



A Present from the Past

A documentary by Kawthar Younis

Produced in 2015, Egypt

Research and writing by Rasha Azab

This study was carried out in cooperation with



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— Students' film projects draw a new reality, sometimes changing the industry's rules and cinema triumphs over mass production, where hope takes over facts. It is, however, a good indicator for measuring the pulse of the cinematic movement and the possibility of its development.

— The Egyptian documentary 'A Present from the Past', released in 2015, is part of the Film Institute students' projects at the filmmaking department. It is the first feature-length documentary film that came out of the student jury hall to cinema theaters in Cairo and the governorates, achieving surprising revenues after playing for five weeks in theaters despite its two-hour length.

— A few years ago, the Egyptian documentary industry took a step towards a new field: biography as an introduction to understanding reality. New generations have come to present their personal and family experiences through a new form of documentaries.

— Egyptian cinema shyly opened up to self-related topics. Egyptian artists rarely presented themselves on the screen. Youssef Chahine and his student Yousry Nasrallah opened doors in fictional cinema and faced some criticism and challenges. We have witnessed some contemporary attempts by Tamer El Said in his films 'The Last Days of the City' and 'Night of the Outside' by Ahmed Abdullah Al Sayed. For years, however, documentary film had been labeled a mirror of social issues, as if personal ones weren't part of it!

— The film has set new characteristics for the Egyptian documentary genre, and new filmmakers began turning to their personal and family lives as subjects of interest.

Preamble



The film opened unexpected doors and participated in several local and international festivals, which helped the director and others from the same generation plan further film projects. That came to light thanks to the independent documentary film industry movement that paved the path by presenting some influential models, such as:

— In 2011: 'The Virgin, the Copts and Me' by Namir Abdel Massih, a film about the personal and family heirloom concept of Saint Mary appearing during events, a pivotal Coptic event.

— In 2014: 'Um Ghayeb, Mother of the Unborn' by Nadine Salib. The film intertwines stories of pain between several women on one side and the filmmaker on the other. The distance between the filmmaker and the main characters of her film disappears on account of unity in pain.

— In 2016: 'Little Eagles' by Mohamed Rashad. The film's title carries the name of the movement founded by Egyptian leftist mothers and fathers for their children, creating a bond with the new generation still suffering from the same pressures and practices. The filmmaker unveils his relationship with his father and tries to explore similar relationships within his generation.

— Kawthar Younis' film 'A Present from the Past' belongs to that new spectrum of Egyptian documentaries, which is still cultivating connections based on personal and individual issues.

— Dr. Mokhtar Younes, Kawthar's father, stood against the film's screening after Kawthar finished editing it. Despite his praise of the content, he did not expect the film to unveil his personal story to the public. He ended up changing his mind only hours before the jury's convention.

“We rarely hear about audiences' notable feedback lately due to the stagnation in the artistic fields. However, A Gift from the Past has broken barriers, driving audiences to break their silence and praise this high-end, purposeful work. It was recently screened at the Zawya Cinema downtown, and no one expected this simple project to achieve such remarkable success.”¹

About the film

— A daughter embarks on the search for her father's former girlfriend, whom he met during his study trip to Italy 30 years before. The story gives way to other branches within the film as the filmmaker rediscovers her relationship with her father, the connection between humans and places. She also deals with being an accomplice in the quest to find the former lover, which affects her relationship with her late mother.

— The filmmaker/daughter filmed the events of her entire project by dedicatedly peeping around her father, a professor at the Film Institute. She never told him about her intentions until the end, as she had convinced him she was working on another idea. She watched him with multiple cameras for months, trying to seize natural expressions and reactions through events she was creating unknowingly to her father, the main character, as he was going about his daily life.

Cast and Crew

Directed by:
Kawthar Younis

Starring:
Mokhtar Younis

Cinematography:
Kawthar Younis

Editing:
Kawthar Younis, Ramy Nidal, Mohamed Imad,
Omar Abu Al Oula, Heba Othman

Sound design and mixing:
Abdul Rahman Mahmoud

Produced by:
The Higher Institute of Cinema

¹ Interview with Mohammad Al-Saeed and Shaima Salah, Kawthar Younis: I documented my search for my father's first girlfriend in "A Present from the Past", El-Nabaa, Tuesday, January 10, 2017.

Budget and Production

– As a student, Kawthar Younis decided that her graduation project from the Film Institute in 2016 would be a film about the journey of searching for the woman her father loved for 33 years. So she started the preparations a year and a half before graduation.

– She decided to use several hidden cameras, as the narration depended on filming the emotional moments of this story, and she did not have any tools at the time to implement the idea.

– She worked for a year and a half as an assistant director in commercial films and advertisements to provide for her project. That included equipment (camera, phone with camera, spy camera eyeglasses, laptop) and airline tickets to Italy as a gift for her father on his birthday, to help him find his girlfriend he hadn't seen in 33 years.

– The shooting took place between Cairo and Rome and lasted for two months, resulting in 350 hours of filming!

– She resorted to several editors to classify the material and also worked on editing parts of the film herself.

– The editing phase lasted for about a year until it reached the length of two hours, which was the version presented to the jury. Then the film was reproduced in its final version, 80 minutes long.

– The film was screened before the Film Institute jury.

– The film's journey relied on a dramatic open line, allowing all expectations. The director hadn't foreseen a planned ending to this story nor a complete conception of a form for the film she had started, so there was no clear production plan.

– "You don't have the tools you need, and the Film Institute only provides traditional forms of support that you wouldn't need in films that rely on smart hidden technology."

– She handled the production, shooting, and part of the editing process.

– She had 350 hours of film on her hands, a number sufficient to make one drown in material and make it difficult to reach a clear picture.

Chronological Context

— Egyptian cinema had tried to keep pace with the significant events the country went through, in failure or success. By the end of the revolution era and the beginning of the new military rule in 2014, cinema had shifted from big issues and collective awareness concerns.

— Filmmakers had diverged closer to resorting to individual issues and subjectivity. The cinema audience, as well as the artists, needed a truce to understand what happened.

— The film brings up a poignant story. A young woman decides to give her father a gift for his 75th birthday: finding his long-lost love. So the search begins for a woman he hadn't heard from for thirty years and of which he only knew the first name and the country. Still, the film's most significant accomplishment arose during the years-long experience of making an Egyptian documentary film with limited assets and achieving satisfying results. That was accomplished through the collective engagement with an utterly individual story..

— This film restored the documentary genre momentum and raised the critical question: Why don't distribution networks screen documentaries, knowing that some can be autonomous and lead the way for others, as was the case with 'A Present from the Past'?



"As I tried to get creative with my documentation, I used spy camera glasses and sometimes left my laptop's camera on. Ultimately, this experience helped me be sure I could do anything regardless of resources."²

♪ Where is the hope ? And it's charm ♪

The Film as an Impact Tool

About Cinema Zawya

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"A theater for films that are not played in"

'A Present from the Past' created a fresh and new Impact network. There never was an Impact plan, but when things started happening, the results were impressive. Several factors helped with the Impact:

The Film Institute students and professors

— In 2016, 'A Present from the Past' premiered at the Film Institute within the framework of the students' graduation projects. That is when the Impact network of the film began.

— As a student, Younis was to present a short documentary film as her graduation project. However, she could not commit to the rules and made an 80-minute film. That caused a predicament for the jury in the beginning. However, when the film ended, and they saw the reaction of the student audience and professors, questions like "How was this film made? How can we support it?" were raised.

— Many student audiences and professors became promoters of the film. Film students and new filmmakers, the striking force of promotion's early stages, took to social media, conveying interest to critics and the official press.

Cinema Zawya

— The curators of Cinema Zawya asked for the rights to distribute the film, and from then on, the film moved to the next stage.

The Film Page

— The filmmaker established a page for the film as a platform for advertisement, publishing screening dates, and audience invitations.

— She said that she did not have any budget for advertising, and relied mainly on her network of relationships with students and new artists, as they formed the audience for this type of film.



Impact Distribution

The film screening became wider, taking an automatic path following stages of unpaid advertising. It is a noticeable impact that this type of spontaneous advertising carried out through individuals on the ground, influential in their circles, can accomplish, as opposed to purchased advertising that achieves fake turnout and multiplied numbers. Zawya organized 'A Present from the Past' screenings in Cairo and the governorates, which bore promising revelations.

Cairo

- The first public screening at the Cairo International Film Festival, November 13, 2015.
- Screening at Zawya Cinema on November 30, 2016, then scheduled to screen for a week.
- After massive success during the first week, the show was extended for a second, then a third, until it reached the fifth week, an unprecedented turnout for a documentary. The most prolonged period for a film was two weeks. But following fervent audience requests, the presentation was extended, and curators agreed with cinema management.
- It played in commercial cinemas in Cairo, such as Americana Plaza, Point 90, and Zamalek..
- The film screened in several cultural institutions such as the Cairo Book Fair, Goethe Institute, and Hanager Arts Center.

Governorates (It is unusual for cinemas in the governorates to screen documentaries)

Mansoura Space Cinema Club / Damietta / Tanta Rivoli Cinema / Zawya Cinema in Alexandria (Amir Cinema) / Port Said / The film was released on DVD and sold out at Cinema Zawya.



Impact dynamics

A Present from the Past's support network consists of making the most of the success. The film presents a heavy dose of tangled family relationships and a journey in search of a lost lover of 35 years. The film placed the spectator in a state of anticipation and excitement. Even the critics did not pay much attention to the film's technical anatomy. What affected the audience had the same effect on them. They loved the experience with all its flaws, accepted it, and defended the continuation of this type of film. The impact was various, and we can monitor it as follows:

- The film played for five whole weeks at Cinema Zawya and sold more than 4,000 tickets.
- Several seminars were held following the film screenings in the presence of the filmmaker and the main character Dr. Mukhtar Younis.
- It was clear that the mass attendance in Cairo made young filmmakers request to see the film, causing it to circulate to several governorates, followed by seminars.
- The film's local impact motivated its expansion to international festivals, and not the other way around, as usually happens. That must lead us to believe in the importance of local communities in protecting their films.

After success in Cairo and the governorates, the film was selected to participate in several international festivals, such as:

- The Arab Film Festival Berlin
- The Agadir International Documentary Film Festival and won the Audience Award
- The Encounters South African International Documentary Festival
- The International Film Festival of Patmos
- As the film was the director's first, she announced that its revenues would go to finance her next film, which encouraged the audience to support her. Some spectators stated that they watched the film more than once.
- After that first experience, Younis worked on several projects with fellow filmmakers as a director and producer.



Impact dynamics

— Kawthar Younis and other Arab filmmakers founded a women's film group, "Sisters for the Love of Cinema," which aims to communicate between female producers and exchange experiences. However, the group has not yet presented any notable production at the time of writing this study.

— The film's main character, Dr. Mokhtar Younis, stated that his life was upturned at the age of 75 because of this film. The life of that cinema professor was going to be a simple traditional outline with no surprises, but the film helped him rediscover himself and presented him to students in a new way, which was to the Film Institute's benefit (faculty-students).

— A Present from the Past's social media page is now a support page for similar film projects.

"Sisters for the Love of Cinema: We do not seek to create a feminist bond, but we want to express our existence."⁴

4 Mona El Mougy, Sisters for the Love of Cinema: We do not seek to create a feminist bond, but we want to express our existence, Masrawy, October 26, 2020.

Behavior Change

— The filmmaker tried to make the best of the audience's appeal to her film and the project's social media presence, promoting a social initiative to support the recycling of plastic products and their sale at Cinema Zawya.

"The government must develop a solid plan to allocate part of its budget to support independent cinema projects or those discarded by producers. The Ministry of Culture must also end the stalemate and procedural complications inflicted on young artists. In short, the government must develop an integrated vision that defines the position of art or how it should be seen and what is expected out of it. Also, it is necessary to allocate cinema theaters for those films as a diverse artistic delicacy."⁵

5 Ahmed Barakat, Kawthar Younis: I wanted to break patterns and stereotypes in A Present from the Past, The Gazette, 11-23-2015.

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Special thanks:

Beadie Finzi / Sandra Sayej / Mustafa Youssef

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Cinema Zawya

— Cinema Zawya was established in 2014, as a space for alternative cinema screening, a role that was lost in Egypt during the last two decades. Cinema Opera had occupied that role in the sixties and seventies, where young filmmakers were able to watch experimental projects as well as European, Latin and East Asian films.

— Cinema Zawya provided a much needed space. Filmmaker Youssef Chahine's family benefited from the available resources which allowed them to use the 175-seat small hall at the old Odeon Cinema, to screen Chahine's controversial films.

— In 2015, Zawya also entered the distribution market, in an attempt to create a network for independent Egyptian films screening.

— The right to distribute *A Gift from the Past* was transferred to Cinema Zawya, which initially announced its screening for a week, and that was the first cooperation between a graduation film project and a screening theater.