

Part III

Futures

PROOF

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11 Describing the Future

Predictability, Uncertainty, and Imponderability

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'I need to sell 5,000 tickets.' Ahmad Fawzi Saleh chewed on his fingers while contemplating just how many strangers he needed to convince to watch his new film. After its world premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2018, *Poisonous Roses* toured international film festivals and was about to be screened at the Cairo International Film Festival in November 2018. Fawzi, who was the film's writer, director, and co-producer, had agreed a commercial exhibition deal with the local alternative theatre Zawya. The deal was to screen the film for one week in their downtown theatre then hope to attract enough revenue at the box office to negotiate another week or more. This plan followed in the footsteps of *Yomeddine* (Shawky 2018), a recent alternative Egyptian feature that had seen relative success with a similar distribution formula in Zawya. This was the best Fawzi could manage in a context where major distribution and exhibition conglomerates take very few risks when it comes to screening a film starring young actors, an austere plotline, and innovative aesthetics. While he never intended to create a commercially successful film, Fawzi was concerned that he might not be able to break even on production costs. Domestic exhibition sales were an important income stream in this sense, but all his eggs were now in a single basket: one theatre with two screening rooms totalling 410 seats. At 40 LE (40 Egyptian pounds, or US\$ 2.20 at the time) per ticket, he would receive just around 14 LE (or \$0.78) on the ticket after the distributor and exhibitor had taken their cut. Yet he still needed hundreds of thousands of pounds to settle the debts that he had accumulated with numerous co-financers.

The calculations racing through Fawzi's mind could be described as his way of mitigating an uncertain future, in which box-office returns are unknowable and unpredictable. Fawzi confronted this uncertainty by turning it into a set of risks: he decided to screen in just one theatre in the hope that it would sell out and earn more screenings, and *not* to distribute in multiple theatres and thereby risk failing to attract enough viewers at Zawya. Such risks come with a sense of predictability, an awareness that, given certain pre-established data (one theatre, 410 seats, 40 LE/ticket), one

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can estimate the chances of reaching a quantifiable outcome, namely, selling 5,000 tickets.

This predictability cannot erase the future's fundamental uncertainty, but it works to orient present actions towards managing uncertainty in imperfect ways. Such accounts of risk management and uncertainty are prevalent in anthropology, including in the anthropology of commercial film production (see Ganti 2012), and in neighbouring social sciences. Scholars have explored the different ways in which their interlocutors attempt to know and predict a future that is assumed to be unknowable and unpredictable. These have included probabilistic calculations of risk (Beck 1992; Zaloom 2004, 2009); hope in and aspirations for self-improvement (Miyazaki 2004), trust in promises (De l'Estoile 2014; Hetherington 2014, 2016); creating new imaginative horizons (Crapanzano 2004; Appadurai 2013) or anticipatory scenarios (Kinsley 2010, 2012; Samimian-Darsh 2013; Hannerz 2016); and even divination (Zeitlyn 2012).

This chapter argues that such accounts of uncertainty and its mitigation are insufficient to describe ethnographically all the ways in which 'futures' are anticipated, to take heed of Zeitlyn's (2015) suggestion to always pluralize possible states of affairs. These accounts have been restricted by two assumptions: first, that all futures are fundamentally unknowable and unpredictable; and second, that the mitigation of this uncertainty involves an act of individual imagination, usually by experts. My contention is that these assumptions lead ethnographers away from describing some everyday 'orientations' of human action towards future ends (see Bryant & Knight 2019). One such orientation is visible in complex sociotechnical processes like filmmaking, where the outcome of production – the film – is expected and anticipated through everyday techniques, as part of a collective imaginative effort distributed across a wide division of labour. I suggest that such futures can more accurately be described using a different category: what I call 'imponderability'.

In ordinary English usage, the terms 'uncertain' and 'imponderable' are largely synonymous: what is uncertain involves a certain doubt or indeterminacy about what will happen, and what is imponderable cannot be evaluated or assessed in advance. I propose a redefinition of each term to mark an analytical distinction between two kinds of future orientation. I use 'uncertainty' to describe those futures that are unknowable and unpredictable to social actors, such as the possible states of affairs in which Fawzi either succeeds or fails to sell 5,000 tickets. I use 'imponderability', in contrast, to describe those futures that are expected yet unpredictable to social actors, such as the film that was imagined throughout the production process of *Poisonous Roses*. An imponderable future is not uncertain under my definition, because, beyond unknowable success or failure, it has an expected conventional outcome – i.e. 'the film'. Yet the different courses of action leading to this outcome cannot be weighed or calculated in the present. In other words, an imponderable future involves a surety among

actors that there will be a product, but this product will need to be imagined and worked through at every production stage in ways that cannot be fully anticipated.

In considering his film's fate at the box office, Fawzi seemed to be caught between the risks posed by an uncertain future and the possibility of transforming it into calculable risks, but his overall work throughout the film's production process had been more assured. While he could never have predicted how *Poisonous Roses* would be made in advance, nor whether it would show in Rotterdam or Cairo when he began writing the script, he did expect to make 'a film', and he did work through a conventional sequence of operations, within an established division of labour and using well-known techniques and technological devices, to mediate between his present and the expected yet unpredictable outcome that is now *Poisonous Roses*. An ethnographic account of film production where the only future of interest is one in which filmmakers worry about box-office success diminishes the complex relationship that they have with their possible futures throughout the filmmaking process.

There is a need to expand anthropology's conceptual vocabulary to encompass various versions of the present in relation to different possible futures, including those involving strong expectations about unpredictable outcomes. This expansion is needed because, on one hand, discussions about futurity in anthropology seldom encompass the ordinary sociotechnical futures towards which everyday action is oriented. On the other hand, it better describes the substance of people's imagination of possible futures, which is seldom a pure mental exercise, but a collectively embedded set of experiences, skills, and techniques premised both on past expectations and on future unpredictability. This chapter shows how the film production process can be grasped by refining the blanket notion of uncertainty usually applied to the future, then by discussing the conceptual differences between uncertainty and imponderability. The ethnography is based on fieldwork that I conducted between 2013 and 2015 on the production process of *Poisonous Roses* in Cairo, initially as an observer, and later as a participant in screenwriting and in production.

The Futures of *Poisonous Roses*

Poisonous Roses (2018) is the story of young woman called Taheya, who lives in a small apartment in Cairo's tanneries district with her mother and her brother Saqr, a waged worker in a tanning workshop. Every morning, Taheya wakes up to prepare food for her brother and brings it to his shop. Every night, she travels across the city to an upper-class mall where she cleans toilets for a living. Saqr nurses the dream of migrating to Italy, where he could make more money to support himself and his family, but Taheya will not allow it. Saqr meets a young doctor called Nahed and escapes his sister's grasp little by little, but Taheya does everything in her powers – including

magic – to keep him by her side. When he resolves to migrate, he raises funds to pay for the boat journey and leaves his work, but Taheya goes after him until she brings him back.

Audiences who watch *Poisonous Roses* today will see this narrative unfold, but it was not always the way the story was supposed to go. When I initially met the screenwriter and director Ahmad Fawzi Saleh in October 2013, he was working on the twelfth version of his script. The story is an adaptation of the 1990 Egyptian novel *Poisonous Roses for Saqr* (*Worud Sama li-Saqr*) by Ahmad Zaghoul al-Shiti. The novel is written using four different narrators: Saqr, his sister Taheya, his bourgeois lover Nahed, and his friend Yehia. Fawzi's initial adaptation preserved this structure and transported the action within the tanneries district, in which the director had filmed an earlier documentary called *Living Skin* (*Geld Hayy*, Fawzi Saleh 2010). Soon enough, however, he decided to rewrite the script in a more linear style, in which the reader follows Saqr's story and all the remaining characters became secondary. Fawzi started shooting this script in December 2014, but he interrupted the filming because he was dissatisfied with the footage. He went back to the drawing board with his cinematographer Maged Nader, his assistant director Youssef Abodan, and me, to workshop the script in the summer of 2015. This script became the final version of *Poisonous Roses*, in which Taheya becomes the main character and Saqr a secondary character.

One way to describe the change in the screenplay's storyline between 2013 and 2018 would be to posit that the outcome of the film was uncertain when Fawzi started writing. This is the usual way in which the future of film production is described in ethnographies of commercial film production. Grimaud writes, for instance, that 'making a film in Bombay is playing the game of a laborious and uncertain quest' (Grimaud 2003: 7). In a different context, Pandian has similarly emphasized this uncertainty:

[W]herever I followed filmmakers like Krishna and Vishnu – the streets and studios of Chennai, the sandstone plateaus of central Karnataka, the soaring bridges of Kuala Lumpur, the mountains of Switzerland, or the deserts beyond Dubai – I found a milieu of tremendous uncertainty. ... Accidents come in endless varieties: the excitement that crests and wanes with every new story; the protean play of light, wind, and other natural forces shadowing every take; the unforeseeable needs that inevitably trail shot footage into editing and composing studios; the constant failure of actors and equipment to act and react as they should.

(Pandian 2015: 6)

Pandian paints a picture of filmmaking that emphasizes accidents and chance events on set, but this emphasis is more a product of his interest in the ineffability of cinematic creation than an accurate description of the total work invested in a film project. Grimaud's ethnography serves as a good counterpart in this sense, because it shows in more detail how many

layers of intricate activity stand between, say, a present in which the director and the scriptwriters scribble notes on paper about the eventual film, and an unpredicted future in which actors, costumes, locations, equipment, images, and sounds are brought together into ‘the film’. While Grimaud labels this relationship between present and future as broadly uncertain, I would suggest that the specific uncertainty involved in film production is more accurately described as ‘imponderability’, using my definition of the term. The filmmaking process is not seen as being completely unknowable and unpredictable. Rather, it is driven by an expected outcome – the film – as well as conventional expectations about the operational sequence leading to the outcome.

When I first met him in 2013, Fawzi mentioned that he would use different bits of the script to different ends. He might send the latest linear version to apply for international funds, but he intended to include some scenes from earlier versions of the script in post-production. When I asked where he would do post-production, he said it depended on which European country gave him funding. If he got French funding, for instance, he would have to do post-production in France, but he might get Swiss or Norwegian funding as well, in which case he would have to do it according to their bylaws. I asked him whether he might consider finishing his film in Aroma, one of Egypt’s largest post-production companies, but he categorically rejected that possibility. I later understood that Fawzi had no intention of pursuing local post-production venues because he did not think that he could find a good enough editor and sound designer in Cairo, given his film’s unusual style.

The way in which Fawzi talked about his project’s future in 2013 ended up being close to what occurred: he did send the linear screenplay to international funding organizations, he did manage to secure some funding, he did include some scenes from the very first script in the final film, and he did edit the film in France. This is not to say that the director could predict these outcomes in advance, since there were numerous trial-and-error attempts and dead ends too. Still, he had expectations about the different paths that the film project could follow. The possibilities envisaged by Fawzi were not uncertainties in a broad sense. Rather, there was a sense in which current actions involved expectations about where the film would end up, without any certainty about which path it would take to reach that destination. The chances that these expectations would materialize could not be calculated in advance, yet these expectations informed his way of thinking. In other words, Fawzi could not imagine whether he would successfully gain funding or not, or whether he would edit in France or elsewhere, but he did imagine securing international funds and applying for French post-production grants.

Such imaginings are not just about the imponderable outcome, but also about the collective process through which the film is made. This was clear in the way in which *Poisonous Roses*’ screenplay was reworked in screenwriting sessions. During a session that I observed in October 2013,

Fawzi sat around the office table with me, the assistant director Osama Abol Ata, and the art director Hassan el-Belasy. Each had their printed version of the screenplay and used a pen, a pencil, or a highlighter to make the adjustments dictated by Fawzi. Each participant in turn read the script out loud in a crisp neutral tone, followed by discussions of each scene. To give just one example, the director wanted to add a scene near the end of the script where Taheya dances for Saqr in front of Nahed on the Nile. Osama was not convinced. 'It's too direct,' he said, adding that it was probably way too costly. He slipped a snide comment about how Fawzi thought that the shooting would be done in three weeks, and the director laughed. Hassan agreed with Osama, saying that the current ending to the script powerfully reunited all the movie's characters, but adding that the Nile scene would ruin this effect. Fawzi abandoned the idea after discussion, joking that he was 'a democratic guy'.

This brief exchange – one of very many over the years that it took to write *Poisonous Roses* – shows how expectations about the imponderable future always diverge among those involved in making a film. The divergence is not just over what the director wants in his script, or over whatever advice his key crew gives, but also over the varying priorities of different workers within the project's division of labour. While Fawzi could whimsically add a scene on the Nile at the end of his screenplay, his assistant director immediately translated this imagined scene into shooting days and additional costs. The director, the assistant director, and the art director each had a different idea about what the film would look like, even though no one knew exactly how the actual film would materialize. These strong expectations about the film's materialization still did not allow the crew to predict how the film would end up being made or what exactly it would look like. As it turned out, neither the scene suggested by Fawzi nor the ending of the 2013 script were ever shot. And in fact, Osama and Hassan did not even remain in their respective positions until the end of the project.

The gap between what was discussed in 2013 and what ended up happening by 2018 illustrates the future's fundamental uncertainty, but it cannot account for how social actors imagined the film's future during screenwriting sessions. This envisioning not only varies according to one's position within the crew, but it also evolves throughout the conventional sequence of operations involved in making the film. When Fawzi, Osama, and Hassan were done with their screenwriting session in 2013, the director asked his crew members what the next steps were. Osama said that his work hung on receiving the final version of the script, ideally formatted with one scene per page and a larger font. Once he got it, he would proceed to do a full location and character breakdown, then set a shooting schedule based on these breakdowns. Hassan, for his part, answered that he needed to sit down with Fawzi, as well as with the cinematographer Houssam Habib, in order to discuss changes in costumes and set design. Hassan added that he

would arrange several fitting sessions with actors. Fawzi agreed to send him the actors that had been cast.

This debrief at the end of the screenwriting session illustrates how filmmakers constantly work between their present and the imponderable future. The present is not just about discussing the screenplay and all the elements that will feature in it, but also about anticipating the different steps leading to the production of the film according to each participant's specialization. Osama thinks about the logistics of his shooting schedule, while Hassan thinks about his set and costumes. These thoughts do not just emerge within each worker's mind, but they are also materialized through technological devices. As Strandvad (2011) notes in the case of screenwriting in Denmark, screenwriting ideas are more than purely cognitive or oral: they rely on a variety of implements, papers, annotations, computers – and these constitute the material basis of film production. The director, the assistant director, the cinematographer, and the art director each have a set of technological mediators to work with: script breakdown tables, scouting pictures, set designs, fitting pictures, and so on. Thus, the gap between the present and the future of film production is mediated through an accepted labour hierarchy, a well-established sequence of operations, and a constant use of technological devices.

This pattern is visible across the film production process. On the day immediately following the 2013 screenwriting session, Fawzi went on a scouting trip with Houssam, Osama, Hassan, and two production workers. After spending the morning scouting a film theatre, we took a production car to an antiques gallery in downtown Cairo. The gallery was meant to feature in one or two scenes that would illustrate the bourgeois lifestyle of Saqr's lover. When we reached the gallery, Fawzi asked Houssam to take a picture of the entrance, and then to photograph specific objects within the gallery in a specific lighting. I told Hassan as an aside that he would need to change this gallery a lot. He agreed, but on the other hand, he said, he would not have to change the costumes much. The gallery scenes were never shot. In fact, they were removed from the script once Fawzi committed to a storyline in which Taheya became the main character, and in which Saqr's lover, Nahed, only appeared once or twice. Yet while scouting the gallery, Fawzi still had Houssam take some pictures to visualize what the gallery would look like in the eventual film, while Hassan and I had a brief word about how the space could be transformed into the film's décor and what relation it had to the costumes.

Filmmakers do not think that these situated anticipations necessarily mean that the film will be finished – indeed, doubts about *Poisonous Roses'* future would constantly creep into conversation throughout the filmmaking process. Yet these anticipations about 'the film' are integral to the filmmakers' work at each juncture in the process. When I met Fawzi in late January 2014, three days into his initial shooting block, he had decided

to reshoot all his footage. ‘It’s around 120,000 LE thrown to the ground,’ he said. Two months later I sat with Fawzi and his new art director Omar Abdel Wahab. Fawzi was excited that shooting was about to start again. He felt as if the years spent preparing were finally not in vain. After months scouting the tanneries with his first assistant director, Maged Nader, and his cinematographer, Houssam Habib, he now had a clear idea of his shooting style thanks to the nearly 20,000 pictures that had been taken. Fawzi wanted to start filming at the end of May or September, because it would be too hot to work in the summer. Omar, Fawzi, and I agreed on meeting with Houssam and Fawzi’s mentor Adel el-Siwi to brainstorm ideas about how to finish his script before deciding on shooting again. ‘I want to know what the script is about,’ said Fawzi with a hint of anguish.

The second round of filming did not in fact start until December 2014. Again, one could interpret this series of events as a crystallization of the filmmakers’ difficulties in dealing with an uncertain future, understood as being both unknowable and unpredictable. This interpretation is still insufficient insofar as filmmakers expect certain outcomes at every juncture of the filmmaking process, and they never seem to capitulate to sheer indeterminacy. When a filmmaker like Fawzi mentions wanting to know what the script is about before shooting again, he is not saying that he can predict what the script or the film will be, or that he cannot imagine it until it happens. Rather, he engages in certain mediating actions – watching the footage, scouting locations, meeting with collaborators – that will allow him to get closer to the expected outcome – ‘the film’. To describe the filmmaking process as an ‘uncertain’ one is too vague in this respect, because even though it is an unpredictable process, it is laden with all the expectations of the people involved throughout its execution. These expectations narrow down the scope of uncertainty through everyday filmmaking tasks, which both try to anticipate and concretize an unpredictable outcome. Filmmakers are not just faced by a broadly uncertain future, in this sense, but by an imponderable one.

Futures in Contemporary Anthropology

The most pervasive conception of the future in contemporary social science is well summarized in Luhmann’s aptly titled essay, ‘Describing the Future’ (1998 [1992]). Luhmann was concerned with the way in which Western technocratic experts have historically sought to predict the future – with only partial success. He argues that there was a historical shift concomitant with European modernity to a conception of the world in which uncertainty is replaced by a ‘risk of deciding’. Experts turned unpredictability into calculable and predictable events, but, ultimately, they could not avoid the future’s unknowability. This line of argument has been developed by anthropological work on current political, economic, and ecological crises, which shows precisely how experts cannot escape

uncertain outcomes, or at least no more than their interlocutors. This argument for the future's fundamental unknowability, including for experts, is evident in ethnographies of austerity in Europe (Knight & Stewart 2016; Knight 2017a, 2017b); economic uncertainty in Africa (Cooper & Pratten 2014; Goldstone & Obarrio 2016); global migration flows (Pine 2014; El-Shaarawi 2015; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017); global security governance (Holbraad & Pedersen 2013); and environmental degradation (Tsing 2015; Whittington 2019).

Against predictive expertise, the implicit intellectual project in these ethnographies is to give a sense of emergent possibilities – a sense of the numerous ways in which humans might experience their world and their destiny. Such possibilities are traceable in human societies past and present (see Carrithers 2005; Graeber 2007), but they can also be grasped through science fiction (Collins 2008) or space exploration (Valentine 2012, 2016; Messeri 2016). These possibilities reflect an uncertain, unknowable, unpredictable future that has existential consequences on individual, societal, and planetary scales. These consequences are 'existential' in the sense that they always harbour a potential for radically altering or eradicating certain peoples, ways of life, and ecosystems. Studying existential futures is important, especially given the topic's political urgency, but it is not always attuned to the ways in which humans understand their futures on a day-to-day basis. The concerns discussed by this scholarship tend to flatten possible futures in this sense. I would argue that there is a difference between the economic, political, and ecological futures faced by humanity and the way in which a filmmaker conceives the future of their film project. My intention is not to bestow value on one at the expense of the other, but to point to the limits of an undifferentiated category of the 'uncertain' future to describe these two kinds of future orientation.

The blanket notion of uncertainty has already been nuanced by anthropologists with an epistemological interest in 'the future', whether in Guyer's (2007) lament about the disappearance of the 'near-future'; in Augé's (2011) musings about the disappearance of the future *tout court* in a neoliberal world order; in Rabinow's (2008) anthropology of the 'contemporary'; or in Pels' (2015: 779) attempt to systematize 'the diversity of futures acting on the present'. These scholars have proposed a range of intermediary categories to describe the future. For instance, arguing against technocratic prophecies, Pels proposes a typology including 'open' futures in policy-making practice, 'empty' futures in endless capitalist accumulation, and 'not-yet' futures that devalue present conditions at the expense of expert scenarios. Pels' epistemology of futures, just as the categories of the 'near-future' or the 'contemporary', remains embedded within a conception of uncertainty in which the unknown and the unpredictable reign supreme, albeit in different contexts as defined and envisaged by expert social actors. This scholarship can be seen as extending an older tradition within the anthropology of time (e.g. Munn 1992; Gell 1992), in which

the anthropologist situates certain time-concepts within the social actor's broader cosmology. The cosmology, in this case, is the somewhat familiar conception of an uncertain future, and the time-concepts being proposed reflect the anthropologist's attempt to grasp experts' concerns with this kind of future.

Thus, current anthropological scholarship about the future tends to limit the prospects faced by human beings to a specific (existential) orientation and, in some cases, to a specific set of social actors with an expert interest in such abstract categories as 'the Future'. The way in which different kinds of social actor understand different types of future falls by the wayside here. This key point is well summarized in Bryant and Knight's critique of Appadurai's *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013):

While he calls for investigation into human preoccupations with imagination, aspiration, and anticipation, he does not go so far as to sketch methods and particular ways of understanding the future that may help the discipline move in the direction to which he points.

(Bryant & Knight 2019: 13)

One direction in which anthropologists can move to understand how humans envisage their future activity – not just their precarious existence or their meta-conceptions of the future – is by examining how workers within an extended sociotechnical process experience the process's outcome as being both expected and unpredictable.

I have proposed the term 'imponderability' to describe this specific orientation to the future. This is not meant as an echo to Malinowski's 'imponderabilia of actual life' (2002: 16), which are understood as ineffable patterns of behaviour to be discerned by the ethnographer through careful notetaking. I have chosen to define an imponderable future as one whose actualization cannot be weighed or assessed (in the etymological sense of imponderable), yet whose outcome remains expected. A screenwriter expects to make 'a film' when he writes and an architect expects to make 'a building' while he designs, but all the courses of action leading to the concrete processes of actualization cannot be calculated in advance. The screenwriter cannot accurately predict what his film will look like, just as the architect cannot accurately predict how the building will be built. Imponderable outcomes are mediated through a conventional set of working relations, production operations, and technological devices used in anticipation of the outcome's achievement. Acknowledging this mediation allows me to extend Laura Bear's (2014) argument about the way in which unpredictability under neoliberal conditions is mediated by human and non-human labour. Without such labour, without the technical know-how and the technologies mobilized in sociotechnical operations, there would be no distinction between an uncertain outcome, which is unknown and

unpredictable as I have defined it above, and an imponderable one, which is expected even though its actualization is unpredictable.

Distinguishing between imponderability and uncertainty is important because any exhaustive study of futures as experienced by social actors should account for the ordinary sociotechnical facets of their lived activity, in which possible futures are often expected yet unpredictable. The distinction would also allow anthropologists to spell out an important yet underdiscussed criticism of predictive expertise. The usual anthropological critique of risk and uncertainty, as initially theorized by Knight (1940 [1921]) and Keynes (1921; 1964 [1936]), is that they transform uncertainty into a gamble by reducing the unknowable and unpredictable future to a set of calculable trends (see Appadurai 2013). Yet in Knight's and Keynes' work, as well as in later economic theory, prediction is not conducted in ignorance of the fundamental uncertainty that all humans face, but with the assumption that what is uncertain can be treated as being imponderable – that what cannot be known or predicted may at least be expected. This assumption is well summarized in Keynes' *General Theory*, where he explores how profits are accumulated under conditions of uncertainty in the 'state of long-term expectation':

The outstanding fact is the extreme precariousness of the basis of knowledge on which our estimates of prospective yield have to be made. If we speak frankly, we have to admit that our basis of knowledge for estimating the yield ten years hence of a railway, a copper mine, a textile factory, the goodwill of a patent medicine, an Atlantic liner, a building in the City of London amounts to little and sometimes to nothing; or even five years hence.

(Keynes 1964 [1936]: 149–50)

In this passage, Keynes admits that the yield of long-term investments cannot be calculated *a priori*. Any such calculation is based on convention, as he recognizes later (Keynes 1964 [1936]: 152–3), a point extensively developed in economic sociology (see Beckert 2016). What is interesting in this passage is that Keynes assumes a certain permanence of the yield's source: that ten years into the future, there will be a railway, a copper mine, or a textile factory from which one will be able to extract profit, even if these profits are incalculable.

Keynes assumes that what is unknowable is the yield, not its source, which produces an apparent disagreement between his concept of uncertainty and the one commonly used in anthropology. Given a definition of uncertainty in which futures are unknowable and unpredictable, we *cannot know* whether the railway, the copper mine, or the factory will still be standing ten years down the road. Yet Keynes effectively assumes that this can be reasonably expected, which is a wholly different stance to take than to assume that

the future is uncertain in a fundamental sense. The expectations implied in Keynes' quotation are rarely discussed in a critique of the transformation of uncertainty into risk. There is a parallel criticism to be made of the way in which expert prediction invariably reduces uncertainty to imponderability, by turning fundamentally unknowable outcomes into expected ones, even though both are unpredictable in a probabilistic sense. Understanding the dynamics of imponderability in concrete sociotechnical activities puts the theoretical limits of expert prediction in perspective. Watching how filmmakers deal with uncertainty by turning it into imponderability, by presuming that the future of 'the film' is unpredictable but expected, can highlight by analogy how experts involved in predicting uncertain outcomes rely on similar expectations and mediations to engage with possible futures.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the categories used to describe the future in anthropology should be expanded to account for different 'orientations' towards the future (Bryant & Knight 2019). What is at stake is not to describe people's different conceptions of time, but to understand how their actions are affected by expectations about their unpredictable fates. Using the example of film production, I have argued that the way in which filmmakers anticipate their film and its making, well before its actualization, cannot be subsumed under a blanket notion of uncertainty. Instead, I describe these futures using what I consider to be a more accurate category, imponderability; a future orientation in which an outcome – the film – is both expected and yet unpredictable. Creating 'the film' is not about mitigating an uncertain future through probabilistic calculations, or by hoping, or through imaginative scenarios. Rather, it is about imagining an imponderable future by means of a certain division of labour; it is about anticipating a certain sequence of operations; and it is about using technological devices to remind oneself of what comes next.

Although I have chosen a specific case to illustrate the argument, I would argue that distinguishing between different ways of describing the future is more than a hair-splitting exercise in abstract reasoning. Indeed, I would wager that these distinctions have analytical purchase over the way in which anthropologists interpret observable decisions made by interlocutors in the field. Such decisions are not always immediate responses to a foggy future through which one navigates by means of calculation, guesswork, or sheer hopefulness. They can be, in some cases, mediations between a present laden with expectations and an imponderable future, expected yet unpredictable. These mediations cannot be reduced to an actuarial exercise through which social actors anticipate the probability of future events. These mediations include working relations, technological use, imaginative conversations, and all the activities that give concrete thickness to everyday life, which have been extensively studied in anthropology and in neighbouring social sciences. Yet

these activities are seldom situated in relation to the futures anticipated by actual social actors. Making this connection illustrates how imagining the future is seldom an individual exercise, but is rather a collective one in which each action and each representation has a noticeable effect in the long run.

I would further argue that the cases in which futures are conceived of as being ‘imponderable’ involve extended sociotechnical processes, in which all actions taken by social actors are oriented towards a certain end without being determined by it. There are many cases in the ethnographic record in which ‘the future’ could be described in this manner: one can think about Malinowski’s (2002: 80–94) description of canoe-building in the Trobriand Islands, Callon’s (1986) description of growing scallops in Brest, or Marchand’s (2009) description of house building in Djenné. In such cases, and many more, there is no doubt that the sociotechnical outcome and its accomplishment cannot be probabilistically determined *a priori*, yet there is still a sense in which the outcome is expected. This expectation shapes the various mediations through which humans and non-humans tend towards its accomplishment. More than an account of risk and uncertainty, the notion of imponderability allows us to consider sociotechnical activity beyond present encounters between humans and non-humans, and beyond rote repetition of past technical behaviour.

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