

What is Egyptian about Egyptian Cinema?

Abstract

Egypt has long been home to the dominant commercial film industry in the Arab world, but the industry's "Egyptianness" has rarely been questioned by critics and scholars alike. In a tautological sense, commercial movies made in Egyptian colloquial Arabic in Cairo have something "Egyptian" to them, but the extent to which one can ascribe a single national label to this cinema needs to be re-examined. Scholars of Egyptian cinema such as Deborah Starr, Kay Dickinson, and Viola Shafik have already pointed out how minorities outside the mainstream nationalist mould (e.g. Italian, Levantine, or Jewish Egyptians) were portrayed by – and even actively involved in producing – classical Egyptian movies. Yet even within the majoritarian film industry today, insiders struggle to articulate what is specifically Egyptian about their practice.

Based on extensive fieldwork in the Egyptian film industry between 2013 and 2015, this paper examines how different filmmakers define the "Egyptianness" of their activity, and how this representation emerges in implicit or explicit contrast with a normative model of "Euro-American" filmmaking. Neither the "Egyptian" nor the "Euro-American" model is coherent, I argue, because both act as contingent signifiers in an ongoing process of self-definition among filmmakers in Cairo – a process which is inflected by the industry's labour hierarchies and everyday production operations. This paper is therefore not interested in finding out what might be "Egyptian" in Egyptian filmmaking *per se*; rather, it situates this question within the broader context in which both scholars and industry insiders struggle to pin down this elusive Egyptianness.