Title: The Reification of Concrete Work in Egyptian Film Production

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Abstract: The anthropology of cinema has been instrumental in describing the 'unseen' labour invested in making films. What has been less explored is that, within the filmmaking process, workers erase each other's concrete effort in a similar manner. This process is what I call 'reification'. Extending Georg Lukács' reflections, I argue that the relations of production in filmmaking seem to be transformed into relations between things (images and sounds) in a recurring pattern throughout the filmmaking process. This transformation impacts every juncture in commercial film production in Egypt, and film workers manage its continuous impact via conventional means of recognition towards their concrete work. The overarching project is to understand, on one hand, how the serial erasure of concrete work contributes to creating the film as a commodity and, on the other hand, how workers find value in their work under conditions where their effort is consumed by the things that they produce.

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The Reification of Concrete Work in Egyptian Film Production[i]

The dream-like nature of cinema has been a common matter of reflection in film theory since its early days (Epstein 1946, Morin 1957, Baudry 1975, Metz 1982). Yet, the extent to which these reflections ignore the concrete work behind these dreams is striking. The 'anthropology of cinema', as Lotte Hoek calls it (2016), has been instrumental in dispelling these illusions by shedding light on film workers behind the scenes (see Ganti 2012, Wilkinson-Weber 2014, Martin 2016). Similar ethnographies have shown the necessary collaboration between creative and technical workers in shaping the complex and inventive activity of filmmaking (Grimaud 2003, Hoek 2014, Meyer 2015, Pandian 2015). This interest in filmmaking labour has been central in a neighbouring interdisciplinary subfield of media studies known as 'production studies' (Caldwell 2008, Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009, Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2013, Curtin & Sanson 2016, Banks, Conor & Mayer 2016, Curtin & Sanson 2017). Much like the anthropology of cinema, production studies have established that the concrete making of film is nothing like a dream, but involves global flows of people and capital, hierarchical divisions of labour, and specialized sociotechnical processes with recognizably different dynamics in different industries.

The descriptive impetus behind this scholarship has been to make 'visible', through ethnographic description, filmmaking labour that is 'invisible' in mainstream media discourse or among non-insiders to the industry. Such a concern has been integral in media production ethnographies more broadly (see Bishara 2013, Gürsel 2016). The rhetoric of revelation circumvents the question of how, *within* media production processes, concrete work is made visible or invisible to media producers in different ways depending on their position in an already

unequal industrial landscape. Media production labour is not merely invisible beyond the confines of the industry, but it has varying degrees of visibility depending on prevailing labour hierarchies in a given media industry. This article argues that metaphorically 'seeing' media production through ethnographic writing is insufficient to account for how media workers themselves 'see' each other's concrete work. Eschewing metaphors of visibility and invisibility, I suggest that the notions of reification and recognition present more accurate analytical tools to grasp how media workers experience their concrete work.

I borrow the term 'reification' from a genealogy of theorists extending back to Georg Lukács in his seminal essay on 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1971). This essay has been appropriated in disciplines as diverse as psychology (Gabel 1962), sociology (Berger & Pullberg 1965, Berger & Luckmann 1967), literary theory (Goldmann 1959, Williams 1980), and philosophy (Honneth 2008, Feenberg 2015). Yet few anthropologists have engaged with the notion beyond its vernacular usage in academic anthropology, where 'to reify' means 'to essentialize'. Sónia Silva has recently defined reification as 'the universal human tendency to apprehend abstractions as things' (2013: 80). Michael Taussig, on his part, has used reification as an unproblematic equivalent to Marx's commodity fetishism (1980a, 1980b). Lukács' own definition is more ambiguous. Reification is a generalization of commodity fetishism to all spheres of life, such that 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (1971: 83).

This article will not attempt to give coherence to Lukács' original notion of reification or its subsequent appropriations, which have been actively remoulded to the shape of changing social, political, and institutional concerns (see Edward W. Said's analysis of reification as a travelling

theory, 1983). Rather, I will repurpose the concept to address the important yet undertheorized effect whereby concrete work in industrial production is serially erased by the unfolding production process. This erasure occurs when the effort exerted by co-present workers in a certain stage of production is reduced to a set of physical objects that are *passed on* to later stages. These objects physically shape the outcome of production while hiding the labour behind their making: they act as 'mediators' in Bruno Latour's sense (2000). These mediators are not commodities strictly speaking, because they are not made to be bought and sold on their own, but their main use value lies in creating commodities. In Lukács' terms, such mediators conceal a relation between people before the commodity is even made.

Filmmaking is a textbook case of reification in this sense. 'The film' can seem to be made by a series of things – screenplays, scouting pictures, audio-visual material, editing cuts – but this impression is ethnographically incorrect. It is as clear to the anthropologist as it is to the film crew that the operation of scouting locations, say, is not just a series of nice pictures shown to the director and his/her collaborators, but a very exhausting task executed by production workers who run around Cairo to photograph in detail various locations in various neighbourhoods through unenviable traffic conditions. The basic point is that reification reduces the activity of scouting to mere objects – scouting pictures – once they are *passed on* to crew members whose jobs are predicated on considering them *qua* objects – say, the director who selects potential shooting locations based on the production crew's pictures. This situation recurs throughout the production process. For instance, all set design work executed by the art director, his/her assistants, the prop master, and the chief builder is reified into images once the material passes on to the editor, whose work is again reified once the film passes on to an audience. Borrowing from Roy Dilley (2004), it is as though the sphere of (film) production was intentionally hidden to allow the free play of

values and meanings in (film) consumption. This serial hiding benefits higher-end crew members such as the director and his/her collaborators, who get to enjoy maximal credit for 'the film' as an artistic creation by shedding away the concrete work invested in its making.

This conception of reification makes two contributions to the analysis of capitalist wage labour and value creation in anthropology (see Bear 2014, Harvey & Krohn-Hansen 2018, Lukács 2020). First, reification is the basic condition under which media products can become commodities. In a sense, all the labour invested in the filmmaking process is part and parcel of the film product. Yet it is the *serial erasure* of this labour that transforms the various mediators produced in the course of filmmaking into a finished film commodity – circulated on the film distribution market, with a given price tag, and consumed in various exhibition venues. This erasure is not just an ordinary technical facet of filmmaking, then, but the condition under which the totality of labour invested in filmmaking becomes an audio-visual trace commodified in film form and attributed to certain crew members. Second, the specific way in which concrete work is reified in media production generates an uneven recognition of the totality of labour invested in the film. Out of all the workers working on a given project, only a select few can lay claim to the authorship of the film and all the work done on its images and sounds, while most will not leave traces on the film product except in ending credits or in fleeting moments on screen. These forms of recognition cannot undo the serial erasure of labour inherent in filmmaking, but they offer conventional means through which workers relate to the commodity despite the inevitable reification of their concrete work.

This article examines reification and recognition in the case of commercial film production in Egypt, based on fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015. I have mainly followed two feature film projects from screenwriting to postproduction during this period: *Décor* (2014) and

Poisonous Roses (*Ward Masmum,* 2018). *Décor* is a psychological drama about an art director who finds herself becoming the main character in her film, switching back and forth between both worlds and both lives. The film was produced by New Century Film Production, one of the most prolific production companies in the Egyptian film industry after the 2011 Revolution. *Poisonous Roses* is a social drama about a brother and a sister living in the tanneries district of Cairo and trying to make a living against all odds. The film was co-produced by Al Batrik Art Production and Red Star for Film Production and Distribution, two smaller companies in the industry, with additional funding from local and international festivals and granting agencies. After situating filmmaking labour in these productions within its broader industrial context, I will detail how reification was evident in *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses*, and what means of recognition were enabled in both cases. The argument elaborates on the emic distinction between 'artistic' (*fanni*) and 'executive' (*tanfizi*) labour in everyday filmmaking practices, as this distinction provides the empirical basis upon which the relationship between reification, recognition, and cinematic creation should be understood.

Labour in the Egyptian Film Industry

No matter their position within the Egyptian film industry, my interlocutors would talk about their everyday activity as 'work' (*shoghl*). The Arabic term contains the same ambiguity as the English one: *shoghl* means both employment and concrete work; being paid to accomplish certain tasks and the act of accomplishing these tasks. While reification is specifically about the erasure of concrete work, it is useful to bear in mind the labour conditions behind this process in the Egyptian

film industry. All film workers are employed in a similar manner, but they do not all share the same skills or execute the same tasks. Production crew members, assistant directors, cameramen, set builders, prop assistants, stylists, and sound engineers all have different skillsets and different working hours. Some have been formally trained and work only on set, others have no formal training and follow the project from screenwriting to editing. This variation among crafts is integral to understanding the specificity of filmmaking as a media production process and, as I explain in the next section, how reification manifests itself within this process.

The Egyptian film industry is driven by small-to-medium production companies executing film projects via one-off capital investments, meaning that employment is precarious and usually managed on a contract-by-contract basis. On any given project, nearly all cast and crew members are temporarily contracted except general managers, accountants, publicists, and maintenance staff, who are all permanent workers within their production companies. This pattern is familiar in post-1980s media industries in Europe and the United States, where precarity in a global supply chain of labour has become the norm (see Curtin & Sanson 2016). Yet Egyptian crew members do not freely circulate in an open and global labour market, because domestic hiring practices are specific to the Cairo-based media production market (what is locally known as *el-su'*).

To begin with, hiring is nested in a conventional order of decision-making, reflecting the industry's ingrained labour hierarchies. The producer – who is usually the principal funder of a film project – hires the director – who oversees all the 'artistic' (*fanni*) aspects of the film (what in Euro-American industries would be called 'the creative process'). The director, in turn, hires his first assistant director, who lays out the 'course of execution of the film' to use the assistant director Omar el-Zohairy's expression. The assistant director hires continuity script supervisors and second assistants, who help with the assistant director's day-to-day tasks, while overseeing

film continuity on set. Likewise, the director hires a cinematographer and an art director, who in turn hire (among many crew members) a cameraman and a chief builder, who in turn hire their own assistants, and so on. Hiring decisions are ultimately under the producer's purview – s/he is paying after all. Yet in my experience, such decisions are usually made by the head of each team or sub-team on a given film project.

Working relations are highly personalized in this sense, a pattern which has been noted in several film industries (Ganti 2012, Hoek 2014, Pandian 2015). Working together on a project tends to be based on kinship networks, friendship networks, or sustained interaction on previous projects. When the hired worker has no direct ties to the crew, being hired becomes contingent on asking a *wasta*, an intermediary individual, about the prospective candidate. 'I've never worked with my current assistants', Zohairy once told me during *Décor*'s preparations while detailing how he was linked to each assistant. Jaylan Auf (the movement script supervisor) had worked with the director Ahmad Abdalla before; Kawthar Younes (who was meant to be a costume script supervisor) had worked with a good friend of his in the advertising sector; and Renad Tarek (a trainee) had worked on a common project with him. Zohairy's narrative was typical of the way in which heads of each team and sub-team decide on who they hire. The term *wasta* has a pejorative and nepotistic connotation in Egypt, but the effective role played by interceding parties in the hiring process remains crucial in practice, especially when hiring someone with whom one has never worked or who is unknown in the industry.

Hiring decisions, in short, are based on previous experience with a candidate *or* on a candidate's recommendation by a trustworthy party (*wasta*) *or*, in rare cases, on the weight of the candidate's reputation (*som'a*). This hiring system – nested contracting based on interpersonal connections – has consequences over the way in which workers are trained in the industry, the way

in which hierarchical superiors are treated, and the way in which career paths are traced. In an industry where hiring is so personalized, there is a high premium on the ability to 'work with everyone' (*teshtaghal ma' koll el-nas*), an expression that I have heard on numerous occasions during fieldwork. All crew members (but especially younger and less powerful ones) are under constant threat of never working again if they cannot smoothly work with their superiors or with crew members on other teams. Consequently, as Yann Darré points out in the French film industry, 'The mode of recruitment, by co-optation at each level – of creative collaborators by the director; of assistants and trainees by the department heads – allows for the reproduction of the group and its ideology' (2006: 127).

The well-known director Marwan Hamed echoed a similar thought when he told me how important it is to choose a crew wisely in an interview: 'It's important that the crew has the same *work ethic* [using the English expression] and the same interests, because it's important to have a common goal.' Crucially, one must find people who will have 'a human connection' (*tawasol ensani*) in his view. 'What do you mean?', I asked, to which he replied with another question: 'How many hours do people spend shooting together?' I calculate for a moment. 'Around sixteen to eighteen hours, on any given day…' 'Suppose we shoot sixteen hours a day for seven months', he jumped in, 'Can you imagine spending that much time with someone you don't like?' I shook my head to answer his rhetorical question in the negative. 'That's the reason why it's important to choose the right people on the crew', he concluded, adding that 'you need to choose people who will have the same overall vision (*ro'ya*) of the project, but who will also constantly add something to it'. Hamed gave the example of Nahed Nasrallah, the most reputable costume designer in Egypt, with whom he works on occasion. Nasrallah can not only create good costumes in his view, but

also contribute to the project by proposing changes to the actors' look to better suit their character in the script.

While highlighting the importance of hiring a harmonious crew, Hamed's narrative assumes a latent hierarchical distinction between 'artistic' (*fanni*) and 'executive' (*tanfizi*) work. His concern over sharing a vision with the crew does not include all the workers on set, but specifically those workers involved in what are locally called 'artistic decisions' (*qararat faniyya*), including the costume designer Nahed Nasrallah. According to industry insiders, artistic work designates all labour with some impact on the audio-visual film product – image composition, lighting, texture, set design, sound design, the actor's on-screen performance (*ada'*), and costume design. Conventionally, each aspect is assigned to a different worker: the cinematographer deals with the image, the art director deals with the set, the director deals with actors, the stylist deals with the costumes. Artistic workers, in turn, have numerous workers at their disposal to execute their decisions. For instance, under the cinematographer's orders, the lighting technicians carry around lighting equipment, rig it, and adjust it; camera technicians carry the camera and the tripod to position it; focus pullers put lenses and filters on the camera, and so on. Executive work encompasses all financial, logistical, and technical tasks in a film project. The distinction between artistic and executive workers roughly corresponds to the distinction between above- and below-the-line workers in the United States (see Mayer 2011, Ortner 2013). However, while these terms are in common use in American media production to designate two types of *workers*, the terms 'artistic' and 'executive' designate two types of *tasks* in Egypt and, only by extension, the workers assigned to these tasks.

The separation between artistic and executive matters is justified as a neutral difference in working tasks, yet it is also – and perhaps most importantly – a hierarchical difference. This

hierarchical difference is homologous to broader gender/class structures in Egypt, but it is not identical to them. The great majority of workers, no matter their gender or class, begin their careers with an executive job, and they can rise within their own team's ladder until they become the highest executive member on the team or, when it is possible, an artistic worker. At the pinnacle of this hierarchy, the director exerts ultimate authority over all artistic decisions in Egypt. 'In the end, it's about the director's confidence [*seqa*] and skill [*shatara*]', once argued the well-known assistant director Wael Mandour. Sipping on his drink while sitting for a formal interview in Costa Coffee, he mused about the qualities required from a good director. 'You can be a confident director with little technical skill. So you will be able to control a location without getting good artistic quality (…) Or you can be a weak director with great skill. So you won't be able to control the location, but you will make a good product.' Mandour's conception of the director's strength or weakness in this reflection has little to do with his ability to make good movies, but rather with his ability to 'control a location', which means being able to coordinate all teams on set with firm decisions about what must be shot next and how it must be shot. 'As an assistant director, I prefer to work with a strong director', argued Mandour, because '*rule number one*' in his own words is to have a director whose decisions are clear, singular, and definite.

Although the director has the ultimate word in all artistic matters, collaborators like the cinematographer or the art director have a similar authority over limited aspects of the film, such as the lighting or the set design. Likewise, workers in each team and sub-team answer to their immediate superiors. The hierarchical pattern of hiring resurfaces again, here, but this time in the guise of a chain of command, running between workers who get to decide what the film will look like – mainly the director and his/her immediate collaborators – and workers who execute the necessary tasks to make it happen. This distinction is enforced by artistic and executive workers

alike. Once I commented on where an actor should stand in an upcoming shot in *Décor*. With his caustic sense of humour, the location manager Ahmad Abdallah Abdel Halim told me: '*Ma tigi tekhreg enta!*', which roughly translates as 'Why don't *you* direct?' The stinging remark provoked a string of giggles, and I was embarrassed because I knew exactly why I was temporarily subjected to ridicule. All workers on set know that actors can *only* be directed by the film director. Since I was just a bystander making suggestions about where actors should go and what they should do, I was deservedly hit by Abdel Halim's joke, which was both a way of saying 'You're not the director, so you shouldn't waste your breath on empty suggestions' and 'If you were the director, your suggestion would have already been executed'. I have seen a similar remark used on different sets to put down crew members who dare emit any opinion on artistic tasks.

These opinions matter little, however, given entrenched patterns of decision-making on set. These patterns give higher-end crew members responsibility over the film, while leaving lower-end ones with little investment in it. Even when they watch films, Egyptian filmmakers tend to comment by praising the cinematographer's image, or criticizing the art director's set, or arguing over whether the actor's performance was convincing or not. This kind of film analysis reflects how industry insiders recognize film work through the film's visible and audible traces, which are divided and streamlined according to each artistic worker's responsibilities in a project. When I asked the script supervisor Sandy Samuel, who aspired to upgrade into a directorial role one day, whether she would be willing to work for Sobky, a producer who is notorious for his low-brow entertainment and inattention to artistic detail, she bluntly answered: 'It doesn't matter (…) As an assistant, you're not responsible for the way the film looks like in the end.' This answer is reminiscent of a remark made by Hortense Powdermaker in her classical study of 1940s Hollywood:

> The personalities of those who sit in the front office, of producers, directors, actors, writers, and others (...) influence the creative aspects of movie production and leave their imprint on the movies. *Although no movie could be made without cameramen, set designers, musicians, costume and make-up departments, carpenters, electricians and many others, these have relatively little influence on the content and meaning*. (1950: 10, emphasis added)

There are notable differences between 1940s Hollywood and today's Egyptian film industry, not least the much larger scale of Hollywood (even in the 1940s) in contrast with the Cairo-based industry. Whereas classical Hollywood was a vertically integrated industry, where studios concentrated control over production, distribution, and exhibition, today's Cairene industry is horizontally integrated, with a wide array of small-to-medium-sized, flexible firms cooperating and competing to produce films. What is interesting is that despite these great differences, there remains a central hierarchical distinction between people who have a say in the movie and people who do not. This relative lack of influence over the film's content shapes how reification occurs in commercial film production. At every juncture in the production process, some workers erase the labour of others via mediators – the script, scouting pictures, audio-visual material, editing cuts. This serial erasure produces the film as a commodity, while reinforcing the notion that the director-artist and his/her collaborators are the singular creators of the film commodity. The visible and audible traces remaining in 'the film' after this erasure are precisely what distributors get to buy and sell on the exhibition market. And it is only because artistic workers hold a monopoly over the decisions that lead to these traces that they claim exclusive authorship over the (reified) film product.

Reification as an Erasure of Concrete Work

Rotterdam, winter 2018. I sit next to the crew of *Poisonous Roses* right before the film's international premiere. The director, Ahmad Fawzi Saleh; the cinematographer, Maged Nader; one of the protagonists, Ibrahim el-Nagary; the executive producer, Eman Hemeda; the art director, Omar Abdel Wahab; and me. I am officially there as a crew member on industry business, not as the film's anthropologist. The room is not very full, and the crew is anxious. When the film begins, I am impressed by the sound quality. I had not attended most of the shooting, but I was still surprised by how much of the story was removed from the final cut.

Oxford, summer 2016. I sit on the shabby couch in the basement of the anthropology department. I am attentively watching the latest cut of *Poisonous Roses*. The director had uploaded the cut on Vimeo and sent me a password, but I had been postponing watching the film. The nearly two-hour-long first cut was surprising because it did not match my recollection of the small amount of material that the crew had shot. The soundtrack was a little out of sync, as Fawzi had warned me. The story was stretched out in very lengthy sequences where the sister's character just walks around the tanneries. I remember just how much work we did in scouting the streets through which the actress Maryhan Magdy walked, then how much we practiced navigating the dusty streets of the tanneries with the camera. Still, I felt like the cut was dragging along, and I mention this to Fawzi when we talk over Facebook Messenger on the next day.

Maadi, summer 2015. I am sitting with Fawzi in his apartment while we look through a Google Docs file where he has uploaded the latest version of his treatment. Having shot for a few weeks over winter, Fawzi decided to take a break to revisit his script. On our own initially, and

later with the assistant director Yousef Abodan, we rewrite large segments of the screenplay over the summer, in what became a screenwriting overhaul in the middle of the shooting. In a few weeks of rewriting, we settle on a new version of the story in which the sister becomes the main character, while the brother becomes a secondary character, and his love interest barely comes into the story at all. We had shot nearly two weeks with Rémie Akl, who embodied the love interest's character, but Fawzi was not convinced by this material, and he thought it brought the audience out of the tanneries too much.

Masr el-'Adima, near the tanneries, fall 2014. I have not written field notes in nearly a week, as I am assiduously working on the preparations of *Poisonous Roses*. I had agreed to become Fawzi's assistant over the summer to gain a more direct sense of the industry's work. The phone keeps on ringing, at all hours during the day. Sometimes it would be the office manager Gerges Mokhtar, other times the production manager Edward Nabil, yet other times the editor Mostafa Nour. All wanted to get the latest update on preparations while Fawzi was away in Germany. Every day, I would walk through the tanneries with the cinematographer Houssam Habib and the art director Omar Abdel Wahab. We scout several options for each location: the main tanning workshop, the main tannery towers, and the streets where the characters will walk. Houssam would take pictures with the company's DSLR camera, while asking me about which point in the plot corresponded to each location. Houssam and Omar would then discuss lighting, colour, the scene's position in the plotline. The script is not yet finished. In fact, Houssam and Omar often joke about whether Fawzi is serious about even making the film. Eschewing all doubts, all three of us went out scouting the tanneries every single day.

Masr el-'Adima, fall 2013. The cinematographer Houssam Habib and Ahmad Fawzi Saleh are going over the script. Fawzi adds details, sometimes whole scenes, while reading out each and

every scene's description and dialogue. The session progresses chronologically. Fawzi reads the initial carnival scene: a huge feast. The next scene, the brother sits at a bus station, with two guys by him playing checkers. They get into a fight. One slashes the other with a pocketknife and flees. A few scenes down the road, Fawzi makes a significant change to his script: his main character, the brother, commits the kind of mistake on his job that would make the viewer notice that he wants to commit suicide and, at the same time, allow him to meet with his love interest – a doctor in training at the nearby hospital. When he made this change, Fawzi cheekily exclaimed, 'I'm an artist!' Houssam asks if this change will give him problems later in the script – meaning, will his plot become inconsistent if he introduces this change early on? Fawzi is convinced that there is no problem: the brother would just meet the doctor faster, his sister would see that he has someone else in his life, and it would be a good way to introduce the love interest. Houssam concedes. Later, I ask him if they had any previous meetings like this one. He replied that they had scouted the tanneries before, but they did not sit on the script (*el-wara'*) as they were doing right now.

Going back between 2018 and 2013, there is no doubting how much work went into making *Poisonous Roses*. Watching the film at the international premiere in Rotterdam or in a basement in Oxford gives a thin sense of the amount of labour involved in screenwriting, preparations, shooting, and postproduction. This counter-chronological description illustrates how film workers – including myself – are engaged in a constant erasure of the concrete work invested in earlier phases of production once it is passed on to later stages. This is what I have called 'reification'. When Fawzi chose a location based on scouting pictures in 2014, he was reifying the scouting labour invested in creating these pictures. When I suggested that the editor should cut out scenes from the initial cut (which is what ended up happening, since the final cut is only 70-minutes long), I reified the labour of all workers involved in preparations and in shooting. This reification is

experienced differently by each filmmaking craft. Although all workers sell their labour-power to the producer, a director, a stylist, a set builder, or a production assistant have vastly different working experiences. These experiences are not just reified into an abstract thing, such as their labour-power, but also into the physical objects that mediate the production process. This attention to physical objects has been eschewed by Lukács and his successors, who probably sought to avoid the charge of vulgar materialism. Yet my argument is not exactly that the erasure of labour is directly occasioned *by* physical objects, but that it is the consequence of a process where workers in later production stages only care about earlier stages *through* these objects.

Thus, reification is not an obliviousness to the actual human beings involved in the process of making films, but a *de facto* inattention to their concrete work given their position within the production process. Reification involves three main parties: 1) the 'reified' worker, who invests concrete effort towards producing mediating objects in a certain phase of production; 2) mediators themselves, which can be scripts, scouting pictures, audio-visual material, or editing cuts depending on one's craft; and 3) the 'reifying' worker, who erases the work invested in creating the mediator in the very act of using it. Scouting in *Poisonous Roses* is a clear example. In an initial phase, the cinematographer Houssam Habib and the art director Omar Abdel Wahab expended concrete effort into taking pictures of numerous locations in the tanneries. This work, which is materialized by the pictures, was ignored by the director Ahmad Fawzi Saleh when he would browse through these pictures in quick succession to visualize his film in our rewriting sessions in 2015. The labour of gathering pictures is ignored by the director at the very moment in which he considers scouting pictures as purely visual artefacts, approximating to what the film will eventually look like.

Crucially, this erasure is never a one-off instance, but it occurs regularly throughout the production process. Reified labour is in a way 're-reified' at every stage, even as reified and reifying social actors are resituated vis-à-vis one another. For instance, the legwork invested in producing scouting pictures in the tanneries in 2014 was reified when Fawzi and his artistic crew chose the locations where they would shoot later in the year. Then, the labour invested by the art director Omar Abdel Wahab and his team to design and furnish these locations is re-reified in the audio-visual material. The whole effort invested in shooting is re-re-reified by the editor and the director when they decided to exclude entire scenes from the final cut. Reification serially enfolds concrete work in a manner reminiscent of Alfred Gell's Strathernograms, where each gendered exchange is 'eclipsed' by a later one. Ceremonial pigs, who embody these exchanges (between male and female labour invested in the pig's reproduction, between ceremonial donor and recipient), 'eclipse' the gendered work involved in all previous exchanges (1999: 47-49).

Reification seems to go without saying in these circumstances. While I was conducting fieldwork, inattention to other workers' objectified work was regularly justified as being 'part of the job' (*heyya dil-shoghlana*). In a sense, reification is an ordinary consequence of the temporal organization of film production. No matter what workers think or feel about it, their concrete effort will always be subordinated to the decisions of the director and his/her artistic collaborators, who get to decide which versions of the script, which scouting pictures, which set designs, which takes, which editing cuts make it into later stages. Film workers are conscious that they are bound to reify the concrete work of others while their own work is being reified. This ambivalent situation is evident above all to editors. Several editors told me in formal interviews that they did not like to spend time on location because they wanted to remain dispassionate when it came to cutting out entire scenes on their editing station. For instance, the well-known editor Mona Rabie felt that she

had great responsibility towards the effort (*maghud*) expended by the cast and crew in shooting, but she also had to do what is best for 'the film' (even by removing whole chunks of hard-earned material). While reifying the work invested in shooting, the editor's work is in turn reified by the film. Rabie's work will be deemed good by her peers if it is imperceptible in the dream-like final product – that is, if the imagined spectator is mesmerized by the seamless flow of the narrative without seeing any trace of the film's concrete making.

Thus, reification is integral to the film's creation as a commodity, but also as an artistic creation. Artistic decisions, as they are locally understood, involve *both* making certain mediators (scripts, scouting pictures, editing cuts) *and* shedding away previous executive and artistic work invested in filmmaking. The basic condition to arbitrate between what makes it into 'the film' and what does not is precisely the ability to serially erase the totality of labour invested in each stage. The authority to decide over what is included or excluded in specific mediators at different junctures in film production defines the film as an artistic product. This authority is taken for granted in individualistic art forms like writing or painting, where the relationship between the artist and the artistic product might seem immediate. In a collective creation like filmmaking, however, it is difficult to explain why the director or his/her artistic collaborators have authority over the way in which the film is made without understanding how reification affects what is included and excluded throughout the filmmaking process. The attribution of authorship to the director and his/her collaborators is a consequence of their authority over crucial nodes in the reification occurring throughout the film's production, and with a direct effect on the creation of the film commodity. Artistic workers are therefore the prime movers behind reification at different junctures in filmmaking, and some of the prime benefactors of reification once the film is made.

Reification and Recognition

The reification of concrete work is not without apposite talk of recognition in the Egyptian film industry. Expanding on Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's cryptic aphorism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – 'all reification is a forgetting' – Axel Honneth argues that reified representations lead people to forget the necessity of recognizing or acknowledging the existence of others (2008: 58-59). Honneth is committed to the idea that reification is simply an objectification of social representations, which leads him to think idealistically about recognition as an inherent human trait. 'Reification is a modality of consciousness,' said Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann in an earlier iteration of the concept, 'more precisely, a modality of man's objectification of the human world' (1967: 107). Reification, here, is understood as a universal tendency to mistake abstract categories for nonhuman creations when, in fact, they should be recognized as bearing a human imprint. But which humans? In what circumstances? To what end? These questions remain unanswered, making this conception unhelpful to understand the erasure of industrial labour in a context such as Egyptian film production.

Unlike Honneth, I have redefined reification as a material effect related to the erasure of concrete work in complex production processes. This effect cannot be undone by recognition, insofar as the concrete work absorbed in writing a script, shooting a scene, or editing out entire sequences cannot be replicated in the final film product. In this respect, I follow Lukács more closely when it comes to understanding the dissociation between the worker and his/her concrete work (1971: 88-90). Capitalist relations of production dissociate concrete work from the worker's organic experience according to Lukács, making this experience seem immediately given in

external things. One such thing is labour-power: the capacity to offer labour time in exchange for wages, which is bought and sold on the labour market. Lukács' interest in showing how concrete work is reified into labour-power has been largely ignored by later appropriations of the notion. Other such things, I argue, are the various mediators through which film workers reify each other's concrete work in successive stages of film production. Thus, the erasure of concrete filmmaking work is not just the product of a spectator's gaze, as has been argued by some film theorists (see, for instance, Baudry 1975). Well before anyone watches the film, concrete work gets erased in a systematic and recurring manner by filmmakers themselves.

This erasure is met with a rhetoric of recognition in the Egyptian film industry. Workers at the top of the industry's labour hierarchy invoke the figure of the 'unknown soldier' (*el-gondi el-maghul*) to recognize the work of forgotten workers, usually workers at the bottom of the hierarchical division of labour. The line producer Ahmed Farghalli would regularly vaunt Mondy, his location services man, as an unknown soldier who was to be recognized – as he would often tell me – through my own research. Such a metaphoric recognition is better understood as a nominal *a posteriori* credit given by hierarchical superiors to their subordinates, much like heads of state memorialize the unknown soldier sacrificed at war. In *Poisonous Roses*, the director Ahmad Fawzi Saleh regularly expressed his gratitude to the production manager Edward Nabil as well as the entire crew, while apologizing for the difficult conditions under which the film was made. This rhetoric of recognition did not translate into concrete improvements in the workers' labour conditions, but it acknowledged the way in which executive work is always ready to be forgotten in the course of production.

There is no relationship of necessity between labour conditions and the serial erasure of concrete work in filmmaking. A more worker-friendly director such as Fawzi will just as well reify

production labour as a less friendly director, because wages and working hours are not dependent on the extent to which work is reified. However, there are cases in which complaints about working conditions manifest themselves through instances of reification. For example, when the crew was still scouting in *Poisonous Roses*, Nabil would constantly complain that he had neither the time nor the money to visit all the neighbourhoods in which he had made scouting appointments. 'Aren't these apartments good enough?!', he would regularly cry out. By apartments, he meant the scouting pictures that he gathered every day in his scouting round across Cairo. These pictures never looked good enough to Fawzi, who was looking for a specific minimalist style that he never found in Nabil's pictures. With recurring pressure to scout more, Nabil would tell me that he was physically and mentally exhausted. He felt like Fawzi made unreasonable demands without recognizing all the effort that he had made. 'If only he knew what I am going through...', he lamented. In this case, the moments of reification where Nabil's work seemed to be ignored by Fawzi led to his gradual fatigue and his ever-increasing complaints on the job.

Nabil's case illustrates how, as Vicki Mayer argues in the case of production work in American reality television, 'programs rely on thousands of collaborative efforts, but without some form of fieldwork, it's hard to know how these collaborations manifest to make workers accept the fact that the arrangements result in uncompensated labors' (Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009: 23). Such labours are not just uncompensated in a financial sense, but also in an affective sense, as Gabriella Lukács illustrates in various examples of digital media production among contemporary Japanese women (2020). Unpaid emotional labour performed by female digital media producers in Japan allows online platforms to extract value from content – such as photographs, short videos, cell phone writings – without employing them formally. Women's 'invisible' labour, here, is necessary to generate value, much like reification is necessary to

produce the film as a commodity. Such erasures of concrete work have an additional impact on the film's authorship in the Egyptian film industry. Those who get to lay claim over one aspect or another of the film product are artistic workers, even when their executive teams are directly responsible for the concrete work behind this commodity. The tension between this conventional pattern of recognition and the inevitable reification of filmmaking labour raises an issue well described by Miranda Banks in the case of costume-making in Hollywood:

> The central dilemma – and paradox – for costume designers is that their job is to visualize a character through a costume that should go unnoticed by the audience because it looks organic to the personality of the character. The invisibility of costume designers' labor on the screen […] frequently means that they are marginalized on the set and in the press. (Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009: 91)

Such a pattern can be noted more broadly in the work of executive workers on artistic teams in Egypt. During the shooting of *Décor*, for instance, the art direction team once took one or two days off to rearrange the set design in one of the main apartment locations. The scenes to be shot featured an alternative storyline to the two main worlds in the film, where the protagonist Maha is successively married to an art director called Sharif and a taxi driver called Mostafa. In the alternative story, Mostafa had never been married to Maha and had always remained single. During the film's preparations, the celibate Mostafa's apartment was designed to include a room where he would store vinyl discs and listen to music at his leisure. In the few days available to rearrange the apartment, the art direction assistants – led by the first assistant Mohammed Ezzat – and the prop team – led by the prop master Mohammed Seyaha – took it upon themselves to cut 200-300

cardboard record sleeves to furnish the library, with the expectation that the library would be seen in the film.

On the morning of the shooting day, I saw Ezzat with his assistants and his prop team anxiously arranging the sleeves in the library. Ezzat explained to me that they were a little late in finishing the set on the previous day, so they only managed to make these 200-300 sleeves in seven hours. 'We would've needed 2,000-3,000 to fill the whole library', he lamented. When the artistic crew came to shoot in the room, however, the director Ahmad Abdalla decided to take only one angle in which the library was just partially visible. Thus, all efforts to furnish the library were rendered vain by the director's decision to exclude all angles in which the sleeves could be seen on screen. Ultimately, they did not appear in *Décor*. Ezzat was upset because his props did not appear on camera, although they took two days of work, including a seven-hour stretch where he painstakingly cut these fake sleeves out of cardboard with his team. While Ezzat's (and his team's) concrete work would have been reified by the audio-visual material in any case, the fact that the sleeves did *not* make it into the film's image was especially painful to Ezzat, because his work is only recognized by his peers when it can be seen on screen.

In a reflexive twist, the protagonist in *Décor*, Maha, is faced with similar issues throughout the movie in which she works as an art director. The film's opening scenes show her struggling on the set of a low-brow commercial production where she is pressured to produce low-quality work to save time and money. While builders are laying wallpaper on studio walls, the director asks Maha to finish on very short notice, prompting her to get the builders to quickly paint the surface using an even colour. When she visits the star actress in her lodge, she is not wearing the costume that Maha had assigned, because the actress found it too bland. The director backs up his star when Maha complains about her defiance. *Décor* portrays the fictional art director's dilemma in much

the same way as it appeared to the actual art directors and their assistants on *Décor*'s set. On one hand, Maha cares about how her work on the set will appear – visually – in the film; on the other hand, she has no control over what more powerful workers on set will do to ruin her work. While Maha's dilemma is exaggerated for dramatic effect, it is interesting to note that the same tension would occur on the very set of *Décor*.

These examples mark a salient distinction in the recognition of artistic and executive work in film production. This distinction is held by filmmakers themselves, who value concrete work that leaves a visible or audible trace in the film in a different way to the work that does not leave such a trace. The contrast became apparent one day in *Décor*'s preparations, while I sat with the art directors Asem Ali and Nihal Farouk in New Century's office. Suddenly, the line producer Ahmed Farghalli irrupted in the office. He sat right across from Ali and Farouk with his usual smirk. 'We're already over budget', clamoured Farghalli. 'I've kept spending under control by getting 1,000 LE back here and there (…), [but] we only have 30,000 LE left for the rest of the movie [based on the initial budget].' Farghalli laid blame on Ali because he wasted 2,000 LE on the kitchen when it was never shot in the end. 'The scenario said we would see the kitchen! (…) It's not my fault [the director] decided to remove the kitchen in his shooting script.' After Farghalli had gone back and forth with Ali, who tried to negotiate more leeway in the ever-tighter budget, Farouk decided to jump in and appeal to Farghalli's sensibility: 'You can bear to have some extra costs on the set because the film will be enhanced by it (…) do it for the sake of Art! – I don't care about art', answered Farghalli with a large smile. 'I've worked with Mohammed Khan, Khairy Beshara, Atef el-Tayyeb, Radwan el-Kashef, Osama Fawzi [all well-known directors], but no one can name the line producer in those films.' Nihal was embarrassed by Farghalli's point, because

she could not name any line producer either. She tried to mumble a response, but Farghalli insisted. 'I'm the line producer in this film. Who will remember it?'

Farghalli's question concluded an allegorical debate between business and art, which was temporarily won by the business side. The art directors were unable to extract a single penny from Farghalli in the conversation's immediate aftermath. However, the interest of this incident lay not so much in the negotiation between Ali, Farouk, and Farghalli – where two regimes of value were invoked – but in Farghalli's justification for refusing to invest more. Following his own logic, since the line producer will not be remembered, he has no interest in improving the movie's artistic quality, especially when this improvement hurts his own interests as a budget watcher. Likewise, since the art directors' work will be seen in the film (through the set that they have designed), they have a greater stake in improving the film's appearance, even if it translates into an additional financial or logistical burden on the production. Farghalli seems to suggest that all his concrete work as a line producer in *Décor* would never be remembered by the public, and it will not be fully appreciated by industry insiders such as Farouk. His best bet to gain recognition among producers is, precisely, as someone who does his job well to keep the budget balanced.

While workers in artistic teams get recognized through their work on some aspect of the image/sound of the film, workers in non-artistic teams (such as production, lighting, set building) only have the film credits to lay some claim to the film's making. The beginning and ending credits stand as the primary token through which all cast and crew members are recognized as part of 'the work' (*el-'amal*, as it is known in the industry's insider language). They are supposed to inscribe the names of all participants to the film's making, and great care is taken in inscribing the right names. On the final shooting days in *Décor*, the production assistant Khaled Labanita ran around the location with a sheet in hand, asking the head of each team and sub-team to write the names of

those who participated in the film, to ensure that they are all properly credited once the chaos on location dissipates into the cool, silent editing rooms. Crediting is not as straightforward as it seems, however, because some workers are systematically ignored in ending credits – most notably extras and trainees. Those workers who only briefly intervene in the production process can be ignored or willingly excluded from the credits as well.

Not only is getting credited a struggle in some cases, but the very job titles chosen on credits are contested and manipulated. One night, while sitting with the production crew in *Décor* waiting outside the studio, Labanita joked that he wanted to be credited as the 'production manager #3' in the TV series where his immediate superior Ahmad Abdallah Abdel Halim had an upcoming gig. The surrounding crew laughed at the idea, but Abdel Halim took it as an occasion to say that these titles are a bit ambiguous. According to him, there are only three real production positions: the line producer, the production manager, and the assistants. Looking into film credits, however, one can notice more middling job titles: 'production supervision' (*edaret entag*) between the production manager and other assistants; 'production assistants' (*mosa'ed entag*) and 'executing assistants' (*monaffez entag*) to distinguish among all workers underneath the production manager. Labanita's joke turned out to reveal the contest through which subordinate crew members seek greater recognition by adopting impressive titles in credits. 'I wouldn't even take you as production manager #5!' Abdel Halim joked back to Labanita. Job titles might vary, but hierarchical rankings remain stable and known within a given team. 'These titles are important for credits, [not] on the ground', as the line producer Ahmed Farghalli summarized on another occasion.

Although credits are not always taken seriously by film audiences as they dash across the screen, they are a most serious matter among industry insiders. Farghalli is an extreme example. Once, he was watching a movie in which he had worked in a theatre. When the ending credits

appeared, the projectionist shut off the film while moviegoers were slowly heading out. Enraged, Farghalli went up to the projectionist and forced him to replay the whole credits, which he watched on his own, in the empty room, to his great satisfaction. 'If I don't respect my work, it won't respect me', he declared emphatically. While Farghalli felt a strong connection to his projects, I know several executive crew members who have no interest in watching the films that they make. This may be a matter of taste, because crew members may not like the films in which they work, but my sense is that this lack of interest – just like Farghalli's indifference to artistic considerations in *Décor* – is compounded by reification. Concrete effort expended in filmmaking is serially erased throughout the filmmaking process and in the projected film, which comes to seem distant to the very workers who made it.

Credits are still a kind of signature, and workers take great pride in having their names included on them. In the industry's labour market, being credited guarantees that workers have a stake in a tangible product to establish their reputation, which is indispensable to securing more contracts. Irrespective of whether their concrete work leaves a visible or audible trace on screen, being credited in the film commodity is an important currency within the industry's precarious labour market. Yet executive workers also take pride in their concrete work, and it is common to see them reminisce about the 'good work' that they have done in the past. These reminiscences have little to do with the film product itself, but with the experiences built while working on previous productions, some of which are remembered with more fondness than others irrespective of how the film commodity itself fares – whether it becomes a success or not, or whether it is even finished. Workers who are otherwise unrecognized by non-insiders to the industry tend to lay ownership on 'their work' in this manner, even though the nature of this work varies according to their specific craft and is, by definition, reified.

Conclusion

What I have described as 'reification' – the erasure of concrete work by workers situated in different phases of a complex production process via mediating objects – is a central aspect of filmmaking. While this article has detailed the workings of reification in the case of Egyptian film production, this case can speak to different media industries across the globe. The ethnographic record shows that the concrete work of executive workers – workers who have no formal control over the media product's content – has rarely been recognized except in scholarly accounts. This recognition is uneven, however, and it is insufficient to explain why there is any difference at all between workers who have a say over content and workers who have no say. I have argued that this hierarchical distinction is reproduced in the daily work of filmmakers through the reification of concrete work – of scouting work by the director, of lighting work by the cinematographer, of on-set work by the editor. What remains in each case is a mediating object – the scouting picture, the audio-visual material, the cut – which materializes concrete work from earlier stages. This successive erasure produces a commodity whose authorship is attributed to specific workers, while most leave a small trace of their involvement in the credits. What remains after reification, in short, is appropriated by artistic workers as being their own, even if it is the product of a collective effort.

The anthropologist's ethical imperative, here, is not just to reveal in ethnographic writing the 'invisible' labour behind film production. This revelation, as I have argued, tends to ignore the ways in which an already uneven industry distributes visibility and invisibility to different workers according to their hierarchical status. The sheer complexity of film production, extending over

months or years in successive production stages, can explain why reification is unavoidable. Since concrete work is always ready to be erased throughout the filmmaking process, acts of revelation in writing cannot undo this erasure. Rather, an ethnographic attention to reification can better acknowledge the systematic relationship between the erasure of concrete work and the creation of a film commodity benefitting a specific subset of workers. There is no 'un-reified' form of film production to contrast with a reified one, as though all concrete work invested in film production could be revealed in each stage of filmmaking; or as though a film commodity could reveal all the traces of its own making. My suggestion is that the commodity status of the film product is only possible because it reifies concrete work in such a way that only a few workers can lay claim to its authorship and, by extension, can accrue most financial and reputational rewards from it.

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