

Messages From Paradise #1

Egypt : Austria / About the Permanent Longing for Elsewhere

A documentary film by Daniela Swarowsky and Samuli Schielke



In a village in Egypt, young men dream of migrating to Europe where they hope to realise all the good things they lack at home: money, freedom, new horizons. In Vienna, Egyptian migrants long back home. Their tales of migration reveal that the realities of living in Europe are more complex and nuanced than they themselves might have dreamt of. Paradise, both sides of this fictional dialogue tell, is always elsewhere. And perhaps happiness lies not in making old dreams come true, but in finding new ones.

Language spoken in film: Arabic, German

Language of subtitles: English, Arabic

Year of production: 2009

Country of Production: Netherlands, Austria

Running time: 44 minutes

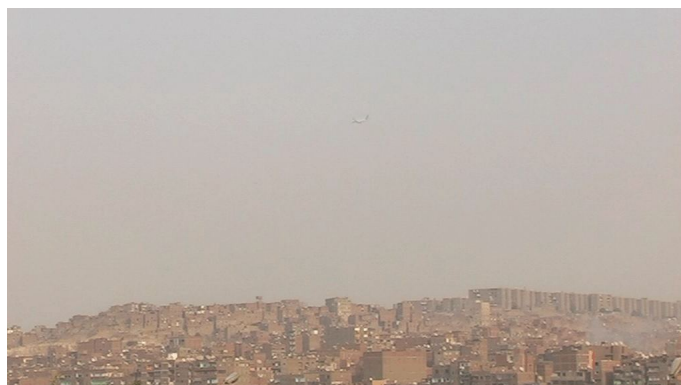
Aspect ratio: 16x9

Format: DV/DVD

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SYNOPSIS

The grass is always greener on the other side, or so the well-known saying claims. In *Messages from Paradise #1*, the first part of a trilogy, this maxim is articulated by a young Egyptian on a rural rooftop, his horizon defined by raw brick houses, piles of hay, and satellite dishes. He seeks advice from migrants abroad, and is offered a response from the lush gardens of Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace, the former summer residence of the Habsburg's imperial family. There, speaking beside the meticulous flower beds, an older Egyptian migrant identifies with this youth's longing to travel but also cautions that Europe is not really the place that people imagine it to be.

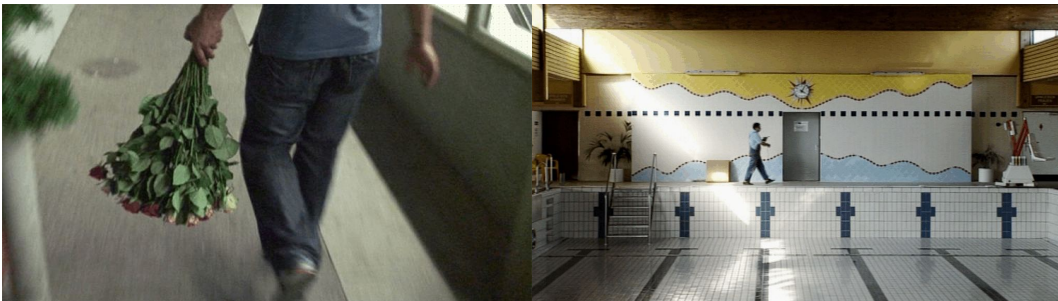


In *Messages from Paradise*, four young Egyptian men, all of them born and raised in the same small village in the Nile Delta, speak of their dreams of migrating to Europe, where one is assumed to obtain freedom, financial gain, and self-realization. Some of them pragmatic planners and others philosophical dreamers, they all aspire to escape the suffocating frustrations they deem intrinsic to life in Egypt. Each believes that traveling to Europe would help them to a better life.





The camera then takes us to the other side of the fence, where we meet nine Egyptians living in Austria who share their personal experiences with migration. Some settled in Vienna for good and others eager to meet their goals and move on; they include a student, a taxi driver, a former boxer, a dancer and cook, a rose peddler, a tile artist, and an intellectual who insists on speaking in German. These migrants tell of their impetus to travel abroad, describe what they see as the advantages and disadvantages of life in Europe, and share their nostalgia for their homeland. In telling their tales of migration, they reveal that the realities of living in Europe are more complex and nuanced than they themselves might have dreamt of before they originally left home. Few have found the trick of how to settle without being split: Leaving the old dreams aside and finding new and unexpected ones.



THE STORY BEHIND

Daniela Swarowsky is an Austrian artist and cultural producer working in Rotterdam. Since 2003, she has been focussing on migration in a range of art-, film- and video projects. Samuli Schielke is a Finnish anthropologist currently working on contemporary Egypt at ZMO (Zentrum Moderner Orient) in Berlin. They currently live and work in Rotterdam and Berlin. This film is their first one, and a consequent continuation of their previous projects that engage with questions of migration, identity, and the idea of home.

The idea for this film emerged when we were for the first time together in Egypt, where Samuli has been conducting ethnographic research since many years. Arriving in Egypt, Daniela was struck by the massive presence of the urgent desire to migrate most people we encountered expressed. But this desire appeared very strange in the light of a chance encounter with an Egyptian taxi driver she met on her way to the airport in Vienna. The taxi driver, hearing that she was going to Egypt, declared that coming to Europe had been the worst decision in his life. Europe as a paradise young people aspired for, and Egypt as a paradise migrants longed back for - How could these two imaginations be so far apart? Daniela wanted to go after the myths which migrants, returning home on holiday, create about their lives abroad. Samuli, in turn, wanted to look at the dreams and frustrations that young people in Egypt and many other places around the world project to the prospect of migration. From these shared concerns and discussions emerged *Messages from Paradise #1*, the first part of a trilogy in progress conceived of and produced by Daniela. (Part two, a video installation between Moroccan youths in the Netherlands and Morocco is in production at the time of writing this, part three is being planned.)

The core idea of this trilogy is based on Daniela's observation that migrants, when they return home on an annual vacation, often give an image of their life that is very far from their lived reality. At the same time, they glorify their homelands more and more. And even if they sincerely try to give a truthful image of their experience, young people at home are either not interested, or do not believe. The problem is that it is very difficult to tell how it is to be a migrant to people who do not know it from first-hand experience.

Messages from Paradise is an attempt to create a fictional dialogue where a real one is missing, an indirect confrontation about dreams, frustrations, and hopes of people in different places around the world.

This fictive dialogue has shaped both the making and the form of this film. We began with preliminary interviews in Vienna in summer 2007, then conducted a set of interviews in Egypt in October and November 2007. In these interviews we always asked people to formulate questions to the Egyptians abroad. Two of these questions, by Basim and Mukhtar, also appear in the film. Back in Europe, we returned to film in Austria in August and September 2008, and used the questions and themes that we had collected in Egypt in the interviews we made



with the Egyptians in Vienna. Finally, in December 2008, we toured Egypt with a raw edit of the film, and used the feedback we got during the screenings to create this final version.

The film, like every story, presents a specific group of people: Those in Egypt all come from the countryside and while they are all well educated, their prospects in Egypt are limited. Those in Austria have all, with the exception of one, arrived as migrant workers. There are other, wealthier Egyptians for whom migration is not an urgent necessity and Europe not a fortress. But this is not their story. More importantly, this is not a film about Egypt or about Austria. The story is a universal one, known by people in similar situations around the world. Finally, this is a film almost only about men. This was not originally intended. But Egyptian women were often less enthusiastic about appearing in a film, and we also had to discard some good interviews because of technical problems. So this became the men's story. The women's story is yet to be told...



THE SONGTEXTS

There are countless Arabic songs about the desire to travel abroad, the homesickness of the migrant, the question whether one should stay or go. For this film, we asked all people we spoke with to suggest songs that they would find expressive of the longing for abroad and home. With the exception of *The Blue Danube* (12:30) and *Add il-huruf* ("As Much as the Letters", 06:40) a hit that just happened to be playing on a radio at the street during the shooting, the songs in the film were selected on the basis of such suggestions.

In the final edit, we decided not to subtitle the songs, because it would have made the film too heavy on subtitles, but here are the translations of the songs and the stories behind them.

***Hatgannin ya Rit ya Khwanna
Maruhtish London Wala Baris***
(01:24)
(I'll Go Crazy, Brothers, I Never
Went to London or Paris)
Zakariya Ahmad



*"I'll go crazy, brothers, I never went to London or Paris
Those are the cities of civilization, cleanliness, kindness, and it makes me
mad..."*

This is a classic from the 1920's written by Bayram al-Tunsi, and it still expresses the unbroken modernism and optimism of those days, looking forward to Europe as the site of modernity and progress in a humorous tone. Zakariya Ahmad, Bayram al-Tunsi and other authors and musicians of the early 20th century continue to be popular especially among the intellectuals.

Add il-huruf

(06:40)

(As Much as the Letters)

Asala Nasri



*"Why is the moon precious to me?
Because in its glow and its distance,
there is a resemblance to you.
Why is the winter...."*

This hit by the Syrian pop singer Asala just happened to be playing loud on a radio when we were shooting the street scene where it can be heard. We found it fitting and used it.

Fi Eniki Ghurba

(10:15)

(There is Estrangement in Your Eyes)

Muhammad Munir



*"In your eyes, there's estrangement and unfamiliarity
and yet I'm fervently longing for you.
In your eyes, there's estrangement and unfamiliarity..."*

Muhammad Munir, one of Egypt's most famous pop singers of the day, has sung many songs about travel and homesickness. This one was suggested to us by Basim who is a big fan of Munir.

***An der schönen, blauen
Donau***

(12:30)

(Blue Danube)

Johann Strauss II.



Daniela Swarowsky, who herself migrated from Vienna in 1995, has developed a nostalgia towards this song (and other things typically Viennese that she would have shunned before), ever-increasing the longer she lives abroad.

Layali Al-Uns fi Vienna

(22:11)

(Nights of Intimacy in Vienna)

Asmahan



"Enjoy your youth in Vienna

Vienna is a garden of paradise..."

This song from the last film of Egypt's first pop star Asmahan from 1946 continues to be the most well known reference to Vienna in Arabic popular culture. Almost everybody in Egypt will associate Vienna with the first lines "Layali al-uns fi Vienna...." In Vienna, however, Egyptians we interviewed would often be rather disillusioned about the song: "As you may have heard from Asmahan, Vienna is a garden of paradise. I don't know if she's saying that because she had heard of it, or seen it, or whether she was just singing anything." (Adil) "Asmahan cheated us" (Esam)

Al-Tir Al-Musafir

(28:23)

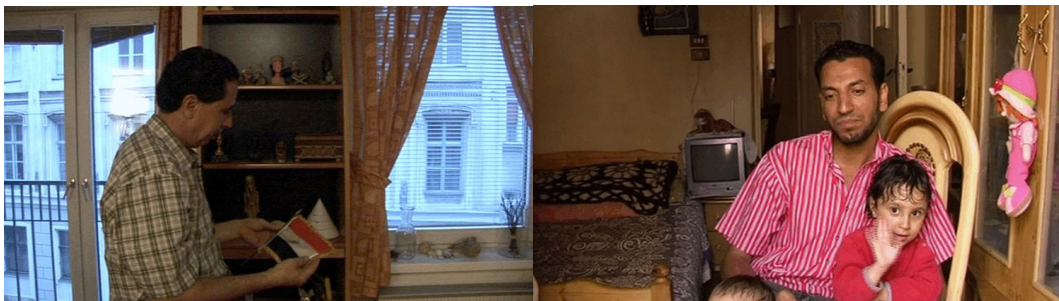
(The Travelling Bird)

Nagat Al-Saghira



*"We sent with the travelling bird a letter,
a scolding, soil from the land of our forefathers,
and a flower from the valley.
Perhaps the migrant will remember
that he has loved ones at home,
that he has loved ones at home."*

This song was selected by Ashraf, who in the film tells the story of the concert of Nagat al-Saghira he saw in Jordan in the 1990. It is one of the songs that accompanied the first wave of Egyptian migration to the Gulf states after the oil boom, and a splendid piece in the style of Arabic tarab about homesickness and longing, and we also used its instrumental intro for the opening and closing scenes of the film.



CREDITS

Idea: Daniela Swarowsky

Direction/Camera/Sound: Daniela Swarowsky and Samuli Schielke

Editing/Advise: Arthur Bueno

Interviews: Samuli Schielke

Translations: Samuli Schielke and Omnia Mehanna

Research Assistance Egypt: Omnia Mehanna

Subtitles: Samuli Schielke, Jennifer Peterson and Ayman Amer

Produced by Daniela Swarowsky

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Realised with the support of:



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