The Other: Homage to Edward Said

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Abstract—The current investigation aims to explore the multimodality of the visual language in cinema, which articulates pictures and words into a creative medium of contemporary aesthetics and criticism. This multimodal discourse analysis focuses on *Al-Akhar* (The Other, 1999), a film that renders the postcolonial philosophy of Edward Said (1935-2002), the Palestinian-American critic. Youssef Chahine (1926-2008), the Egyptian cinematic artist, produced this film. The present creativity of multimodal cinematic visual language is significant in articulating form and content, where expressive components manifest through graphic, aesthetic, and semiotic symbolisms overlapping with local/global cinematographic ecologies. Three decades ago, *Al-Akhar* imagined today's media dominance when it criticised the sociopolitical landscape of the 1990s, which led to a series of inhumane incidents across different geographies at the beginning of the new millennium. It investigates the impacts of media and globalisation on Arabic social systems, discussing economies and cultural heritage with imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. This paper aims to identify Youssef Chahine's cinematic art as a medium of Edward Said's criticism. Methodologically, it adopted the aesthetic analysis as a qualitative research method to explore the visual language in the cinematic medium. The research's question corresponds to the critical role of media in rendering the cultural issues of identity from aesthetic perspectives. This paper is significant because it explores the impact of critical thinking on multimodal media, which aesthetically incorporates language, fashion, architecture, sociology, philosophy and education. Furthermore, it identifies a significant dualism in art resembling a multimodal articulation of Edward Said's criticism and Youssef Chahine's cinema.

Index Terms—multimodal discourse analysis, media criticism and aesthetics, visual communication, social semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

The creative medium of cinema conveys language into messages through body movements, facial expressions, and grotesque pictures, simultaneously symbolising convergent or divergent contents to forms. In this multimodal context, the symmetry and asymmetry of cinematic language produces and condenses narratives through visual composition. Such visual heritage of language developed since cave dwellers painted on cave walls to communicate ideas and beliefs (Mitchell, 1986, 2015), while the contemporary phenomenon of human communication is extensively more visual than ever in education, economic, cultural, political, social and geographic, and information and communication systems (Abu-Hammad & Hamtini, 2023; Al-Abbas et al., 2024; Alsaggar & Al Atoum, 2019; Suvakovic, 2017). Furthermore, the art of cinema represents a grand narrative of modern human communication. It is a multimodal medium that assembles images, texts, sounds, fashions, social critique, histories, aesthetics and semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; Mitchell, 1986, 2005, 2015; Suvakovic, 2017). Consequently, the multimodal criticism in this study provokes further possibilities. It varies in exploring the visual language of cinema in contemporary art contexts, inviting artists/authors to visualise the world from uncommon perspectives.

The present paper aims to identify the multimodality of Edward Said's criticism through the visual language of Youssef Chahine's cinema. Y. Chahine's cinema represents social critique through pictorial language that connects to a comprehensive spectrum of viewers and audiences. In the film *The Other*, he portrays homage to E. Said, who

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discussed the global significance of Y. Chahine's oeuvre in his book *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-determination, 1969–1994*:

> Films produced in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, which has always been the heart of Arab film culture, have not generally been part of the international network. The only Arab director to have made a name for himself abroad is Youssef Chahine, and aside from the occasionally interesting Syrian, Iraqi, or Tunisian feature, films by and for Arabs are of strictly regional import; Egyptian comedies and melodramas in particular continue to delight huge Arab audiences that have still not made the switch to Dallas and Dynasty. (Said, 1994, p. 132)

On other occasions, E. Said identifies Y. Chahine among other global Arab writers, novelists and artists such as Taha Hussein, Um Kulthum, Nizar Qabbani, Mahmoud Darwish and Elias Khoury (Iskandar & Rustom, 2010).

With Edward Said, the involvement of the postmodern discourse criticised a significant part of the established modern/colonial iconographies in media. The Palestinian-American critic deconstructed the conventional narratives which some authors/artists have produced to represent the Orient (Iskandar & Rustom, 2010). On the other hand, Youssef Chahine rendered E. Said's philosophy to convey specific social dynamics which are creatively critical in form and content. In his films, he explored or manifested critical thoughts through pictorial dialogues and subjects rather than representing society's familiar image and language. Y. Chahine transformed the language of E. Said into a visual experience, turning historical subjects into contemporary subjects, and associated these transformations with the social realities of Arab societies during the second half of the twentieth century (Chahine & Massad, 1999).

The Egyptian cinematic artist reflected the themes of the late twentieth century in his cinema while representing the paradoxical truth of their social reality. Youssef Chahine's oeuvre aims to establish a dialogue between the similarities and differences of cultures to acknowledge, recognize, and accept the Other. According to Edward Said (2000), artists, poets and filmmakers have the potential to create significant frameworks for such multicultural interaction across societies and creative languages.

In the Nineties, E. Said and Y. Chahine criticised the issues of globalisation, postcolonialism and displacement through texts and images from interchanging geographic perspectives. Similarities and differences in the Arab social reality influenced their aesthetic attitudes toward social narratives in cinema and literature. Even if they both rendered the same issue, some social reflections still influence the individuality of every other one and make it novel. They deconstructed social realities to reflect the contemporary issues of the nineties. In *The Other*, the philosophy of Edward Said manifested as a result of multimodal socio-political critiques, influencing cultural discourse and displacing the old-fashioned social contexts. Youssef Chahine examined the collective thoughts of the Arab community to establish a transformative approach to bridge local culture into the global world's culture.
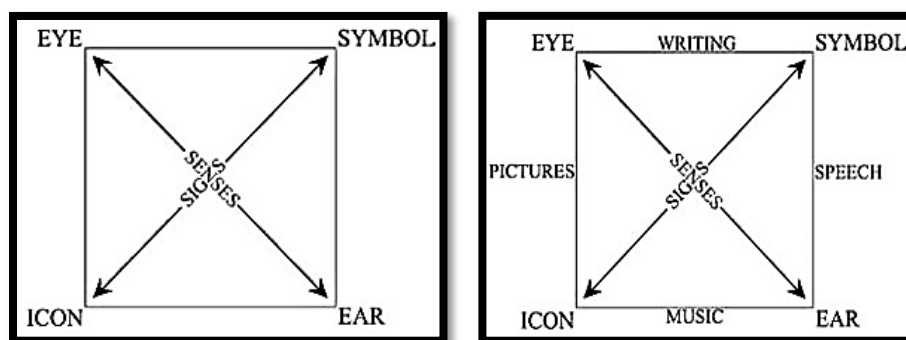
II. MEDIA AESTHETICS IN CINEMA LANGUAGE

Figure 1. The Framework of Image X Text Intersection Between Signs and Senses (Mitchell, 2015, p. 41)

The qualitative research methodology on cinema interchangeably involves iconology, language, and media aesthetics. This post-medium condition corresponds to the essential point that the art of cinema is creative in assembling images, music, and texts into one communicative medium. The balance of these elements significantly impacts the audience's awareness. Cinema art represents the temporalities of a modern human era in social, political, and economic details, while artists/authors express particular messages through their oeuvre according to aesthetic rhythms. The communicative process depends on post-medium expressions, including sounds and pictures, where every balanced artwork conveys a message. In this multimodal context, iconology is an aesthetic tool that studies images across creative media, especially the constructions of cinematic language and pictorial representation. Media aesthetics connects the cinematic dialogue to image, social, political, and artistic displacements of expressive components (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; Mitchell, 2015). Furthermore, the aesthetic qualitative approach identifies visual and semiotic messages in creative human practices across arts (Al-Abbas, 2016, 2022, 2023). Similarly, the concept of multimodality renders sociopolitical signs in dynamic pictures and texts by articulating symbolic,

educational, and communicative assemblages, which produce metaphors through cognitive systems (Bahrudin & Bakar, 2022; Peng, 2022; Wang Chongqing, 2022).

The present film study focuses on cinematic art as a creative kinesthetic medium, which renders images and texts in one dynamic, moving composition. The hybridity of filmmaking constructs languages and pictures into visual dialogue and conveys social and semiotic messages. In the current media context, W. J. T. Mitchell (2015) negotiates Plato's allegory on the nature of knowledge as a multimodal assemblage of theatrical pictures combining human bodies and objects merging into shadows and lights. This "quasi-platonic cinema" aesthetically conceptualises a system through which visual and textual components assemble and function. Plato categorised them in terms to relate them to each other, adapting an aesthetic classification without exclusion. Humans practised this creative performance through Cave Painting, through which belief manifested as a different mental power than knowledge. However, W. J. T. Mitchell (2015, p. 81) argues that Plato's narrative remained latent in the scholarly tradition. The present study adopted the aesthetic conception of knowledge, from which words and images spontaneously connect.

III. MULTIMODAL CRITIQUE ON *THE OTHER* CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

The Other visualises Edward Said's postcolonial criticism in Youssef Chahine's Cinema; this film indicates the communication between social issues in multimodal and multicultural contexts. *The Other* is a metaphor where someone's space opens for outer ideologies. The aesthetics in the film's cinematic language evoke further exploration of the sociopolitical conditions where the impacts of globalisation on culture mark out. In this context, Y. Chahine's film focuses on representing its imagined community while facing global economic and social systems. The ideologies of social classes in Egypt metamorphose, where individuals engage in paradoxical dialogue on the cultural, economic and sociopolitical transformations. This theme connected the philosophies and approaches that post-colonialists practice to produce their argumentation. This point constructed the dialogue in the film, which visualised the postcolonial argumentation into a visual language between the film's characters. Therefore, it exhibited and recorded the daily engagement of people at work, schools, markets and open spaces.
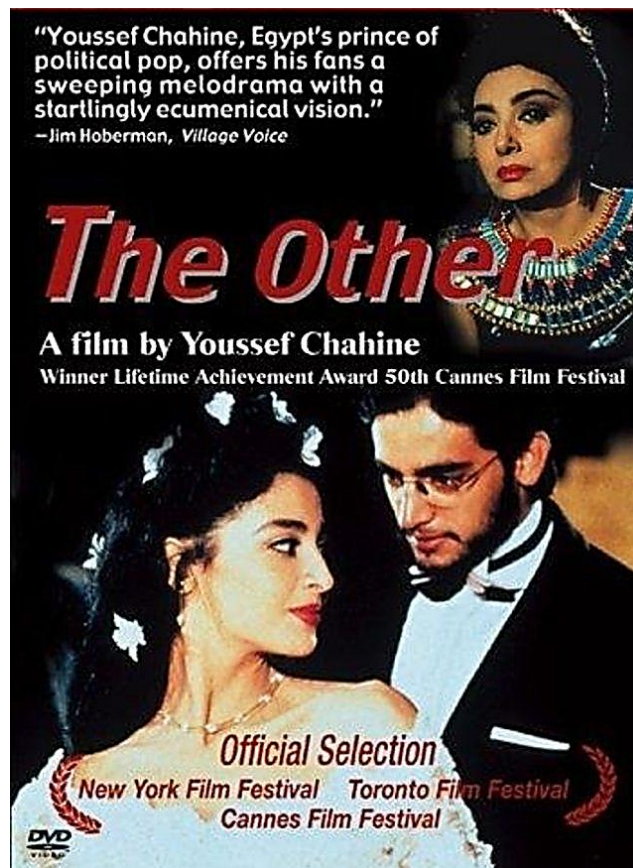

Figure 2. The Film Poster (Public Domain)

The film places an allegorical emphasis on the conception of cultural language, which diverges across particular depictions of social classes in Egypt and builds ideological connections with the global cultures in other regions. Within this Glocal framework, the film represents a social critique to conceptualise home, language, culture and place. The postcolonial and multicultural diversity of film's content represented Edward Said's philosophy in criticising the colonial heritage in global/local culture to recognise the autonomic culture that clusters human diversity. Into multiple

spaces, that film connects the aesthetic value of the place and the value of the postcolonial society. This visual language constructs a new semiotic experience in Egyptian cinema, discovering new similarities and differences among the Egyptian cultural and social landscapes. This semiotic experimentation is significant because it exposes the Arab audience to understanding contemporary social issues which are multicultural, multinational, and global (Chahine & Massad, 1999). Twenty-five years ago, this film anticipated today's contemporary power of Information and Communication Technologies. It promotes awareness among the arts' audiences to educate people about contemporary global and local issues, integrating cultures, spaces, and contexts in the social art-making of cinematic visual language.

Youssef Chahine did not stereotype social groups nor tried to label particular individuals to certain appearances (Khouri, 2010). He focused on the significance of the sociopolitical question and the phenomenological social reality. The study identifies social groups in the film that share common sociopolitical symbolisms, languages, and fashions. Every group negotiates and discourses some side effects of globalization, where the visualization of cinematic language produces semiotics of social impacts on the individual and collective levels. Synchronously focusing on a postcolonial social critique, the film created imagined contexts by constructing multimodal thematic articulations according to the social background of each imagined social group. The film outlined and related social contexts to the peoples' beliefs through direct and hidden representations of cinematic imagined communities; it developed the perception of social politics from different semiotic angles and cultural perspectives. At this point, the religious emergences manifests through mainstream collective signs and high/extreme individual signs.
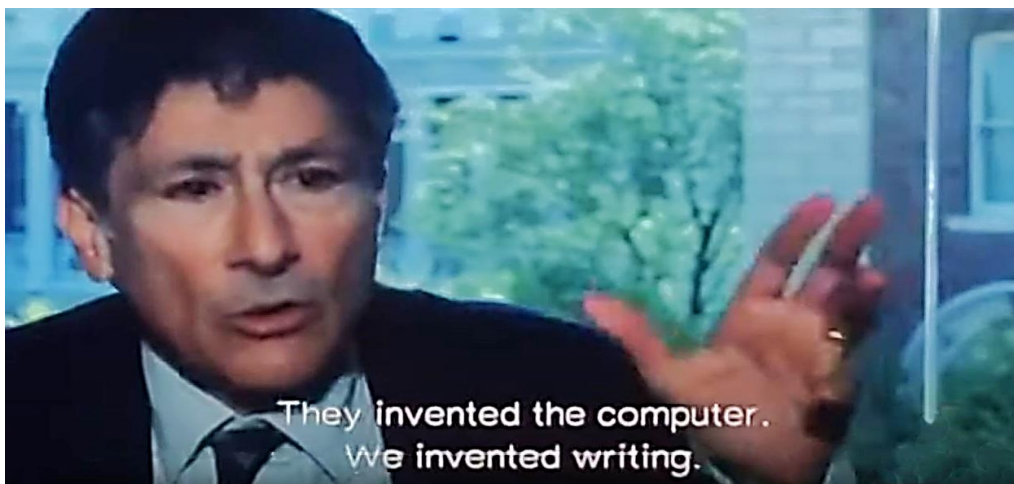

Figure 3. Edward Said Playing Himself in an Introductory Guest/Cameo Appearance at the Opening Scene of *Al-Akhar/The Other (1999)* Cinema Film

The film deconstructs the conservative images of every social class, which defines social clichés from a critical perspective. There are two central characters in this cinematic context: young man Adam and young woman Hanna. Each character belongs to a different social class that diverges in beliefs and cultural and educational backgrounds. The relationship between Adam and Hanan develops into marriage, which evokes a deeply critical side of the Egyptian social system. *Al-Akhar* reconsiders this established paradoxical image of such complex narratives in multilayered social contexts. The cinematic artwork critiques the conservative images of the social-political communication within Arab ecology through the dialogue of the paradoxical marriage relation between Adam and Hanan, projecting the impacts of postcolonial thoughts. In this overlapping dialogue, the cinematic visual language displaces the individual characters outside their social class. It presents a specific message by expanding and displacing the sociopolitical context to other contexts.

In discussing social justice through Edward Said's critique, he evoked faith, cultural identity, economic influences, globalization, immigration, women's rights, public culture, gender, and political propaganda. These issues appeared through *Al-Akhar's* language when the film pictured the global/local environments, cinematic identity, natural phenomena, consumer behaviour, urban representations, nostalgia, immigration and diaspora that overlap into social space representations inside and outside the buildings and architectural designs. The film represented the open spaces of the urban landscapes, picturing the interchange between the characters' private spaces, individual environments and the public environments outside the social space. Sexuality and gender representations are other veiled issues, making further connections with the consumerist culture, which Youssef Chahine addressed and criticized in his cinema (Khouri, 2010). *Al-Akhar* represented a complicated side of the modern Arab social reality, the ideological conflicts in the 1990s between different armed and political systems. It critiqued these politics, which adopted different ideologies driven by foreign powers, influencing conflicts directly across Arab geographies. From a broader perspective, the symbolism of social conflict was another side effect of the political conflicts between Marxism and Capitalism in the Middle East. Y. Chahine represented this issue in his art to relate the impacts of political global powers on the economies and cultures of developing countries worldwide.

The content of Youssef Chahine's cinema is one of the few internationally recognised Arab creative experiences for several reasons, such as its closer position to the global scene, making it more reachable for the international audience. This cinema profoundly engages with the cultural aspects of European societies when compared to other local Arab cinemas (Said, 1994). The geographic possibilities of Y. Chahine cinema provide features for its cultural characteristics; this variety is considered significant. It integrates further with feminism, gender and sexuality, and representations of the body, and visualises a global character. On one side, Y. Chahine's cinema is close to Western and Eastern Europe; on the other side, close to North Africa and other parts of the Middle East, clustering a wide range of cultures. This critical examination succeeded in reconsidering visual ecologies and re-evaluating our understanding of contemporary cinema. It represents a variety of emergent global concerns following many political, social and economic subjects that connect circles of artists, audiences and societies. *Al-Akhar* portrayed Edward Said when he criticised the problems and sicknesses of the 20th-century civilisation, proposing a collective ethical question regarding its human nature. The articulation of E. Said criticism and Y. Chahine's cinema represented the relationship between economic theories and societies. They reimagined the old debates between Marxism and Capitalism and their influences on the collective art scene; they put mainstream and individual creativity under question. Such cinematic Arabic language produces signs of sociopolitical conflicts, which portray pictures against imperialism. The film represented further narratives of imperialism from other geographies; these narratives took place across separate scenes, interacting with multilayered social realities.

The film's social construction critiques globalisation's cultural impacts on the interchanging social levels. The political and economic realities emerged into the language that characters expressed in diverse imagined contexts. The film created a communicational bridge between the imagined audience and the imagined communities, where the Egyptian Diaspora extended into the imagined global cultural ecologies of the continuous scenes, interacting with different shades and identities of Egyptian and non-Egyptian people. This social-oriented dialogue led to complementary examples of convergence between cultures. Those assemblages of language, culture and social critique engage with elements of visual local culture, foreign international culture and social-political symbolisms.

In the continuous scenes of the film, the feminist discourse rendered the female presence in its private and public spaces. It pictured an analogy between the gender hierarchies in global politics and local religious thoughts (Khouri, 2010). This multimodal breakdown evokes feminism in the Arab creative media; in *The Other*, different semiotic layers construct gender issues to correspond to Edward Said's critique when he related feminism with local beliefs in Arab society and simultaneously investigated the relation to social beliefs and local gender rules within global frameworks. This analysis explains the motivations behind Youssef Chahine's situating of cultural identity and gender systems into colonial and post-colonial feminist perspectives. The film analysed the constructions of contemporary gender and identity in feminist contexts. *The Other's* cinematic language decoded the involvement of global and local feminism in societies where female characters personify across film scenes.

The relation between feminist image in cinema and gender rules articulated multimodal social dialogues in the film, rendering cultural perspectives. Gender Rules manipulate the social film language by constructing/imagining mainstream attitudes toward the characters' cultural, political and economic identities. As a result of this imagined connection to social reality, the gender modality in the film constructed feminism in the cinematic representation of the socio-political environment. For this reason, the representations of women's identity manifest through direct and indirect forms to evoke those mainstream thoughts and, simultaneously, to develop identity and gender practices to improve the feminist social realities in the cinematic language.

In his criticism, Edward Said engages with gender and identity practices to analyse the picture of women in Arab media according to cultural contexts (Said, 1978, 1994, 2000). His process of constructing and de-constructing the structures of gender and identity resembles through the language of *The Other's* Discourse. This approach opens the criticism of feminine/feminist representations in multimodal practices to aesthetic aspects. In the same context, Youssef Chahine is one of those confrontational cinematic artists known for challenging models, where he represents characters in multimodal settings and backgrounds in cinematic artwork. Some critics consider Y. Chahine provocative because his images of Arabic society are associated with religious beliefs. On the other hand, some art critics tolerate contemporary culture and understand the diversities of social reality that impact the cultural values of Arab societies (Khouri, 2010; Chahine & Massad, 1999).

IV. CONCLUSION

Youssef Chahine pictured Edward Said in the opening first scene of *Al-Akhar*, where the Palestinian-American critic concluded his otherness philosophy. The film's first minute exposed three characters: the established professor E. Said himself, the freshly graduated Adam and his college mate. This historic scene projected Y. Chahine's cinema as a medium of E. Said criticism of postmodernism. Such a dualism between cinema and criticism marks the concurrent condition of today's media, as the global audience witnesses violence and conflicts across transnational geographies. Adam, the Egyptian young man who received higher education from an American university, interrogated the cultural identity of a Palestinian-American professor. In this scene, E. Said spoke an unfamiliar Arabic accent, representing his hybrid language identity. E. Said's Arabic accent signifies a displaced childhood/memory/background, where he learned the Arabic language in a non-Arab community or non-Arab environment/ecology. On the other hand, Adam spoke a

familiar Egyptian Arabic accent in typical manners. This conversation between the professor and the freshly graduated Adam uncovered the diversities of their sociopolitical identities. E. Said concluded his philosophy in the first scene while conversing with Adam, where they said:

<div dir="rtl">

[كل من لا يؤمنون إلا بالقوة الغاشمة لا بد أن يفجروا مقاومة وعنفاً وكراهية عند الآخرين...]

</div>

Edward Said in unfamiliar Arabic accent: All those who only believe in violence [aggressive power] must provoke resistance, violence, and hatred, among others.

<div dir="rtl">

[آدم: حضرتك أمريكاني الجنسية وأصلك فلسطيني، إنتماءك لمين؟]

</div>

Adam in Egyptian Arabic accent: You are an American citizen, and your roots are from Palestine; to where do you belong?

<div dir="rtl">

[أتمنى أن نتوقف عن التفكير بهذا الشكل. هُم اخترعوا الكمبيوتر، ونحن اخترعنا الكتابة! ليس مهماً مَن أعطى لمن ومن أخذ مِنْ مَنْ. الحضارة الفرعونية، مثلا، هي مثل موسيقى بيتهوفن بالضبط، وكلاهما ملك كل البشرية. اتمنى أن يأتي لنا وقت، ويأتي لهم وقت نتوقف فيه عن قول أنا وأنت ونقول بدل ذلك نحن]

</div>

Edward Said in unfamiliar Arabic accent: I hope we stop thinking this way. They [the others] invented the computer, and we [the Orient] invented writing! It does not matter who gave to whom and who took from whom. The ancient Egyptian civilization, for example, is precisely like Beethoven's music, and both belong to all of humanity. I hope the moment will come to stop saying you and me and say we instead.

The film's critical multimodality associated cinematic language's identity with social narrative, community structure, social dynamics, and political issues. In the context of aesthetic, social and political values, the research connected *Al-Akhar* to Edward Said's point of view, which negotiates the impacts of globalization and communication media on social systems and people's culture. The dualism between Y. Chahine and E. Said produces a metamorphosis of social identity that transforms through belief, nationalism, popular culture, gender dynamics and family.

The language of cinema is a visual tool that engages in educational and communicational systems in the community. It renders the social transformation with culture on divergent and convergent levels. The film recorded sociopolitical issues as they all overlap and articulate into layers of relations to create a particular social reality that people live in certain times and places according to particular circumstances. This articulation enhanced Edward Said's and Youssef Chahine's dualism in *The Other*. On the other hand, social cinema and social arts result from all the elements that mobilize society in contemporary times; it is neither a futuristic plan nor a historical script that people lived before. Contemporary social and visual language culture consists of political issues, feminine issues, and social transformation concepts, in addition to the nostalgia of creative individuals and their style of representing cultural identities according to artistic, individual, and collective philosophies.

APPENDIX. PERSONAL REFLECTION

Figure 4. The corresponding author, a visual artist, made this painting in 2022. It is a memory evocation and a personal reflection on the dualism between Edward Said's postcolonial criticism and Youssef Chahin's cinema. The title of this painting is *The Other: Homage to Edward Said*

Figure 5. The corresponding author, a visual artist, made this painting in 2023. It is a memory evocation and a personal reflection on the dualism between Edward Said's postcolonial criticism and Youssef Chahin's cinema. The title of this painting is *The Others: Timeless Homage*

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