

Title: ‘What Does it Look Like?’: On the Use of Intermediary Images in Egyptian Film Production

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Short Bio: Chihab El Khachab is a D.Phil. candidate in Anthropology in Wolfson College, University of Oxford. His dissertation examines the way in which new media technologies (e.g., smartphones, laptops, cameras) are used in the everyday working practices of the Egyptian film industry.

Abstract: This article examines the use of intermediary images in the process of commercial film production in Egypt. Without being integrally part of the film product, intermediary images play a vital role in mediating interactions in the film’s production process, by anchoring the filmmakers’ multiple and sometimes conflicting representations of “the film” with visual proxies. Focusing on scouting work in two recent Egyptian films, *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses*, I draw attention to the way in which intermediary images allow filmmakers to imagine some aspects of the film-in-the-making.

“What Does it Look Like?”:

On the Use of Intermediary Images in Egyptian Film Productionⁱ

In the autumn of 2013, I was working on my field notes in New Century Film Production when Mohammed Setohy, the production manager in *Décor*, a film project that I closely followed, came in exhausted. I asked him where he had been all day: he said that he went on a scouting mission at the district attorney’s office (*neyaba*) in Qasr el-Nil, but the police officers guarding the office would not allow him to photograph the building unless he received special permission from the district attorney (*el-na’eb el-‘am*). Around sunset, Ahmed Farghalli, the line producer, serenely entered New Century’s office. As soon as he sat down, he started gathering scouting pictures on his MacBook from all production crew members in presence. Setohy gave Farghalli his camera’s memory card, but he had no photos of the *neyaba* to show. Farghalli looked towards him and asked, “Why didn’t you scout the office?” Setohy told him the whole story – to which Farghalli immediately replied, a little heated, “You couldn’t even steal a tiny little picture?? I just wanted the external appearance (*khargi*) of the office!” Setohy justified himself by saying that he did not feel like he could take any photos, given the guards’ presence, so Farghalli sighed and asked, “What does it look like?” The answer was an oral-cum-gestural evocation of the building’s yellow color; its bulky, rectangular shape; its architectural style, similar to other *neyabas* in Cairo. Farghalli seemed somewhat satisfied with the answer, but he still asked Setohy to photograph the office on the next day – which he dutifully did, as he was able to steal a photo of its external look on his way.

[Insert Fig. 1 with caption: Archival picture of the *neyaba* on Qasr el-Nil]

This vignette illustrates the central importance of what I will refer to as “intermediary images” in the process of commercial film production in Egypt. Filmmakers produce intermediary images in order to visualize a particular aspect of the film product, yet these images are never part of the final film *per se*. Scouting pictures like the one eventually taken by Setohy, costume-fitting pictures, printed set designs, color tests, casting videos, video-assist recordings, unwanted takes in editing are all “intermediary images” in this sense. I argue that these images are vital in understanding the creative work of film production: they are not mere by-products to this process, but the very substance through which the film is made. In Grimaud’s words, filmmaking is an endeavor “largely shared between individuals, material components, and the phases of the cinematographic process” (2003: 10). This insight is all the more important given that the filmmaking process unfolds over extensive periods of time: standing in the present, a filmmaker can only approximate the eventual film’s on-screen appearance in some of its aspects (e.g., the actor’s look, the image’s color, the set’s design, the edit’s pace). Without simply relying on common knowledge about the architecture of a typical *neyaba*, then, Farghalli asked Setohy to take a picture of it, to evaluate what it will look like on screen.

My detailed attention to intermediary images contributes to two broader issues in visual anthropology. First, in line with Grimaud’s work in Bombay (2003) and Hoek’s work in Dhaka (2014), this attention highlights the instability of the film-in-the-making, which is never a straightforward materialization of the crew members’ ideas, but a constant back-and-forth between crew members, intermediary images, and unstable representations of what the film will eventually look like. Introducing a sense of the temporal extension of filmmaking raises the issue

of how filmmakers manage to “see” the eventual film in the present, and I argue that this process partly takes place through intermediary images. These images, evidently, are not the only intermediary documents employed in the course of production – one may cite the scenario, the continuity script’s notes, shooting reports, and the editor’s notes among many artifacts with a similar mediating role. For the sake of brevity, however, I will center my analysis on intermediary *images*, with the understanding that they similarly mediate between the present and the future of the film-in-the-makingⁱⁱ. Secondly, this article will contribute to the wider literature with an interest in the materiality of images (see Pinney, 2001; 2004; Edward & Hart, 2004; Meyer, 2010; Gürsel, 2012). I argue that examining intermediary images in filmmaking extends the discussion beyond the immediate embodied experience of images to the embodied experience of their futurity. In its ability to reveal, at once, some aspect of the film product and a variety of interpretations emerging in its production process, the intermediary image materializes a creative impulse that I explore with a particular filmmaking operation in mind: scouting.

Given the wide range of documents that qualify as “intermediary images”, I use scouting pictures as a case study to illustrate my core argument, though I believe that it can be sustained with any intermediary image. The argument, in short, is that intermediary images have a concrete impact over the socio-technical filmmaking process as a whole, since at any point in this process, whatever will be “the film” remains an uncertain potentiality, which is negotiated by filmmakers through their imagination, their conversations, and a wide variety of visual proxies. In this sense, no anthropology of cinematic creation is possible without attention to these intermediaries. This situation is not unique to the Egyptian film industry, yet I believe that it is underrepresented in the existing literature on commercial film production in anthropology (with exceptions such as Grimaud, 2003; Hoek, 2014; and Rot, 2014). This article is based on fieldwork in two Egyptian

film projects made in the years 2013 to 2015: *Décor* (dir. Ahmad Abdalla, prod. New Century Film Production) and the unfinished *Poisonous Roses* (dir. Ahmad Fawzi Saleh, prod. Al-Batrik Art Production). Since I mostly concentrate on the intricacies of scouting in both movies, the reader seeking additional context on each film’s storyline can consult the relevant endnoteⁱⁱⁱ. To situate my argument on intermediary images, I will start with a brief review of anthropological works on the materiality of images, and I will go on to sketch local notions of artistry and authority in the Egyptian film industry. Then, with an eye on explaining how intermediary images intervene in the film-in-the-making, I present two case studies of the scouting process in *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses*.

[Insert Fig. 2 with caption: Promotional poster for *Décor*. Copyright: New Century Film Production]

A Materialist Anthropology of (Intermediary) Images

A central problem in the anthropology of the visual lies in determining the distinct value of the visual when, as Pinney argues, “the historian [or the anthropologist] reads into [images] *what has been learned by other means*” (2005: 260). The visual, in this sense, is taken as an *illustration* of an argument whose substance is not necessarily visible in itself. This illustrative function is evident in the social scientist’s casual use of visual materials in classrooms and academic conferences (see Banks, 2001: 14-18), yet one could make a similar observation about most anthropological studies of media production. These studies are very useful in situating the life-

worlds of media producers, including the narratives that they create, the imagined audiences that they address, the labor that they expend in production, and the various power structures constraining their action. Whether in Meyer’s attention to popular Ghanaian cinema and its insertion in local Pentecostal discourses (2003; 2004), or in Larkin’s attention to the aesthetics of outrage in Nigerian video film (2008), or in Ortner’s attention to the discursive links between “generation-X” and indie film production in the United States (2013), or in Martin’s attention to the risky labor of stunt workers in Hong Kong cinema (2012a; 2012b), or in Wilkinson-Weber’s attention to costume-making in Bombay cinema (2005; 2010), or in Ganti’s attention to the common “production fictions” (2002) and professional “boundary-work” in Bollywood (2012) – in all these cases, the typical attention to narrative, imagined audience, labor, and ideology most often cannot answer Pinney’s challenge to examine the visual “in itself”. I could develop a similar argument in the case of ethnographies of television production (e.g., Ginsburg, 1993; Dávila, 1999; Abu-Lughod, 2005) and advertising (e.g., Dávila, 2001; Mazzarella, 2003), but the basic point is simple enough. If my experience in the Egyptian film industry is any indication, these studies could be enriched by a more detailed account of the role of visual artefacts in media production.

To understand the specific situation of *intermediary* images in commercial filmmaking, the spatiotemporal context within which this intermediation occurs is crucial, because the same document can accrue different meanings at different times in a filmmaking process, and it can be read differently by different people at the same time. This particular problem has been extensively considered in anthropological studies of photography, whether the photographs are taken by anthropologists (see Edwards & Hart, 2004; Morton & Edwards, 2006; Marion, 2010) or non-anthropologists (see Pinney, 2001; 2004; 2005; Meyer, 2010; Frank, 2012; Gürsel, 2012;

forthcoming). Without neglecting the image’s physical features^{iv}, these studies tend to show how particular meanings accrue to a given image by virtue of the socially learned skill and knowledge deployed by each interpreter. This is especially visible in Gürsel’s work on wire service photography in the Associated Press, where she examines “the work of image brokers at key nodal points of production, reproduction, distribution, and circulation in the international photojournalism industry” (2012: 72). “Image brokers”, Gürsel argues, “are the people who act as intermediaries for images through acts such as commissioning, evaluating, licensing, selling, editing, and negotiating” (2012: 72).

Through a wide range of cases in New York, Paris, and Istanbul, Gürsel shows how decisions are made about taking, selling, or publishing photographs based on the broker’s expectations about the represented event in the image, the way in which it will appeal to publishers, and the way in which it should look like in order to be intelligible to the targeted audience. For instance, Gürsel (forthcoming) explains how the images discussed in a seminar for aspiring photojournalists in Istanbul are interpreted differently by photojournalists from different parts of the world, not just based on diverging cultural frameworks, but equally on their experience within the photojournalism industry, their own ideas about what constitutes a “good” photograph, and their own emotional attachment to certain photographs (e.g. Turkish photojournalists in the seminar had a harder time photographing victims of the 2003 bombing of the British Consulate in Istanbul). While intermediary images work in a different way in the Egyptian film industry, above all because they are mostly dismissed in the film contrary to the wire photos that are eventually published, one will be able to observe a continuity between Gürsel’s emphasis on the knowledge brought by different brokers to their decisions on given images as well as the description of film scouting in Egypt below.

Intermediary images, all in all, enhance the filmmaker’s ability to imagine in the present some aspect of the eventual film product, by anchoring individual and collective imagination concerning some aspect of the film-in-the-making. As Strandvad notes with regard to screenwriting meetings in a Danish film, creative ideas remain uncertain until they are given a material form: “as long as an idea is presented verbally, it may be easily changed. To carry an idea further, it is essential to write” (2011: 289). This point can easily be extended to visual ideas in Egyptian film production, whose inscription in image delegates the visual labor that would otherwise be incumbent on additional crew members – say, to describe the *neyaba*, or to scout it in person, instead of taking a picture of it. Without this delegation, the operation of trying to estimate, at any point in the filmmaking process, what the film-in-the-making will be like would be different, if not quite difficult. By holding intermediary images, the crew members have a seemingly objective arbiter to their discussion – something which would be missing if they argue without any physical support. As I argue in the next section, however, it is important to remember that this apparent symmetry is only observable with respect to the viewpoint of certain crew members in the Egyptian film industry, whose authority legitimates their seemingly immediate interaction with the image.

Art and Authority in Egyptian Film Production

Both *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses* are, according to industry insiders, “artistic” movies. The label “artistic” (*fanni*) is used in two ways in the contemporary Egyptian film industry. On one hand, it serves as a tool of professional “boundary-work” (Ganti, 2012: 7), whereby movie projects with

an artistic mission are deemed to have more refined objectives and crew members than movies with a “commercial” (*togari*) mission. While the artistic movie is evaluated according to its aesthetic appeal, the commercial movie is evaluated according to its ability to sell in local theatres and in Gulf-based satellite television channels. All Egyptian filmmakers hold this distinction, even though what is designated as “artistic” is not always the object of a common agreement. Thus, *Décor* was vaunted by its production team as an artistic project, destined to put New Century Film Production on the map of international film festivals, even though many Egyptian filmmakers contended that it was a “commercial” project by virtue of being produced with big-name stars in a big production house. The emic distinction between “commercial” and “artistic” films obscures the fact that all movies produced in today’s industry are commercial in some way, though they seek to reap profits in two generally different markets. While movies labeled as “commercial” are destined for local and regional exhibition, “artistic” movies like *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses* are aimed at international festivals, which is why they are sometimes known as “festival films” (*aflam lel-mahraganat*).

On the other hand, the label “artistic” designates a set of filmmaking practices associated with the physical appearance of the final film product. Out of all the workers on an Egyptian film crew, only a limited set of “artistic” workers – above all, the screenwriter, the director, the cinematographer, the art director, the stylist, the editor, and the composer – have direct authority over some “artistic” aspect of the final film (e.g., the actors, the lighting, the set design, the costumes, the soundtrack, and so on). By contrast, executive workers like assistant-directors, lighting technicians, and hair stylists are not professionally required to be concerned with the film’s appearance: in this sense, they are only required to execute the logistical and technical work necessary to enact the artistic workers’ decisions. Many commercial film industries make a

similar distinction between “artistic” and “executive” labor, most notably the French film industry with its tradition of *auteur* cinema (see Darré, 2006). However, unlike Hollywood’s “above-the-line” vs. “below-the-line” distinction (see Frank, 2012; Ortner, 2013), the dissociation between “art” (*fann*) and “execution” (*tanfiz*) places all artistic workers above the proverbial line, and anyone dealing with execution below it (which is not the case in Hollywood, where higher-level producers are above the line). As I will detail in the section on *Poisonous Roses*, execution is no less a creative exercise than the decisions made by artistic workers, yet it always occurs in the context of a particular relation of authority, between someone who decides over the film’s “artistic” aspect and someone who does the work needed to enact this decision.

All crew members contribute to the labor necessary to make the film, including the production of intermediary images, but this labor is submitted to the word of each artistic team’s head and, ultimately, to the director’s “vision” (*ro’ya*). Egyptian filmmakers generally agree that the director is the only crew member with a complete, overarching view of the film-in-the-making, and his prime skill consists precisely in his ability to materialize his/her vision in the film product^v. This can be explained by the director’s position of authority in the industry’s hierarchy: after all, the director might not actually “see” the whole film in his head, but given that all crew members believe that he can “see” it, then all his concrete, real-time decisions are taken to be manifestations of his overall vision, which gets to be materialized in the final film, thereby enacting his “vision” as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ahmad Fawzi Saleh, the director of *Poisonous Roses*, would regularly express disbelief at the common view that the director “knows what he is doing” at all times. The film is an ever-evolving process, he insists, involving a constant effort to “see”, for instance, what a particular location would look like on camera; or to anticipate what it will look like in the film. This effort, in Ahmad’s case, was supplemented by

his claim to have watched 20,000 images, including innumerable scouting pictures of the tanneries district where he was about to shoot, as well as a great number of movies, paintings, and photographs, where he sought inspiration on image composition, camerawork technique, and/or editing style.

In Ahmad’s narrative, images serve as a kind of visual capital – a stock of material out of which he seeks to craft his own cinematic style. Yet intermediary images bear a more direct, practical influence over the film-in-the-making. I have already discussed how intermediary images help in visualizing, in the present, some aspect of the final film, but it is important to remember that this visualization is sometimes geared to “the next operation”, not the end product in itself. Thus, when the art directors in *Décor* watch scouting pictures (see next section), their comments are not simply about what would look nice in the film, but how they could design a set in this location, or how they would furnish it with appropriate props. When locations are secured, both art directors in *Décor* would go to their design software in order to image a 3D version of the set, and they would scroll through long series of prop pictures on their smartphones whenever they needed to determine what the furniture should look like on set. One can distinguish two important moments here: one where the art directors try to see how the location can be transformed while selecting it; and another where they actively plan the transformation of a given location, all the while eyeing the set’s look in the film. To these ends, a variety of intermediary images are used to discuss artistic choices – of materials, of colors, of props. These choices, in turn, are nested in a socio-technical sequence, where choices about set design or props can only be physically delimited once a decision is reached about the shooting location. The same can be said about lighting or camera movement: artistic choices made by the cinematographer and the director, in each operation, are limited by earlier choices, in scouting.

Hence, it is important to accurately try to see not only what the final film will look like, but how the film-in-the-making will be made – a necessity which is presumably not exclusive to the Egyptian film industry, yet whose consequences have not been adequately described in existing ethnographies of media production. Hoek’s work in the Bangladeshi film industry (2014) stands as an illuminating exception in this regard. With a particular interest in showing how ‘obscene’ material is made visible/invisible in the making of an action movie, Hoek shows at every juncture in the production process how filmmakers anticipate the inclusion of these ‘cut-pieces’ in a later stage. Obscenity, therefore, is not simply present in the final film: it is made visible/invisible in screenwriting when a producer asks to add narrative ‘hooks’ where a cut-piece will be inserted; or in shooting when ‘obscene’ material is shot away from the main studios; or in postproduction when different cuts of the same movie are made to be shown to the censor board or to the local cinema halls in rural Bangladesh.

In short, the necessity to consider both the contents of the movie and its anticipated production process is as pressing to the Egyptian art director trying to see how a location might be arranged while scouting as it is to the Bangladeshi director trying to create sufficient visual material to edit a film with good ‘cut-pieces’. In both these instances, the crew member – helped with various intermediary images, as I will describe in the following sections – seeks to plan *both* an upcoming, unfinished, uncertain operation *and* the eventual film. This observation may be crystallized in the director’s shooting script (*dikoupaj*), which is often modified in the course of shooting itself, with an eye on how scenes will be structured in editing, and how this change can improve over the film’s quality in the director’s eyes.

What should be clear, by now, is that visualization is not simply bound by a single filmmaker’s mind, but equally by her authority over artistic decisions and her skill in trying to tie

intermediary images with the eventual film. I shall illustrate how this skill is enacted with specific scouting examples in *Décor* and *Poisonous Roses*, although I would argue that this skill is equally important to all “artistic” operations in film production, whether in screenwriting, scouting, casting, set design, fitting, shooting, editing, coloring, mixing, etc. In each case, filmmakers try to anticipate what a given character, a given shooting location, a given actor, a given set, a given take, a given sequence of takes, a given color palette, or even a given sound or music track will “look like” in the film.

While the beginnings of production seem most uncertain – I can still recall Ahmad trying to modify the 11th version of his scenario in *Poisonous Roses* with great angst – the instability of the film-in-the-making is reduced as the production process goes on. In this sense, Ahmad would say that he could “see” his protagonist better once he had chosen the actor (Ibrahim el-Nagari), or that he could “see” his story better once he had looked at the material on the location editor’s computer. This is not just a product of the iconic link between the intermediary image and the final film, but equally of the cumulativeness of artistic decisions, where an initially formless script (e.g., the protagonist as written in a scenario) gradually turns into a concrete image (e.g., Ibrahim el-Nagari on screen).

Scouting in *Décor*

Going back to the opening vignette, one can very clearly sense Farghalli’s irritation when Setohy tells him that he has no photo of the *neyaba* to show. This forfeited scouting picture is vital to Farghalli in two ways. On one hand, it gives him a goodish visual idea about the *neyaba*’s

surroundings, which should help him in organizing his daily logistics (e.g. parking shooting cars, storing equipment, and so on). On the other, and perhaps more importantly, it allows him to show artistic crew members what the shooting location looks like, so that they may decide whether or not it fits their demands, whether it looks good on screen or not, and eventually, whether Farghalli should secure the location. I did not talk with Farghalli about this specific incident, but I presume that these concerns were very much on his mind while talking to Setohy, because by virtue of his position as line producer in the ongoing preparations of *Décor*, he was expected to coordinate all logistical elements necessary to the shooting. This duty involves showing potential shooting locations to the artistic crew in order to ease their choice, which means that Farghalli wants a physical photograph of the *neyaba*, a most practical alternative to going on location, in person, to scout.

Being the prime mediator between “executive” legwork in production and artistic crew members, Farghalli’s personal interest in having a scouting picture of the *neyaba* is surely not in trying to anticipate what the location will look like on screen^{vi}, but to give the artistic crew a good idea about this look. To describe the building as Setohy had done, with a mention of the building’s shape and color, would not be sufficient in the absence of a photograph to see, physically, what the building can look like on camera. And since the scene in which the *neyaba* in *Décor* needed to convince the viewer that the main characters were making a deposition to the attorney, taking a building which did not look like a *neyaba*, or did not instill a certain sense of officialdom, would have gone against the artistic crew’s demands. By contrast with Farghalli and Setohy, then, Asem Ali and Nihal Farouk (both art directors in *Décor*) would comment to each other on scouting pictures by pointing to those aesthetic elements in the location’s design that did or did not match their criteria; Tarek Hefny (cinematographer) would comment on the location’s

visible light sources, its partitioning, its colors; Ahmad Abdalla (director) would comment on the location’s overall appearance, or on its adequacy to the characters and the plot, or on its suitability to the envisaged camera movement.

When everyone was gathered around Farghalli’s computer to watch scouting pictures, each crew member would presumably “see” something different in the same image: to the art directors, it is a document of the way in which the eventual location can be transformed in order to give it the aspect that they desire; to the cinematographer, it gives an idea about the location’s “natural” light and atmosphere, and how it can be adjusted to give a particular texture to the final film’s image; to the director, it gives a general idea of the space in which he can stage his story and recreate his overall vision of the film. While this overarching *ro’ya* is only attributed to the director, it remains evident that crew members in all artistic teams – in cinematography, in art direction, in styling – are involved in visualizing some aspect of the final film with the help of various intermediary images. Art directors, for instance, will try to anticipate which transformations to the built environment are needed to build an appropriate set according to their own aesthetic sense, their reading of the scenario, and the director’s demands. With the help of ‘reference’ images, as they are known in the industry, as well as various drawn or digitized set designs, art directors try to predict what their set design should look like on screen, and what steps will be needed in order to build it, regardless of what the director can think.

[Insert Fig. 3 with caption: Screen still from the contentious apartment in *Décor*, with Mostafa (one of the protagonists, played by experienced actor Maged el-Kedwany) pictured by the door. Copyright: New Century Film Production]

With all eyes on Farghalli’s screen, then, watching him scrolls by the scouting pictures, one can easily imagine how the artistic crew’s expectations concerning the eventual shooting location (and, indeed, the eventual film) sometimes came into conflict. When choosing one of the main apartments in *Décor*, for example, Asem Ali adamantly refused to shoot in an apartment that both Ahmad Abdalla and Tarek Hefny liked very much. As he explained, the apartment’s living room did not have enough “angles” (*zawayya*), by which he meant that wherever the camera is positioned, the image’s background will be a flat wall, which he deemed aesthetically unpleasing by contrast with an imagined apartment with several layers in depth. Asem’s opposition remained strong whenever he was shown pictures of the apartment in question, and even after he viewed it. Yet he eventually gave in to Ahmad Abdalla’s choice, because he recognized the director’s ultimate authority over artistic decisions. While instructive with regards to the role of authority in settling artistic disputes, this incident shows how, even when the exact same intermediary image is seen, the kind of vision involved is determined by one’s role on set and, specifically, one’s authority over matters which will eventually actualize the film. This situation compounds the imponderability involved in making a film: if creative possibilities can seem indefinite to the single director, one can only imagine how many more are envisaged by the whole artistic crew, and how their expectations can not only conflict at times, but also become mutually unintelligible. This is not a strictly linguistic matter of miscommunication, but a very material difficulty in communicating images that approximate divergent expectations about the film’s look. The necessary negotiations over this look, then, are mediated by conversations among crew members *and* intermediary images. Given the particularities of each filmmaking process and its artistic members’ aesthetic sensitivities, the particular negotiations that I have witnessed in Egyptian film production may not compare to

similar negotiations in other film industries, but I would suggest that the role of intermediary images would be comparable across these industries.

Scouting in *Poisonous Roses*

The scouting process in *Poisonous Roses*, a film in which I worked as an assistant-director, further illustrates the importance of intermediary images in mediating mutually unintelligible ideas. While we were still scouting, in accordance with Ahmad Fawzi Saleh’s wishes, I asked Edward Nabil (production manager) to look for five missing locations with a limited budget in mind: a gas station where the working-class protagonist’s sister works at night, a bourgeois bar where the protagonist meets with his middle-class love interest, a hospital where the protagonist’s lover works, the protagonist’s apartment in the tanneries, and a “high-class” apartment in Cairo, where the protagonist’s love interest lives. Ahmad and I gave Edward some short verbal descriptions of what we wanted in each case, and we provided him with a printed scenario to give him an idea of the movie’s world. A few days later, Edward triumphantly walked back in the office, boasting that he had secured several locations. When Ahmad and I asked to see pictures, he showed about one or two photographs of what he deemed to be “high-class” apartments, and one long-shot photograph of a gas station, all taken on his Samsung phone. Ahmad swiftly told Edward that the pictures were insufficient, since he (as a director) had no idea about the look of various angles within each location. Edward proceeded to verbally describe what each location looked like, yet Ahmad would not have it: he wanted to see every

angle, in each location, in picture, and he even methodically demonstrated to Edward how he should go about photographing potential locations.

[Insert Fig. 4 & 5 with caption: Exemplars from Edward’s scouting portfolio, showing the living room and the bedroom in an apartment scouted in Mohandessin, an upper-end neighborhood in Cairo]

When Edward went on further scouting rounds, he would bring back a more furnished portfolio of pictures, which eventually amounted to four or five “high-class” apartments, three hospitals, two gas stations, a few apartments in the tanneries, and a handful of bars. While Ahmad was impressed by the volume of images, he was not fully satisfied with the “high-class” apartments secured by Edward: some were oddly painted, some had unseemly furniture, and some were partitioned in inconveniencing ways (in Ahmad’s vision). When Ahmad and I would watch these pictures, he would comment on the apartment’s color (which would be difficult to change in set design, given our limited budget), the furniture (which would often need to be changed when props are chosen), the bathtub’s size (since he had a particular scene in mind which required a big bathtub), the kitchen’s position vis-à-vis the dining room (since he wanted enough space to shoot a one-shot take between the kitchen and the living room when the protagonist first enters his love interest’s house). These comments, which were invariably made by Ahmad whenever we discussed scouting, show how he was aware both of “the next operation” (e.g., how will walls be painted) and the overall film (e.g., how will the color palette in the love interest’s apartment match the film’s overall palette).

When I showed pictures to Omar Abdelwahab, then the art director, and Houssam Habib, then the cinematographer, they expressed similar views concerning the apartments. The artistic crew’s indecision led Edward on more and more scouting rounds. Edward grew increasingly dissatisfied with this indecision, especially given that the low-cost yet “high-class” apartments that he had found were being occupied by lenders over time. As he kept telling me, he thought that he had brought apartments with the exact specifications given by Ahmad (including a kitchen opening on a dining room, a large bathroom, “high-class” furniture), yet Ahmad was still not convinced. When I asked Ahmad what he had in mind, he would give me some evasive verbal detail: he would sometimes mention that he wanted a “minimalist” apartment, a word that I had seen him discuss with Omar and Adel el-Siwi, his artistic adviser and one of Egypt’s foremost contemporary artists. Yet I could not make out exactly what Ahmad wanted until he showed me a folder with generic pictures of “minimalist” apartments, which seemed to have been gathered from Google images. We showed the folder to Edward, who brought back pictures of new apartments in a similar style. Interestingly, Edward kept referring to the new apartments as “high-class”, just like the old ones, yet the thin epithet that we had all been using masked a vast difference between the two types of locations, in addition to indexing a class difference between Edward and us^{vii}.

[Insert Fig. 6 & 7 with caption: Exemplar of Ahmad Fawzi’s list of “minimalist” apartments, showing a living room and a bedroom]

This example illustrates how “executing” an artistic demand is never a mechanical matter, though executive crew members like Edward have no say in the final film’s appearance.

Rather, execution relies on a representation of what the director or the art director or the cinematographer has in mind, which is admittedly difficult without tangible, visual proxies to anchor the discussion. In this context, it was vital to have enough scouting pictures to show Ahmad what a location looks like, just as it was necessary to show Edward some pictures of “minimalist” apartments in order to better evaluate the kinds of “high-class” apartments that he needed to scout. These intermediary images are not only useful to the individual artist’s creation, but also to his/her discussions with fellow filmmakers. What should be clear, by now, is the obvious asymmetry between the verbal descriptions given by Ahmad to Edward and the intermediary images exchanged between them. Indeed, it would seem like whenever a visual aid is available, the artistic crew will resort to it in order to refine their idea about a location’s appearance in the film, and to discuss it in more concrete detail. Though trying to estimate the final film’s image is not impossible without this aid, it is certainly made easier by it, especially when artistic and executive crew members are communicating.

Concluding Remarks

Farghalli’s initial question – “what does it look like?” – captures the way in which filmmakers try to anticipate some aspect of the final film with a physical intermediary image. This imaginative process is usually seen to exist in the filmmaker’s mind: as Ganti briefly notes, “All of the directors I met asserted that they had their films ‘running in their heads,’ discussing them in very visual terms, commonly describing onscreen action in relation to camera angles and movements” (2012: 223-224). Ganti’s overall analysis centers on the social relations of

production in Bollywood, which is why she gives little detail about the process of production itself; a contrast made evident when comparing Ganti’s work with Grimaud’s earlier monograph, where he follows “the drift of the scenario until shooting, shooting until screening, screening until other scenarios, with its anchoring points, its little displacements, and sudden bifurcations” (2003: 12). With a similar objective in mind, this article has traced the way in which Egyptian filmmakers try to see and foresee each “artistic” element under their authority in a given filmmaking process. While this is hypothetically possible on a purely oral level, it is in practice overwhelmingly mediated by intermediary images, which act as material anchors to ongoing discussions concerning the film-in-the-making, both in terms of its upcoming operations and its eventual final form.

One could argue, at this juncture, that since crew members have a pre-existing capacity to imagine the film without the help of intermediary images, whatever images they use in assisting this capacity cannot affect the social process of film production, which would thereby remain “identical”. To some extent, of course, the stylist evaluating an actor’s final look with a fitting picture or with the naked eye imagines the look in a similar way, but this does not mean that this visualization process is essentially “the same”. In one case, the stylist has some physical evidence to imagine what the look is like: the stylist’s mind is thereby distributed between the actor’s actual look, the picture, her imagination, and perhaps a conversation with the director. In the other case, the stylist’s mind only goes back and forth between the look and her idea about the look. In this sense, I argue, whatever is visualized is different with the intervention of intermediary images, especially when more than one filmmaker is involved in the discussion. In one case, we have an icon-like image establishing a direct physical link between itself (e.g., the

actress’ look in the fitting picture) and the film’s image (e.g., the actress’ look on screen); in the other case, we just have the stylist’s internal image of the actor now and on screen.

To be clear, I do not believe that intermediary images are necessary or sufficient to imagine the final film, yet I maintain that these images *co-constitute* the filmmaker’s ongoing visualization in a way which is not identical to visualization in their absence. To conclude on an example in *Décor*, it was never uncommon to see Asem and Nihal (the art directors) discussing a particular prop choice orally, and agree right afterwards on sending reference pictures to each other via smartphone in order to settle what prop style they were envisioning. These pictures, materially anchored on screen, are not marginal to what both art directors would have otherwise imagined: rather, I would argue that these pictures are integral to the thinking of art directors on props, and that their material existence is qualitatively different from whatever mental image might have been produced by their conversation. Imagining the film, here, is simultaneously and materially anchored in intermediary images designed to approximate some aspect of an upcoming artistic operation or, indeed, the final film. This is not just by virtue of the visual proximity between intermediary images and the film, but also by virtue of reducing the range of artistic possibilities on the artistic crew’s minds with concrete, physical images, whose discussion can expose potential miscomprehensions, or narrow down creative possibilities. In this way, the polysemic properties of the intermediary image are channelled into a specific, socio-technical use, whereby the current image, the next filmmaking operation, and the final film’s appearance are simultaneously and materially made present to the filmmaker’s mind.

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ⁱ Note on transliteration: I use a simplified version of the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) transliteration chart, reflecting the phonetic particularities of Egyptian Arabic and omitting diacritical signs for the sake of readability. Proper nouns, however, are transliterated in the form preferred by my interlocutors, or in the form prescribed by convention (e.g., Youssef Chahine, not Yusef Shahin).

ⁱⁱ Moreover, I have eschewed any extensive discussion of the film’s sound, though a great deal of work and anticipation goes into this aspect of the film-in-the-making. What should be noted is that the film’s sound, much like its image, goes through a variety of intermediary stages between on-set recording, sound editing, soundtrack composition, until the final mix. Throughout this process, it is constantly reworked by concerned crew members (including the sound engineer, the composer, and the mixer) with the help of a variety of intermediary documents, which are both visual (e.g., tracing sound waves on Pro Tools software, synchronizing image with sound) and aural (e.g., listening to glitches in on-set recording).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Décor* is a black and white psychological drama about Maha, a young female art director working in a crass commercial movie with her young male art director husband, Sharif. Maha is dissatisfied by the hurried pace and low quality of work in this film, yet Sharif tries to convince her to stick with it to the end: one day, while rearranging an item on set, Maha suddenly finds herself playing the main character in her movie’s world: a young school teacher, mother to a 9 year-old daughter and married to a middle-aged cab driver, Mostafa. Distraught by her passage to the movie’s world, Maha keeps telling Mostafa that she is imagining this world, and that she is actually married to Sharif, and that her mother, alive in Mostafa’s world, has ‘actually’ passed away in Sharif’s world. On another day, Maha suddenly finds herself back in her original world, married to Sharif, yet she is still distraught by her experience in Mostafa’s world, and she starts thinking that she might be mad. She keeps alternating back and forth between both worlds, even going to a psychiatrist in both worlds, as she remains undecided about which world is the ‘real’ one. The plotline, according to the director Ahmad Abdalla, is meant to highlight the variety of choices available to everyone (and every woman in particular) in their lives, since life is not black-and-white, but made of many shades of grey (hence, in part, the choice of shooting *Décor* in black and white).

Ward Masmoum is the story of Saqr, a young working-class man in Cairo’s tanneries district (*el-Madabe8*). Saqr is very well-educated, having finished a law degree in French, and he aspires to pass the bar and get out of the tanneries, yet he is still stuck in working inside the district. Saqr lives with his mother, Watfa, and his sister, Taheya, who is very possessive and seeks to keep him in the tanneries at all costs. She works a menial job in a gas station to sustain the family, since Saqr is not working as regularly as he should to make a decent living. One day, Saqr’s best friend, Yehia, is injured by the toxic fumes in his tannery, and he is quickly transported to a nearby hospital, where Saqr meets a French-speaking, middle-class doctor, Nahed. Saqr starts a relationship with Nahed, and he introduces her to his middle-class milieu, yet their relationship starts falling apart (for various reasons in different versions of the scenario) and Saqr is forced to return to the tanneries. Since, at the time of writing, the movie is still being shot, and since Fawzi (the screenwriter-director) is still adjusting the plotline, I am not exactly sure how the story will end, yet it is very much a tale of hope and defeated hope, as well as a visually attractive look at the working-class world of the tanneries, and its class struggle with Egyptian bourgeois society.

^{iv} Several visual anthropologists (including Pinney, 2001; 2004; MacDougall 2006; Pink 2006) have already suggested a shift in attention towards the corporeal ways in which we interact with images. Pinney provocatively

argues that the disembodied “aesthetic” reception of visual artworks needs to be counterbalanced by “corpoethetics”, that is, “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people (except Kantians and modernists) have with artworks” (Pinney 2001: 158). The visual, here, stimulates an *embodied, sensory* response, and this is precisely what can be understood by visual analysis which cannot be understood “by other means”. While this argument is generally suggestive when considering the embodied nature of interactions with images in the film-in-the-making, it remains insufficient to explain the role of intermediary images in concrete filmmaking processes. Contrary to the “finished” artworks in Pinney’s analysis, these images are not meant to be appreciated in any corpothetic sense, and the sensory responses produced by their examination are subdued to their expected effect, which is to materialize (immediately, to the filmmaker) what a particular location, a particular set design, or a particular actor will look like (later, in the film).

^v Interestingly, the only dissenting opinions to this otherwise consensual idea come from film directors themselves, such as Ahmad Abdalla, who has told me that the film’s overall vision is collaboratively fashioned by the creative crew, or Daoud Abdel Sayed, who argues that he (as a director) has no visual idea of the film, though he has a philosophical “vision” of what he wants to present to the audience. Disagreements over a director’s overarching vision are rare among artistic crew members, since a director will rarely hire someone with whom he cannot agree over basic principles. However, in circumstances where a director is forced to work with a particular crew member, which is often the case with stars imposed by a production company, artistic disagreements over a director’s vision can occur and lead to clashes on set. These clashes, in my estimation, are as much about artistic disagreement as they are about the authority of the director over all artistic matters, since this authority is rarely ever challenged openly on set. One could evidently relate numerous stories about the way in which executive crew members mock, dismiss, or disagree with a director’s “vision”, but this resistance has no implication for the final film’s artistic appearance, which is always submitted to the director’s authority.

^{vi} Not all actions posed by all crew members are always aimed at trying to visualize the final film. For instance, when I went to scout potential apartments for two of the film’s main characters with Setohy, I witnessed him walking around the neighbourhood, looking for apartments whose exterior fit the description given by the artistic crew, asking porters whether they had free apartments in their buildings and – whenever apartments were available – photographing the apartment from various angles with his digital camera. One cannot reasonably assume that, whenever Setohy was looking at a building, or discussing with a porter, or taking a snapshot, he was constantly thinking about the apartment’s look on screen, or even its logistical suitability. However, with a limited description of the apartment in mind, as well as (in some cases) a ‘reference’ image to guide his search, Setohy participates to the narrowing down of creative options successively presented to the key crew on Farghalli’s computer.

^{vii} Indeed, the division of labor between artistic and executive workers in Egyptian film production often maps on a class distinction, since “executive” workers tend to come from a more popular (*sha’bi*) background, with associated taste hierarchies, while “artistic” workers tend to be middle or upper-middle-class, with a more educated eye in Bourdieu’s sense (1984).