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MES 140-183W

Topic Paper #2

*The Iron Gate (Cairo Station)*

I chose to watch *The Iron Gate*, an Egyptian neorealist film directed by Youssef Chahine. The film is about a crippled, homeless young man named Quinwai who is taken in by a newsstand clerk at Cairo Station. He is ridiculed by many and has never had the chance to be in a relationship. He becomes obsessed with women and sex, posting lewd pictures of American women all over the walls of his cabin. His obsessions come to life when he falls in love with Hannuma, a rambunctious girl who illegally sells drinks at the station. She is engaged to Abu-Serih, a station worker who is trying to form a workers' union. In the clip assigned, Quinwai secretly watches Hannuma and Abu-Serih fight and make up after Hannuma rejects his Quinwai's proposal. Quinwai watches the trains go by in quiet horror. Scorned, he plots to murder her. This clip highlights Quinwai's breaking point. Being denied any form of power in his life, Hannuma's rejection is the last straw for him. In a world that shuns him day after day and allots no resources to him, Quinwai sees no other means of retribution except to kill the love of his life. He takes control where he otherwise would have none.

Quinwai's obsession and fantasies about women highlight how he has been deprived of things able-bodied people take for granted. In the beginning of the movie, the newsstand clerk goes into his cabin and sees hundreds of cut-out photos of half-naked women on his walls. Speaking in retrospect, the clerk acknowledges that the lewd pictures are a representation of Quinwai's lack of physical and emotional affection, and that his obsession with filling that void

led to his actions later in the film. Quinwai uses the photos as a way to fill what he feels is a void in his life. It is clear that he feels a sense of entitlement, seeing the young girl reunite with her young love about to go away to the army. Seeing Hannuma, the love of his life, dedicate herself to another man. It is apparent that Quinwai feels he has been scorned and cheated. The only way he can cope with this feeling is by surrounding himself with images of women he wants.

However, these women are printed on a page and imported from the West, a place when glorified white women wouldn't think twice about marrying a poor Egyptian man. In this respect, Quinwai's sense of comfort in the photos ironically can be a source of despair. In one scene, Quinwai attaches a photo of Hannuma's face to a picture of a pin-up model. Further delving into the sickening irony of his situation, Hannuma's face on a pin-up's body only drives home the fact that not only will Quinwai never be desirable to Western women, the one he loves and sees everyday shares the same sentiment as many Western women would. Quinwai intends to put her photo up as a source of comfort, but as the film progresses it seems to cause him more anger and despair. Not only must he face the fact that Hannuma does not love him, Hannuma will never love him, and neither will most of the women he would want to go after. As he slowly comes to terms with this, he becomes increasingly disturbed. He is aware that women do not want to be with him because of his disability, but he cannot come to peace with that fact. He feels that his disability defines his existence to others and even to himself. In the clip assigned, Quinwai rushes to eavesdrop on Hannuma and Abu-Serih because Abu-Serih intends to assault her. In Quinwai's mind, this makes him a dishonorable man. Although he had just been rejected, their fight is an opportunity for Quinwai to prove to himself that Abu-Serih is not a suitable husband. Prior to this scene, Quinwai tells Hannuma he would never hit her. He prides himself in his character and hopes that it will dawn on Hannuma that he is a good soul. However, he sees that

they make up easily and this breaks down his psyche. Being a good man is not enough for Quinwai because he is stuck with an unfortunate disability that makes him undesirable in his society no matter what. Ultimately, this becomes too much to bare.

Abu-Serih represents the life and power Quinwai does not have. In the film there are 2 active plots. These plots are used to create layers in the film and keep the audience engaged with the plot and characters. One follows Quinwai's mental breakdown, while the other follows Abu-Serih's struggle developing a labor union. According to Sikov, "In order to analyze a film's story and plot, you must stand far enough apart from it that you can see it clearly. Given the fact that most narrative films try to draw you in rather than keep you at an analytical distance, it's not easy to enjoy them and analyze them at the same time..." (Sivok 99) Through analysis, one finds that these two characters are nearly opposites of each other. Quinwai is weak, quiet and disabled while Abu-Serih is strong, assertive and strapping. Quinwai lives as a victim of his circumstances while Abu-Serih refuses to be mistreated by his superiors. Quinwai is lonely and pining while Abu-Serih has the woman of his dreams. Quinwai is essentially powerless while Abu-Serih is the film's symbol of power. The two characters do not interact much outside of Abu-Serih ridiculing Quinwai, however their parallels are clear throughout the film, especially in the clip assigned. Quinwai stands to the side watching them in the haystacks, looking small, meek and insignificant compared to the consistent use of low angles on Abu-Serih, denoting power and his power to control his future. Simple as it may be, Quinwai's hunched and powerless form tells us that this character has very little control of his future, his life, or his mindset. The dichotomy between these two characters is utilized to highlight the theme of Power vs. Weakness in *The Iron Gate*. Quinwai is controlled by his obsessions and his turbulent emotions, brought upon by years of isolation and neglect. Quinwai's determination to win

Hannuma may not have to do with his love for her entirely. He sees Abu-Serih every day, making commands as a lowly worker, threatening authority and creating a system for himself and his comrades to thrive. He does not succumb to his conditions, rather he is extremely determined to create his own conditions. He believes it is a human right. It is clear that Quinwai despises him, however this hatred stems from envy. He wants to be the man that Abu-Serih is, he wants to be powerful and able-bodied, he wants to be able to get the woman of his dreams without even trying. He wants to speak out against the powers that have held him down for so long by finding a woman he loves who will love him. He wants the power that Abu-Serih exudes, and he knows that because of his disability, his personal traumas and nobody to lift him up, he will never be able to achieve that power. People like Abu-Serih are valued and feared in their shared society. His determination, strength and collective action makes him a contributing member to society. He is not a good person, as he abuses his fiancé. However, his treatment of women does not come into question when it is decided that he is a powerful member of society. His character flaw does not factor into the image he presents of himself. Quinwai's character and physical flaws are all that make up his image. He is seen as a burden to society, and he is only saved with a kindly man takes him in. Had he not ended up in Cairo Station, he would be suffering elsewhere under similar circumstances. Quinwai is not able to come to terms with these values in his society. Essentially, he feels he has been cheated by men like Abu-Serih in that he will never be considered a contributing member of society simply because of his disabilities. Hannuma's death would mean more than revenge against a woman who scorned him. It would be that in his own way, Quinwai would finally have power over Abu-Serih as well as power for the sake of it. Taking a life is considered the ultimate act of power. Taking the life of a man's fiancé would absolutely give you power over him, over his emotions, over the trajectory of his life.

Hannuma's rejection brings Quinwai to the dark reality of his life, a reality he cannot deal with yet a reality where he can retain his power. In his internal struggles, Quinwai's fantasies become eclipsed by the reality of his life. In response, Quinwai decides to put an end to the fantasies that always seem to elude him. By killing Hannuma, he is liberated from torturing himself with hopefulness and wishful thinking. He will be liberated from heartbreak and having to see Hannuma and Abu-Serih marry while he is left all alone once again. In the clip assigned, we see Quinwai turn away from Hannuma and Abu-Serih's passionate exchange and watch the trains go by in despondency. As long as he's known Hannuma he's known that she was engaged, and he's been determined to win her over regardless. When Abu-Serih reveals to Hannuma that he is getting somewhere with his labor union and they share a passionate moment right after Quinwai had proposed, Quinwai is forced to realize that there is nothing he can do to get what he wants. He knows that Abu-serih is prideful and abusive. He knows that Abu-Serih would force Hannuma to fit into what he thinks would be a good wife. He knows that Abu-Serih does not truly care about her. This is shown when a coworker tells Abu-Serih that Hannuma almost got hit by a train and his response is "I thought you had important news for me." Yet, the woman he loves would rather be with Abu-Serih because of his status and strength in the community. She is willing to disregard all of his shortcomings and wouldn't even give Quinwai's proposal a second thought because Quinwai is disabled, a burden on society. He is weak, and although Abu-Serih is cruel, she would rather be with him than someone she sees as the lowest of the lows. His breaking point is brought upon by this revelation. As the saying goes, "if I can't have them, nobody can". At this point, Quinwai sees Hannuma as a salacious woman. According to Sikov, "However much we take it for granted, movement through space on film can be extraordinarily graceful. And by its movement alone, a camera reveals much more than simply the space

through which it moves. It can express emotions." (Sikov 35) We see the camera zoom into the coke bottle in Quinwai's hand as he watches Abu-Serih and Hannuma share an implied intimate moment. The coke bottle was given to him by Hannuma earlier. He abruptly turns around to face the train in disturbed despondency. The camera switches between the train tracks and Quinwai's face, zooming out as it focuses on him. It is clear that a personal boundary has been crossed for him. Not only has Hannuma rejected him, she has gone against Quinwai's idea of how an honorable woman should be. The shock is far too much for him. Murdering Hannuma is more than an act of revenge against her, although it is. He is taking away her power of choice, her autonomy as a human being and her right to choose to love who she wants. He believes she doesn't deserve these choices as a woman anymore, because she has violated what he thinks is a sacred feminine code. Essentially, her decision to love a man that is not Quinwai would be her demise. This is a form of taking away power. We see it in our modern media, in our government and entertainment scandals. In a patriarchal society, the worst thing Hannuma can do is scorn a man or act in a way that does not line up with his ideas of how a woman should act. In a disturbing way, Quinwai would finally have the power he craves in murdering the woman he loves, the woman who has betrayed him with her slovenly ways.

*The Iron Gate* is a thrilling drama film at the surface. Delving deeper into the plot and characters, we can see that it is an overwhelmingly depressing film, an allegory to power dynamics and those who fall below the sightline. It is a neorealist film, a film that shows us the underside of society. It paints a picture of how those relegated to the undercaste can be traumatized by how they are treated in society. It shows how those people are deprived of little things, such as affection, friendship, love, respect. Ultimately, it shows how this trauma can manifest into something unspeakably heinous. Yet when you examine Quinwai's murder attempt

from all angles, it does not seem as unspeakable or evil as it does when you are looking from the inside out. When you are isolated and discarded by society, how can Quinwai find healthy ways to cope with abandonment? How can Quinwai find power in a society that does not value him? Once one is labeled as an outsider or deviant, it is not impossible to think that one would act upon that label. Being an outcast of society, Quinwai decided to act as an outcast would.

Works Cited

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