

Reification and Recognition in Egyptian Film Production

Abstract

Against the tendency to ignore the concrete effort invested in making creative products, anthropology has been instrumental in highlighting the “invisible” labour involved in creative processes. What has been less explored is that *within* these processes, workers tend to ignore the effort invested by other workers in a similar manner, producing what I call “reification”. This concept emerges from a genealogy of theoretical works extending back to Georg Lukács, who considered reification as an extension of Marx’s commodity fetishism into the sphere of production. Much like consumers, then, producers transform their own relations of production (e.g. the legwork involved in making creative products) into relations between things (e.g. audio-visual material).

This paper explores the workings of reification in Egypt’s commercial film industry, arguing that it is integral to the way in which “innovation” is perceived by filmmakers. The paper describes how reification occurs at every juncture in filmmaking and how workers try to overcome it via various means of recognition, before their labour is ignored or forgotten. What is considered innovative, in this context, is only ever attributed to a handful of “artistic” workers at the top of the filmmaking ladder, whereas all remaining work is invariably reified. This constant erasure of labour raises a different question concerning innovation: not a question about what is innovative, but rather, who is allowed to be innovative? The overarching project is to understand how workers value their own work under conditions where it is consumed by the very things that they produce.