

Managing Imponderable Problems in Egyptian Film Production

Abstract

This paper examines ‘imponderable problems’ in the context of commercial film production in Cairo, Egypt. At different moments in the filmmaking process, Egyptian filmmakers are faced, in the present, with problems of uncertainty concerning the future of their activity – e.g., when and where they will shoot a scene; how the scene will look like in the final film; how the audience will react to the film. This uncertainty is not absolute, however, since it involves an expected outcome – an eventual shooting day, an eventual movie, an eventual audience. What is uncertain, however, is the weight assigned to all possible courses of action leading onto this anticipated outcome: this is why I call these problems ‘imponderable’, as a case of more general categories like ‘uncertainty’ or Crapanzano’s ‘imaginative horizons’.

Imponderable problems, I argue, are insufficiently examined in media anthropology, even though they are common to many long-term media production processes. This paper will present some ways in which these problems are managed in Egyptian film production. I start by giving an outline of the Egyptian film industry’s political economy, while insisting on the role of interpersonal relations in the industry’s everyday working practices. Then, I describe the importance of a hierarchical division of labor, a flexible conception of the socio-technical sequence of filmmaking, and a variety of technological devices in setting standards over who manages imponderable problems when and how. I will illustrate the way in which these factors intervene in one specific problem: how filmmakers try to imagine their audience.