

شخصيات

العدد الخامس

شتاء ٢٠٢٢ / ربيع ٢٠٢٣

Shakhsyat issue #5

Winter 2022/ Spring 2023

On Positionality and Filmmaking: The 'Me' in the Story

By Farah Hallaba

Over the past two years, I have been in conversation with Egyptian and Arab filmmakers about the concept of positionality and what it can offer them when used as a creative tool in their filmmaking processes. I conducted fifteen visual anthropology workshops in which we discussed processes of meaning-making, conceptions of truth(s) and power dynamics in storylines.

During the workshops, we unpacked these concepts through discussions where we collectively reflected on the workshop participants' practices in the independent filmmaking industry, on how they come up with their films' stories, and on the dynamics between filmmakers and the characters in their films. I was inspired to continue these dynamic discussions beyond the workshops.

When I was first introduced to anthropology, a professor told me that anthropologists are storytellers who explore socio-cultural narratives. In my opinion, it is not only a discipline but also a lens and a set of tools by which one can see, understand and speak of the complexity of the world they are interested in engaging with. Thinking about anthropology as a

lens and a depository of tools for engaging with the socio-cultural world makes it a helpful and inviting discipline, not only to anthropologists, but to artists and filmmakers who are also interested in telling narratives about and creating representations of social worlds. Using anthropological tools to tell narratives

allows the storyteller to decode the logics of certain socio-cultural



A photo from the Visual Anthropology Workshop, 2022.

codes and unpack the complexities of social interactions and their meanings (McGranahan 2015). One of the important values of using anthropology's tools, then, is that they allow the storyteller to study mechanisms of meaning-making and existing interpretations of the social world(s) presented in their films. In this regard, one of the valuable tools is the concept of positionality, which refers to how different parts of an individual's identity—constructed through one's social class, education, gender, networks, bodily abilities, or experiences—position the individual within social contexts and hence influence the meanings attributed to surrounding social phenomena. When storytellers reflect on their positionality as part of their process, they acknowledge their social standing within the work they're producing — a necessary step not only in understanding how meaning is attributed and interpreted, but also in creating new socio-cultural narratives and meanings through artforms like cinema.

This essay is part of a longer project. Through the NAAS x Esmat fellowship program, I began to outline an interactive toolkit for filmmakers that introduces relevant tools from anthropology, such as

the concept of positionality, in order to invite a wider conversation among young independent filmmakers around topics such as social standing, power dynamics, sensory ethnography, contextual meaning-making and multilayered truths. The toolkit is meant to be relevant for directors, writers, producers, editors, distributors and programmers. It is also designed to be interactive as I believe that efforts to understand our social world and engage with it, so as to reproduce, rewire or critique it, require both individual and collective labor. Positionality, a primary tool in the toolkit, allows us to have a sense of self awareness, avoid judgements and prioritize engaging with others in the process of developing situational understandings of social experiences. The interactive toolkit, meant to be a vehicle for knowledge production, does not assume a hierarchy of knowledge. It offers space for the multiple vantage points, experiences and roles that make up the process of filmmaking to coexist, as well as for those who are merely interested in engaging with the toolkit to contribute to the discussion. In this essay, I will focus on positionality as a concept and practice and its relationship

to narrative in filmmaking. It is the main conceptual tool in the toolkit, which I hope will offer an opportunity to think of positionality as something dynamic, fluid and transient that one can come to terms with through ongoing reflection and conversation with others.

Being aware of one's social and cultural standing as a filmmaker and storyteller not only reshapes the story being told but creates it. Narrative helps us "translate knowing into telling" (McGranahan 2015).¹ In this translation process, being aware of one's positionality and how dynamic it is influences the technical and creative approach to the 'telling.' It is this process, of translating knowing into telling, that I am interested in extending further through a set of examples and exercises that will be included in the toolkit and briefly presented throughout this essay. Awareness about our social and cultural standing is a process in which we train ourselves to do, be and have certain qualities in our art or research practices.

When filmmakers acknowledge their positionality, it allows them to identify their individual privileges and positions within complex power dynamics and hence narrate stories that are nuanced in their interpretations and presentations of social worlds.

A classic example of a film in which the filmmaker is aware of her social position is Tahani Rached's *El Banat Dol*, or *Those Girls* (2006). The success and popularity of this film, I would like to argue, emanates from Tahani's awareness of her position vis-à-vis the girls she films. This film could have become one in which a privileged Egyptian-Canadian filmmaker imposes her views on a group of underprivileged girls who don't share her value systems, but instead, Rached spent a considerable amount of time with them before she started filming to understand and interpret the meanings they hold of the world and their values. The time Rached spent with them can be compared to an ethnographic practice known as participant observation — a process in which anthropologists spend long periods of time doing fieldwork to explain, understand and interpret social worlds.

1 The author of this article also published a book in 2020 titled "Writing Anthropology, Essays on Craft and Commitment." One chapter, titled "Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling," elaborates more on the article.

Another example I find relevant here is the Palestinian ethno-fiction film *Ghost Hunting* (Raed Antoni, 2017), in which Antoni shares his coming to terms with his privilege and authority over the characters he directs and his vulnerability as someone who is haunted by a personal experience in Israeli prisons. As we watch the film, we, the audience, are offered information that allows us to realize and engage with the complex power dynamics within this film. We may be left with questions around ethics as we watch as well, but the ethno-fiction or docu-drama nature of this personal and collective film helps layer and sophisticate these questions. As an audience, we are forced to reckon with our own social and cultural standing as well while viewing the film. No one is only privileged or only marginalized. It is important to keep an eye on this nuance.



A scene from *Ghost Hunting*
(Raed Antoni, 2017).

These examples show how two filmmakers have employed the concept of positionality as a creative tool in their work, sparking productive conversations about what this tool can bring to the filmmaking process. They also show how acknowledging one's positionality within the world of the story is a dynamic and multilayered process. This is particularly important in avoiding a performed approach to positionality, one that sociologist Louise Folkes calls "shopping list positionality" (2022). Shopping list positionality reduces positionality to a list of identity descriptors that function to indicate the similarities and differences between the filmmaker and the research participants or characters in the film, neglecting the negotiable everyday

aspects of one's positionality. Alternatively, situational understandings of positionality, like those shown in Rached and Antoni's work, depend on filmmakers reflexively engaging with their social surroundings. This could be achieved by engaging with the everyday and the mundane in any particular social context. In my opinion, the mundane is where the majority of social meanings are manifested and contested. Filmmakers who train themselves to appreciate and give weight to everydayness close the divide between what is deemed significant (or exotic) and insignificant. By not elevating one over the other, the ordinary and the extraordinary, one is able to narrate a contextual story that steers clear from fetishization. This influences not only the plot choices but even small details like clothes and shooting locations. Closely examining the everyday interactions and details of the social world a film depicts is the main drive behind the process of acknowledging that one's position as a filmmaker and storyteller is dynamic and contextual.



A scene from Ahlam Momkena/
Permissible Dreams (1983).

A viewer may infer in the documentary *Ahlam Momkena, or Permissible Dreams* (1982), for example, that the filmmaker Atteyat El Abnoudy had many “kitchen table” talks with her film’s main character Umm Said. Social geographers Ellen Kohl and Priscilla McCutcheon (2014) name a process of thinking “kitchen table reflexivity,” which refers to informal talks and interactions that researchers or filmmakers have with their film crew, community and research subjects or film protagonists. The process is meant to aid in understanding who each person is in specific social contexts and the position they occupy within the matrix of social and cultural networks that make up the larger context of a film or research. As an attitude, kitchen table reflexivity stands in contrast to the reductiveness of shopping list positionality. Kitchen table talks necessitate that filmmakers spend time in the communities they wish to film or creatively depict on screen. In one scene, Abnoudy is in a rural woman’s house, and a visitor passes by but is hesitant to enter. Umm Said, the film’s main character, tells the visitor “come in, come in, these are our relatives.” The scene is no longer than a minute, but functions

to signify the amount of time Atteyat and her all-men crew spent with Umm Said. These moments, when kitchen table reflexivity takes place, are when filmmakers negotiate seen and unseen aspects of their positionality, such as social capital, interests and familial background, through informal discussions and participant observation in order to connect with the story and the characters in it. *Ahlam Momkena* is another example that adds to the discussion around positionality and shows that being cognizant of the ways one’s position(s) influences the storyline is an ongoing process. Even though this intentional kitchen table time allows filmmakers to become more familiar with the social contexts they enter and their own positions within them, it is still worth noting that no one can ever completely become an insider through this process.

Reflexivity can also be triggered not only by verbal and intellectual interactions but also through the senses and body. Sensory inputs, such as smells and sounds, can help us center embodiment as we try to understand social experiences. The cultures and social worlds we are part of are not only a set of ideas we share, but a range of meanings we attach to our sensory worlds as well. In its handling of sensory details, the Egyptian film *Geld Hayy*, or *Living Skin* (Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, 2010), offers an example of a film that translates the multi-sensorial textures which constitute the characters' world beyond its narrative. The film takes place in *El Madabegh*, where animal skin gets manufactured and a "particular" smell pervades the streets. One of the film's characters explains how he realizes that he is no longer in his neighborhood when the air starts smelling "cleaner." The filmmaker, Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, who spent a lot of time prior to and during the film's production in the area,² did not overlook this detail.

It deeply impacted his understanding of how the characters make sense of themselves and others through sensory means. The film hence creates through sound and image a tactile experience for the viewer, engaging the full sensorium and activating sensory memories that could almost invoke *El Madabegh's* smell. Another example is the iconic film *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel, 2012), produced by the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab. The film explores and "records material life from an optical reality that is not strictly centered on human form" (Escobar 2017). The film is about fatal mass fishing and exploitative labor and most of its scenes are not shot from a human's perspective. This aesthetic choice by the anthropologist-filmmakers who have made *Leviathan* allows them to give justice to the everyday bodily and sensory experiences of the main characters: the fishermen and the fish. As you watch, you can almost smell the sea, fish, blood and even feel sea-sick. This bodily-material experience forms the core of the characters' everyday life. To narrate their social existence, I would like to argue, one can not transfer their hardships and exploitation to an audience without translating their

2 As per conversations with people who closely worked with Ahmed Fawzy Saleh.

sensory world. We do not hear any of the fishermen speak, but engaging with the sensory and bodily textures of their world offers another way to engage with both our and their position in the world, especially their relationship to the non-human creatures in the film.

Beside the conversations that these examples invite and which the toolkit will guide (in ways that are still being formulated), I am also considering including exercises. In one exercise, filmmakers will be asked to record their daily soundscapes, which could then be shared with the group so that participants could guess where and when the sounds were captured. While listening to the recordings, it will hopefully be possible to realize all that goes unheard when we are inside social situations. We train ourselves to mute certain sounds in order to go about our days. However, upon re-visiting these recordings, we become aware of the presence of these sounds. This exercise can help us realize the importance of soundscapes in creating a temporal and spatial ambiance, encouraging filmmakers to use their full sensorium to experience the worlds of their films and ultimately create a more engaging experience

for their audiences. The exercise also offers a way to focus on the everyday sensory worlds we inhabit, sparking discussions that could potentially allow participants to realize, through sounds, how they negotiate their relationship with their surroundings and others. By noticing these relationships, participating filmmakers may become more aware of their position as social subjects in the world.

In filmmaking, the practice of *moaaysha*, or cohabitation, can reveal to filmmakers how their social and cultural positions shape the meanings of the worlds they create, what they know, want to tell and understand. Another way to describe what the previously mentioned films do is “thick description,” a concept coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to describe the transformative potential of realizing that realism does not depend on *tasweer*, or depiction, but on *moaaysha*.

Here is how anthropologist Carole McGranahan describes Geertz's introduction of thick description in her essay "Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling:"

When Clifford Geertz, for example, suggests that it's turtles all the way down, this is commentary on the simultaneously bounded and limitless aspects of ethnographic interpretation. To say our descriptions are thick is to say they are concerned with meaning and not only description. We don't just work to describe turtles, but to get at why turtles matter, why it's turtles rather than elephants, and why the fact that it's turtles all the way down does not close down our interpretations, but rather provides a foundation for them. Describing turtles, including why turtles are culturally meaningful, is a key component of theoretical storytelling. Description itself may be a non-narrative form of prose, but thick description is narrative. It involves characters, a plot, a storyline, a

form, a goal. In thinking about the place of interpretation within anthropology today, it has in some ways been folded almost seamlessly into ethnography. Interpretation is now unmarked, assumed, expected, and is often narrative in form (McGranahan 2015).

Thick description is a narration of all that filmmakers actively observe and talk about during everyday interactions in their own, and their film's, world. Through thick descriptions, meanings become multilayered and their interpretation a process of negotiation between the audience and what they experience via the screen. It becomes possible as well for multiple interpretations of a single phenomenon to coexist. Although the relevance of thick description is more obvious for documentary filmmaking, this concept can be instrumental to fiction filmmaking as well. Some anthropologists even extend this conversation to science fiction and fantasy worlds. Anthropologists Michael Kilman and Kyra Wellstrom created a toolkit called *Build Better Worlds: Anthropology for Game Designers, Fiction Writers and Filmmakers*, where they introduce

thick description as a tool for sci-fiction and fantasy-based filmmakers to enable them to imagine complex worlds filled with characters and settings free from their own cultural biases and ideas.



Images from “Being Borrowed:On Egyptian Migration to the Gulf,” an exhibition & publication, October 2022. Photos by Ali Zaraay.

Another category of exercises that I hope to develop under the concept of positionality is inspired by a recent experience I had. A screenwriter recently approached me about collaborating on the script for a TV series about an Egyptian family in the Gulf. We met because of my work on *Being Borrowed*, an art/anthropological project that looks at the experiences of Egyptians who migrated to the Gulf. Through a series of workshops, an exhibition, a series of talks and a publication, a group of 25 artists and writers regularly met to unpack representations of Egyptian migration to the Gulf in popular culture and share their own experiences with Gulf migration. My work with the screenwriter makes extensive use of what we uncovered during *Being Borrowed* to build characters and construct their imagined worlds. We discuss the possible meanings these characters may have of class, family, death, loneliness and home. We creatively imagine and design a social world for the characters and simultaneously for the audience’s watching and sharing similar experiences.

I grew up in the Gulf. My parents migrated to Saudi Arabia in 1995, and I lived there from the time I was born in 1996 until the age of 18. I have stakes in the story I am writing. For example, I am particularly interested in class and family dynamics. This interest inevitably influences my creative process and I am more likely to emphasize these dynamics in my characterizations and storylines. The second category of exercises will focus on the act of imagining a character and its social world. I wonder, for example, how the characters and the worlds they inhabit would have differed had the screenwriter approached another anthropologist to work on the script with her. If *moaaysha* is the first step in creating thick descriptions of our socio-cultural worlds, imagination is the second step. It allows us to creatively narrate reality. However, what feeds the imagination (sensorial, emotional, intellectual experiences) is as complex as our social worlds and biases are.

In conclusion, I hope in the coming months to be able to further develop the toolkit and explore more conceptual tools, other than positionality, that could be relevant to young independent filmmakers in my community. I am guided in this

process by a belief that reflexive and dynamic understandings of who we are and where we stand in the world as social subjects could take place through film watching. Through the filmmaking and watching processes, we can collectively think and rethink about how our positionality surfs across different social and bodily settings during different stages of our lives. I sensed an urgency to have these conversations in the visual anthropology workshops I conduct. The reason may be that there is pressure on filmmakers today to perform “shopping list positionality,” and it also may be because of the complexity of and current shifts in social structures. Whether it is either of these reasons or an entirely different one, I believe that the interactive toolkit can spark collectively productive conversations that may heighten the participants’ awareness of their positionalities and give them ways to negotiate its many constituting layers. These conversations can, in turn, offer audiences opportunities to experience more accepting, kinder and less rigid socio-cultural environments in and through films.

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Farah Hallaba



Farah obtained her MA in Social Anthropology and Visual Ethnography from the University of Kent. She started @anthropology_bel3araby انثروبولوجي بالعربي in 2019, aiming to publicize anthropology in an accessible way and in Arabic. She has been doing short engaging online videos and collaborative workshops since then, mainly Visual Anthropology workshops and collaborative Anthropology workshops about social class and migration to the Gulf which led to “Being Borrowed,” a multi-media exhibition and publication released in 2022. Farah was a resident teaching fellow at CILAS teaching Ethnographic Studies 2021-2022. She also shares a creative space in downtown Cairo, where she collaborates with artists to offer spaces for creative discussion-based knowledge production.

العدد الخامس من شخصيات
شتاء ٢٠٢٢ / ربيع ٢٠٢٣
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Issue #5 of Shakyshat
Winter 2022/ Sprint 2023
Cinema's Infrastructures

Published by Esmat—Publishing List and
NAAS - Network of Arab Alternative Screens.
Editor: Nour El Safoury.
Arabic copy editor: Aya Ehab.
English copy editor: Nayera Shalaby.
Administrative support: Sabine Abi Saber.
Designer: Sarah Habli.

Cinema's Infrastructures comes out of a fellowship program launched
in 2022 as a partnership between NAAS - Network of Arab Alternative
Screens and Esmat Publishing List. Learn more by visiting this link:
<https://www.naasnetwork.org/topic/news/open-call-research-fellowship>

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ناس • NAAS

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. تضم الشبكة مبادرات تسعى من خلال برمجتها وفعالياتها ومساحاتها واستراتيجيات التواصل مع جمهورها لدعم ثقافة سينمائية حيوية ومستدامة بهدف تطوير تفاعل الجمهور مع الأفلام. تنظم «ناس» سلسلة لقاءات وبرامج أفلام متداولة وورش إقليمية لكوكتها النامية من الفضاءات السينمائية الغير حكومية. و هي جمعية مسجلة في برلين تمارس عملها اقليمياً بالتعاون مع مشتركي/ات الشبكة في البلدان العربية المختلفة.

عصمت

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شخصيات

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