm. As for me, as someone born in Tunisia, my initial encounter with the subject of love was through *The Ring of the Dove*, which also happens to be the case for many Tunisian adolescents. This is what made me stay faithful to the memory of my first discovery, to the extent that when I wrote the film's scenario—and despite my attempts to include parts of Ibn Hazm's book—I found myself drifting away from it every time I rewrote the scenario; since I found out that my essential relationship was not with

the book but with its essence. That is why I only kept from the book its title, and included the word “lost” which represents Andalusia and also the lost love that is missing in our Arab societies today.

**Cinema, in short, is movement and time. Movement—if you put aside the camera’s —is that of the actors. How and why did you choose an actor from India who lives in England, then a Lebanese/Syrian young actress and a Lebanese/Palestinian boy and actors from Tunisia etc..?**

In the same manner that I tried to recreate an image of a city in the eleventh century, giving it the Arab-Islamic touch of those centuries, I also tried to recreate a human group that could have and—at least presumably—would have inhabited that splendor and framework. The process of pasting (*collage*), and combining things, happened over several stages, and this pertains to architectural as well as human constructions. I feel that the richness of the individual in Arab-Islamic culture is derived from numerous tastes: from the Indian, to the Mogul, the Pakistani and the African. This is how I really feel... and this is what constitutes this richness of the Arab individual. Every time a culture encloses within its tribal solidarity, that is, when tribalism becomes the legal basis for racism (and that is something that our Arab-Islamic culture has suffered from) then a period of decline sets in the society. I tried to accomplish in my film what is impossible to attain only through knowledge of a country’s image, geography and racial frame of reference. You might say that this film was shot in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran or Tunisia or any place, because the human entity that constitutes the film is at the same time from Tunisia, North Africa, Pakistan and India... even with the Tunisian actors, I only selected the extras, for example, who have Mongolian features —and you saw this for yourself—even though they are purely Tunisian. The formation of this human network is one of my basic ideas that enable the film to be free of particularities of place, time or race. That is why your question concerning the actors limits the film, whereas I do not want that limitation. My film expresses a culture rather than a race or races.

**Is it possible, though, to fashion “the cultural” without the interference of “the personal” ?**

I hope to do a film that is personal; for me a personal piece of work is written rather than filmed. Yes, “the personal” has its role in

the formation of “the cultural,” and “the personal” is the education that makes you feel, for example, that beauty is an important element in the life of a human being. Beauty here is not external but encompasses all aspects, as one finds in the case of mystics; and I also think that Islam is based on this function.... Cinema is a function.

I shot my film in a Tunisian city, one of the very few left that shows what the desert cities were once like ... this city is characterized at the present by neglect, misconceptions and lack of funding, etc.; whereas I was shooting a scene that was expressing an established and flourishing culture, and close by there were demolished and abandoned palaces. I decided one day to be positive, both in my life and behavior; that is, I decided not to use my work and my imagination in crying and lamenting but rather as a “living testimony,” living in the sense of remembering, for “the Reminder profits the believers” [*Quran* (LI:55). Arberry’s translation, vol. II, p. 239]. The flourishing shooting site is surrounded by the real state of misery, poverty and desolation.

**You are shooting in the city of Nefta, and at a distance of 500 meters from the site are the tents of refugees who have been ruined by the recent floods in South Tunisia. What is your feeling when situated between two poles of prosperity and extinction ?**

A prosperous place is the outcome of industry. On the other hand, tents and even a demolished wall trigger in me a feeling of proximity with death. The latter burrows into me the feeling of strength, life and beauty, giving me the opposite reaction. The answer or the solution is not in my hands; as for what is within my power, I do it wholeheartedly.

**If you were asked to describe your film *The Lost Ring of the Dove* in a short sentence other than its own title, what would you say ?**

(Silence) It is about a human being looking for love, in a time when love had its cultural connotation, when love was a cultural criterion, while we live in a period of decline where everything is deteriorating, let alone love! Then, it is impossible to summarize the film because it is made up of feelings, apprehensions, concerns, frameworks and passion. No, it is impossible. I have told you about

the feeling that could have been the primary reason that made me direct the film, and the film's title is not a hundred percent literal ; it is more of a "token of loyalty" than a title.

My film is simple as a story line but intricate as a cultural sign; in that respect, it is like the poetry and the stories of mystics. It suffices for a simple person to look at what is happening on the Arab scene, on every level, to feel unsettled in every aspect; to have fear of what might happen or what is happening in some of our countries. The "wretched" in my film and their "guides" represent the deterioration of the structure when something is deformed and transformed into something else. This transformation is not under the heading of life but under the heading of death, and for death, not under the rubric of creation and construction, but destruction...and my film *The Lost Ring of the Dove* is the opposite of death and destruction; it is an anthem of love and life.