

The Double Role of Media Technologies in Egyptian Film Production

Abstract

Anthropologists working on media tend to take a minimal view of media representations as social “texts”, which are locally “read” in line with existing social relations, power structures or situated imaginaries. Consequently, media producers are deemed to “write” media texts. This latter assumption, according to which media production is a form of “writing”, is unpacked in this paper. Based on ethnographic research with commercial filmmakers in Egypt, I argue that media producers are involved in a series of operations (e.g., scouting, costume design, set design) which are not comparable to “writing”, yet whose overall result might be interpreted, in part, as a “text”. This is due to the fact that the labor involved in filmmaking is constantly inscribed on various media technologies (e.g. paper, phones, laptops) in intermediary scripts, images or objects, joining into a final film product. These intermediary scripts/images/objects, I argue, have a double role. On one hand, they meaningfully represent some aspect of the final film text (e.g., shooting location, costume, prop) to cast and crew members. On the other hand, they hide the cumulative labor involved in their very making, in every step of film production, thereby enabling the final “reading” of the film as a “text”. This latter role, I further argue, is central to understanding the film workers’ ordinary conditions of estrangement vis-à-vis the film product, whose final form hides all intermediary steps involved in its making.