

The Perennial “Crisis” of the Egyptian Film Industry

Abstract

This paper starts with the observation that, since its very beginnings, the Egyptian film industry seems to have been plunged in unending ‘crisis’ (*azma*). Based on extensive fieldwork in Cairo between 2013 and 2015, I examine the historical conditions under which this unequal if largely functional industry can be said to remain ‘in crisis.’ Without assuming that this is a negative condition burdening the work of Egyptian filmmakers, I explore the productive potential of ‘crisis’ as a metaphor to express local aspirations for a ‘better’ industry. This exercise should allow us to describe the actually existing Egyptian film industry, without having to prescribe what this industry ought to look like according to a model of alternation between crisis and stability. What emerges in this description, instead, is a sense in which ‘crisis’ acts as a catalyst for Egyptian filmmakers to discuss the industry’s working conditions.

This argument starts with an account of how the metaphor of ‘crisis’ is employed by Egyptian filmmakers in a range of everyday situations, where the national, the local, and the personal are folded in a single term. These accounts of crisis are compared with accounts in ethnographies of commercial film production in the USA, India, and West Africa. While these industries have been thriving commercially, filmmakers in Hollywood (Powdermaker, 1950; Ortner, 2013), Nollywood (Larkin, 2008), and Bollywood (Ganti, 2012) seem to experience a constant sense of crisis, in a manner reminiscent of the Egyptian case. In comparing these cases, this perennial ‘crisis’ will be linked to the experience of industrial capitalism over the last century, as national(ist) politics and uneven markets have inflected working conditions in the cities where commercial cinema has flourished.

References

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