

Three Meanings of “Work” in the Egyptian Film Industry

Abstract

This paper examines three meanings attached to the notion of ‘work’ (shoghl) by workers in the Egyptian film industry. First, I look into the ordinary notion of work as employment, where ‘getting work’ is understood as the ability to accumulate contracts on several film projects. This is a central task in a horizontally integrated industry with personalized hiring practices. Second, I examine the conception of ‘work’ as concrete effort: I argue, more specifically, that in an industry marked by a great emphasis on interpersonal relations, workers have to solve intersubjective misunderstandings on a daily basis if they are to work together successfully. I therefore bring attention to the way in which ‘working’ is associated with particular types of personalities, a particular ability to read one another’s personality, as well as individuated ‘schools of practice’ (madas shoghl). Lastly, I detail how ‘work’ sometimes comes to mean a sum of past productions, which are important in an industry where hiring is often predicated on past reputation (som‘a). This reputation is constructed, in part, according to the interpersonal relations cultivated by workers, and in other part, according to the quality of previous productions made by a given worker. In addition to being evaluated in an aesthetic sense, then, these productions act as indicators of the worker’s suitability to a given project. The worker’s ‘work’ as past productions comes to be a constant source of commentary on the quality of his ‘work’ as concrete effort and, by extension, on his chances of ‘getting work’.