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Issues and Challenges Regarding the Local Distribution of Egyptian Independent Cinema

By Valentina Villani

This article focuses on the local distribution, circulation, and exhibition of independent Egyptian cinema. While independent Egyptian films have received awards at many international film festivals[1], these films are rarely distributed on the national scene. Seeking to better understand the reasons behind this issue, this contribution, through interviews[2] with film experts and practitioners, presents an overview on distribution channels that operate in Egypt and the issues that distributors and filmmakers face when locally distributing alternative films.

After introducing the overabundance of terms used to describe these films and why it matters to locally distribute them, this article first analyses challenges associated with making films in Egypt, and further it presents the core research findings on the distribution of independent films in the Egyptian context and why international film festivals alone are insufficient to guarantee local distribution for these kinds of films. Lastly, this contribution ends with a set of ideas drawn from the interviewees about other possible distribution pathways.

Before introducing the issues of distribution, it is crucial to highlight that a plethora of terms exists to describe non-traditional films. Attempts to understand these terms and to define their filmmaking styles and narratives are fraught with challenges. In fact, even my interlocutors do not agree on which is the more appropriate term to define non-traditional films because the choice of term is often subjective. They have referred to this kind of cinema as “independent,”

1 For example, Ain Shams/Eye of the Sun (El Batout, 2007) won the Best Film Award in 2008 at the Taormina and Carthage Film Festivals. Microphone (Abdallah, 2010) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2010 and won the Golden Tanit at the Carthage Film Festival, among others. And Akher Ayyam el-Madinah/In the Last Day of the City (El Said, 2016) scooped the Grand Prix and the Jury of Youth Best Film Award at the Festival des 3 Continents in France.

2 The results of this research are drawn from interviews with film experts and practitioners, who I immensely thank for generously spending their precious time to answer my questions, despite their busy schedules. Youssef Shazly is the managing director at the Cairo art house Zawya, while Ahmed Sobky is the head of distribution; Hala Lotfy is the founder of Hassala Productions, a collectively run production company; and Alaa Karkouti is the CEO of the distribution company MAD Solutions. Additional interviewees included Mariz Kelada, a film studies scholar, former coordinator of the Jesuits Cairo Film School, and PhD student whose research focuses on precarious labourers in the Egyptian cinema industry and Maggie Morgan, filmmaker and film studies professor at the American University in Cairo.

"alternative," "art-house cinema," "new cinema," "non-mainstream," "non-commercial," or as "new wave cinema." In response to this abundance of terms, I have decided not to adopt any one specific term in this article. Instead, I refer to these movies using a range of terms, including the ones used by my interlocutors.

The main characteristics that these films have in common are analysed in Muhammad Mamduh's *The Democracy of a Medium: The Rise of Independent Cinema in Egypt* (2007), a book that can be seen as a turning point in the use of the term "independent films" in the Egyptian context. According to Mamduh, "independent films" opt for alternative and more realistic styles of storytelling and utilise low-budget techniques and unknown actors. For instance, Ibrahim El Batout in *Ithaki* (2005) and *Ain Shams/Eye of the Sun* (2008) as well as Ahmed Abdallah in *Heliopolis* (2009) ignored commercial market considerations and used digital cameras, non-professional actors, and personally funded their films. One of the key contributing factors to the increase in realistic approaches was the digital transformation of the industry that took place in the early 2000s. In fact, affordable film equipment and universally accessible sharing platforms were indisputable game changers for the production of low-budget films, whose production and distribution did not rely on the star system or popular genres (Ghazal, 2020, p. 9).

At this point, it is fundamental to ask why it matters that alternative films are shown locally. Over the course of our conversation, most of my interlocutors declared that distributing non-mainstream cinema means sharing unique Egyptian voices and narratives that are often unheard and absent from commercial cinema. In fact, independent filmmakers fight back against the mainstream, telling new stories about, for instance, societal problems. Moreover, avoiding the traditional tropes and melodramatic representations of "the Hollywood film-making style that dominates Egyptian cinema," allows these films to speak to viewers on a more realistic and personal level (Ghazal, 2020, p. 11).

Making movies in Egypt: Issues and obstacles

The first issue when it comes to making films anywhere in the world is financing, and this is especially true for the Egyptian alternative film industry. Scarcity of funds is one of the main reasons various filmmakers are not able to produce many films. Egyptian independent filmmakers rely on rare state funding, such as that offered by the Ministry of Culture Film Fund, or compete for contributions from national and regional film festivals, or cultural initiatives such as the Arab Fund for Art and Culture (AFAC). Unfortunately, according to my interlocutors, initiatives like these are not enough, and competition for funding is fierce.

Even if a filmmaker accepts working with a small budget, there is another concern that often discourages filmmakers from starting to work on a film: permits to shoot in open air are notoriously difficult to obtain (see figure 1). The decisive involvement of state-regulated institutions in film production in Egypt—such as for instance the Ministry of Interior, the Censorship Authority, the Cinematic Syndicate and the prefecture—means that filmmakers are required to obtain a range of different permits which are only required when shooting in external locations or when the camera is aimed outside at the street through a window (El Khachab, 2017). This fact discourages many from even entertaining the idea of film production in Egypt. Of course, there are those that try to bypass the system entirely. It is not uncommon for filmmakers to make films illegally or in secret (El Kachef, 2015).

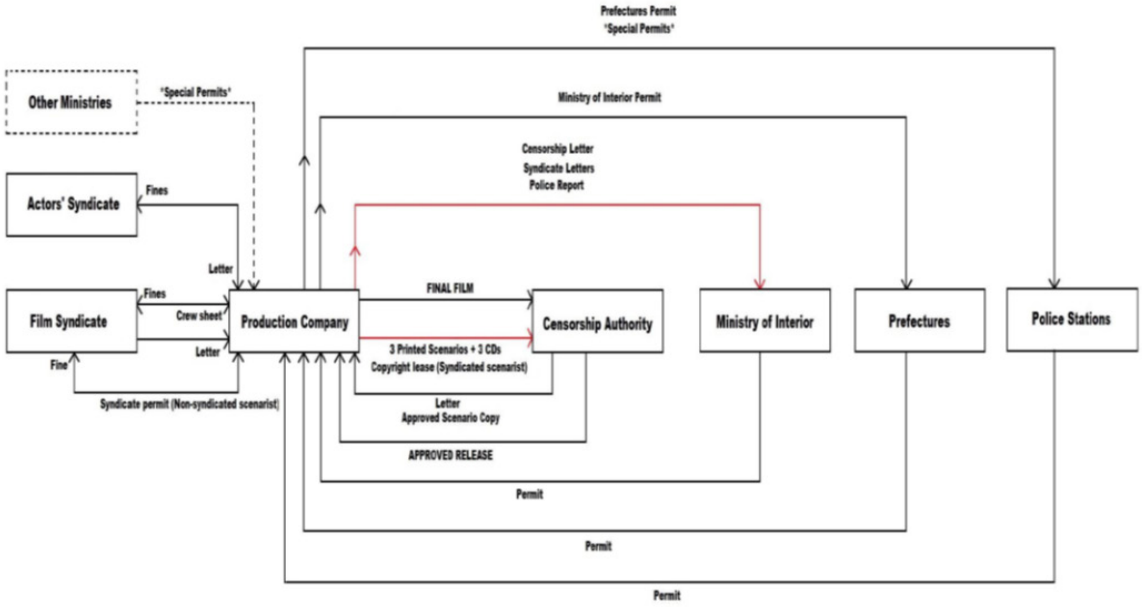

Figure 1. The Permit-Making Process (El Khachab, 2016, p. 75)

Censorship is another key issue when making films in Egypt. The Censorship Authority operates in Egypt through legal restrictions that often weigh more heavily on subversive storylines created by minority filmmakers or those working outside of commercial cinema. Moreover, this leads to a "form of self-censorship" because non-conventional storytelling is made unimaginable. Hence, the Censorship Authority functions on two different levels: on the one hand it works on a formal level via laws and regulations, and on the other hand it controls the industry on an informal level via self-censorship (El Khachab, 2017). Further, self-censorship is also amplified by the presence of conservative audiences who might discredit the filmmaker on public channels, such as social media or television, for voicing or expressing any non-traditional ideas (Morgan, 2021, pers. comm). Lastly, film production in Egypt is also very often constrained by copious forms of "informal control" (El Khachab, 2017, p.1) that have nothing to do with the state, such as people who disrupt the set.

Distribution processes and issues

Most of the interlocutors in this research lamented that the problems associated with independent film distribution in Egypt are vast and often seem insurmountable. The anthropologist and media scholar Chehab El Khachab explains that lack of access to local distribution channels is the main economic inequality between the commercial and independent sides of the Egyptian film industry. Among other concerns, he believes this is due to the "star system." In fact, independent movies cannot afford to have stars in their productions, especially male stars who cost more than female ones. Distributors are rarely tempted to distribute these movies because they do not want to take the risk of distributing a film with an alternative plot and without any well-known Egyptian actors (El Khachab, 2021).

An equally pressing problem is that the distribution system in Egypt operates as a closed circle or "monopoly," and it can entirely wreck the future of a film's exhibition if it has not curried favour with the right people (Khan in Lebow, 2016). In fact, the Egyptian cinema industry depends on an "interpersonal political economy" that includes both the commercial and independent cinema sectors as well as the media sector. The three often share the same labour market and infrastructure. Hence, everyone knows everyone else, and individuals instead of companies have "a monopoly over specific professions" (El Khachab, 2021).

Another issue highlighted by the film scholar and former coordinator of the Jesuits Cairo Film School, Mariz Kelada, is the undermined circuit of circulation. Small screenings at local events and exhibitions may bring viewers, but will not bring income. While drawing large audiences may seem like a positive, the circuit style can be a double-edged sword. When a film is screened multiple times in these "lesser" circuits, it becomes associated with a lack of prestige. Further, showing a film several times can lessen its chances of being bought by platforms or TV stations. Distributors are therefore placed in the unenviable position of having to decide between making an income and at least covering production costs or making the film accessible (Kelada, 2022, pers. comm.).

According to Ahmed Sobky, head of distribution at Zawya, budgets are another big issue. Many small films are made by unknown directors and star unknown actors. In these cases, additional funding is needed to attract an audience. However, most of the budget for these types of movies goes to production, which makes distribution even more difficult. Conversely, big movies tend to have large marketing budgets to match their large production budgets. This financial inequality puts independent filmmakers on the back foot from the outset; it is a mammoth challenge to convince an audience to come and watch a movie by an unknown filmmaker with such a low marketing budget. Another major factor affecting distribution is international, regional, and national competition, as each movie has to compete with a huge amount of other independent movies coming out every year (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.).

The CEO of MAD Solutions Alaa Karkouti emphasises the importance of doing market testing or test screenings, when possible, even if they require effort to organise. For example, he explains that in 2013, MAD Solutions distributed an Egyptian art-house film called *Rags & Tatters/Farsh wa Ghatait* (Abdallah, 2013). The film first went to the Toronto Film Festival. Before distributing it in Egypt, MAD Solutions started doing testing where 70 people from all backgrounds were shown the movie posters. By analysing the survey responses, MAD Solutions realised that it was a big risk to spend a lot of money on advertising. So, they chose to focus the advertising campaign on one main idea: the movie was only going to be screened for one week on seven screens. The film ended up staying in cinemas for five weeks, which was a huge success for the company. As Karkouti explains, every time a movie is distributed, a political and social analysis is needed to predict if its distribution will be in the company's favour. For example, when MAD Solutions distributed *Rags & Tatters*, it was right after the Egyptian revolution. At that time, a lot of people wanted to support local Egyptian art-house movies (Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.). The social climate and the timing of a release, therefore, also play important roles and also influence the success of the distribution plan.

Karkouti also suggests that labelling films as art-house is often unhelpful. This is because there is a general

lack of knowledge about these kinds of movies in the cinema industry in Egypt. Multiplex cinemas do not want to take a chance on these films, and they do not try to understand why it is important to show them. The government recognizes how these movies can create jobs locally or gain prestige internationally, but it does not consider supporting them a priority. And art-house cinemas cannot overcome these challenges without sufficient financial backing or marketing campaigns. According to Karkouti, the industry should be aware of how society is changing and then identify who the target audience is and how to reach it (Karkouti 2022 pers. comm.). But on a limited budget, there is only so far this strategy can take us.

For Karkouti, films are businesses first and foremost. Because audiences are not yet ready to explore these types of films, they do not make a lot of money and their filmmakers cannot consequently produce new films. For this reason, he underlines that these films need the support of the government – a model practised in Europe and elsewhere around the globe. For example, cinemas in France are required to have a percentage of French movies in cinemas, and some European countries give financial support programmes to small cinemas. The Egyptian government does not approve of the way these movies commonly depict Egypt, and it does not grasp why supporting art-house films can be valuable in the long run. In fact, Karkouti reports that the only support that MAD Solutions receives from the government is a tax discount: while foreign movies are taxed at a rate of 20%, Egyptian movies only pay a 5% tax rate.

Karkouti also explains that the process of distributing an independent film in Egypt is very much linked with the concept of "trusting your gut." With limited research conducted on the subject to date, relevant data are few and far between. So, in this industry, distributors have to rely on the experience they have gained in the field (Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.).

Another crucial question is whether distributing Egyptian alternative movies in international film festivals is useful for local distribution or not. Hala Lotfy, filmmaker and co-founder of Hassala, echoed all of the interlocutors by affirming that international film festivals are not enough to get independent Egyptian

films seen at home. Intriguingly, she thinks that being awarded at an international film festival can even prevent a film from reaching local venues. According to Lotfy, local distributors often play a role in restricting access to alternative films. By calling them “festival films,” they unwittingly diminish the value of the films by stigmatising them as unenjoyable, which may in fact be true since pleasing the audience is not generally the aim of independent filmmakers. So, while screening a film at an international film festival can bring it great publicity, when people come to watch the film in Egypt, they are often disappointed because their expectations are unmet (Lotfy, 2022, pers. comm.).

Like Lotfy, the filmmaker Maggie Morgan also found fault in the “festival film” label and agreed that it does not draw audiences to the cinema. In fact, to a general movie goer, this label means that the film is slow, hard to understand, and obscure. Sometimes the international film festival label is only flaunted as an accolade among people in the industry, but it does not draw people to the local screens. According to Morgan, audiences show up for independent films because of the alternative narratives and topics they depict and not based on their labels (Morgan, 2022, pers. comm.).

On the other hand, according to the film scholar Mariz Kelada, the local recognition of an alternative film often depends on it having first achieved international recognition, and this appreciation may in turn create other circuits of circulation and income for a filmmaker. Likewise, the managing director of Zawya, Youssef Shazly, believes that the fact that Egyptian films are presented in international festivals can only be seen as something positive. That said, some films are made with the sole intention of being shown in festivals, and they only target international audiences. According to Shazly, making local films for Western audiences is inherently problematic. The 2011 revolution, for example, was a very hot topic globally during the Arab Spring. However, some alternative films that depicted the revolution were filled with inaccuracies and failed to appreciate or even attempt to communicate the complexities of what was happening. Being tailored to audiences that did not really care about the finer details, these films missed the opportunity to authentically capture the nuance of the historical moment (Shazly, 2022, pers. comm.).

Ahmed Sobky from Zawya affirms that there is a lot of debate on this topic. He argues that when a movie premieres at an international film festival, it gets a stamp of approval from Western festivals, and consequently, it gets more opportunities in terms of distribution. However, this does not always translate to distribution opportunities back home. A lot of movies premiere at international festivals but then they do not get seen by anybody in Egypt. Having the stamp of approval of an international film festival can therefore have both negative and positive outcomes. Some people might have high expectations of the movie but get disappointed when they see it, whereas others might decide to watch a movie they would otherwise not have seen because of the international acclaim it has garnered. Sobky explains that this is a huge debate that is tied to Western people acting as gatekeepers and the ones who have the power to decide a film's fate. He believes that being screened at international film festivals should not be an independent film's only opportunity to gain traction (2022, pers. comm.).

Regarding the possibility of finding new ways to locally distribute independent films, my interlocutors reported some ideas and thoughts about possible alternative ways to distribute non-commercial films in Egypt. While "solving" the problem of independent film distribution in Egypt is not the aim of this research, these findings may nonetheless open up possible future topics of study.

The film studies scholar Mariz Kelada invites filmmakers and distributors to decide in which capacity they want to operate: Are they working in a commercial capacity? Are their efforts in service of social responsibility? Or are they pursuing popularity? Multiple steps are needed to make a film, and distribution is the last step of the circuit. So, the filmmaker's or distributor's ultimate intentions must be clear from the outset of the film's production. If a film is to inspire an underground movement, it probably needs to be popular. If it is intended to echo or inspire a cultural wave, it may need a critical audience. And these aims will affect the way in which these films are distributed (Kelada, 2022, pers. comm.).

Like Kelada, Sobky argues that the aim of the filmmakers and directors

behind the film should be prioritised above all else. The artists must have the will to keep pushing forward, while maintaining budgets and the necessary patience. While they wait for results, they need to get their priorities straight. Are they trying to reach people, make an income, get international recognition, or end up on a big platform? He explains that while so many different "solutions" have come up over the years, they always end up following the same patterns. Because without big budgets, experimenting is risky (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.).

While some of these distribution strategies might not make the filmmakers a lot of money, they can still achieve positive outcomes. Impact distribution is one such strategy. In this instance, the aim is not to gain money from the movie. Instead of just having the audience watch the film, they interact with the audience to effect change. A good example of this strategy is the film *Lift Like a Girl* (Mayye Zayed 2020), an observational feature documentary about a young female weightlifter. For this film, the marketing campaign focused on reaching young girls in order to engage with them and talk about gender inequality in the athletic community (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.). The strategy was successful because it ignited social dialogue on the topic.

Lotfy from Hassala explains that the Egyptian government does not wish audiences be educated, and it intentionally chooses to screen what she calls "copies of American films." Karkouti agrees that without the support of the government, it is difficult to persuade cinemas to show these movies. As a result, MAD Solution continues to use its own resources to drive independent film distribution in Egypt (Lotfy & Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.).

Controversially, Lotfy also makes the case for the role of piracy in increasing audience numbers. She argues that strict copyright laws result from capitalism, and people in Egypt have to obey these laws only because the country was forced to sign an anti-piracy treaty to please the Western world. For Lotfy, eliminating piracy deprives the Egyptian people of their own culture (Lotfy, 2022, pers. comm.). What Lofty means here is clearly exemplified by an event that happened while producing one of her films. In fact, she explains that in *Al-khoroug lel-nahar/Coming*

Forth by Day (2012) she paid 6,000 Egyptian pounds for the rights of one of Umm Kulthum's songs. In 2018, she wanted the license for the same song, but the Egyptian government-owned multimedia company *Sawt al-Qahira* (Sono Cairo) owned its rights. So she was obliged to pay 100,000 Egyptian pounds for less than one minute of music. For Lotfy, this is very disappointing because she believes that having access to her own heritage should be free. In fact, the filmmaker thinks that the Egyptian people should have the rights to Umm Kulthum's songs. She questions who is allowed to enjoy culture in light of constricting copyright laws.

Regarding video-on-demand and streaming platforms, the filmmaker Maggie Morgan acknowledges that they have changed the scene to a small extent because they are starting to buy independent films, shorts, and documentaries. Countering this perspective, Karkouti and Sobky underline the pitfalls of these new platforms, arguing that they do not pay enough to keep the industry afloat. While further discussion of this topic is outside the scope of this article, the opportunities that online streaming platforms present to independent filmmakers are indeed worthy pursuits for further study.

Over the course of our conversation, most of my interlocutors admitted that distributing independent films in Egypt is a constant struggle. While talking with them, I saw a collective willingness to present alternative films to the public and to cultivate a wider and more fervent local reception for these films. According to all my interviewees, independent films impart a form of higher knowledge and consequently they admitted that audiences in these films are required to critically think and to not only feel entertained. That is why some of my interlocutors acknowledged that labelling a film as "art-house" or a "festival film" is often unhelpful and may discourage audience attendance. In fact, quite often audiences are unfamiliar with the alternative film's language, image and narrative style because acquiring this familiarity is a gradual process that requires time and audiences need to be guided through it.

What I also believe is needed here is research and new strategies. As Karkouti from MAD Solutions underlined, the process of distributing an alternative film in Egypt is very much linked to the concept of "trusting" the distributors' "gut" because, given the lack of data and research on this subject, distributors mainly rely on the experience they have gained in the field. Research also means finding new strategies that may be guided by cultural policies, and that distributors can use to accompany and guide audiences. In fact, the critical role of distributors and the present infrastructures of film exhibition and distribution demand further study because there is an imperative need to ask questions about how these films can find audiences and through which channel. This is crucial because avoiding the traditional tropes and melodramatic representations of "the Hollywood film-making style" that overshadow Egyptian cinema means addressing the issue of how cinema can speak to viewers on a more realistic and personal level, create a shared space for social and political engagement and eventually impact society.

I wish to express my gratitude to Hala Lotfy, Alaa Karkouti, Ahmed Sobky, Youssef Shazly, Mariz Kelada, Maggie Morgan and Irit Neidhardt for generously spending their precious time to answer my questions, despite their busy schedules. A huge thank you also goes to Nour El Safoury and Sabine Abi Saber for all the productive suggestions they made and for taking the time to read my article.

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العدد الخامس من شخصيات
شتاء ٢٢٠٢/ربيع ٣٢٠٢
البنى التحتية للسينما

نشر قائمة نشر «عصمت» و شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس"
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يصدر «البنى التحتية للسينما» عن برنامج الزمالة المقام في ٢٢٠٢ من خلال شراكة بين شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس" وقائمة نشر «عصمت».
للمزيد من المعلومات يرجى زيارة الرابط بالأسفل:
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شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة «ناس» هي شبكة تضم شاشات ونوادي سينما عربية غير حكومية ذات رؤى برمجية تعتمد على التفاعل المباشر مع الجمهور. تسعى «ناس» من خلال عملها إلى توسيع نطاق الأفلام المتاحة للجمهور العربي وخلق حوار حول السينما وتشجيع وجود أنماط متعددة لتجربة المشاهدة الجماعية للأفلام. يلتزم مشتركي/ات «ناس» بتقديم برامج أفلام منتظمة، ويلتزمون/ن باتجاه الشبكة لتغيير ديناميات عرض ومشاهدة الأفلام في المنطقة. تضمَ الشبكة مبادرات تسعى من خلال برمجتها وفعالياتها ومساحاتها واستراتيجيات التواصل مع جمهورها لدعم ثقافة سينمائية حيوية ومستدامة بهدف تطوير تفاعل الجمهور مع الأفلام. تنظَم «ناس» سلسلة لقاءات وبرامج أفلام متداولة وورش إقليميَة لكوكبتها النامية من الفضاءات السينمائية الغير حكوميَة. و هي جمعية مسجلة في برلين تمارس عملها اقليمياً بالتعاون مع مشتركي/ات الشبكة في البلدان العربية المختلفة.

عصمت

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