Re-Presenting the Egyptian Informal Urbanism in Films between 1994 and 2014

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Abstract : Cinema constructs mind-spaces that reflect inherent human thoughts and emotions. As a representational art, Cinema would introduce comprehensive images of life phenomena in different ways. The term “represent” suggests verity of meanings; bring into presence, replace or typify. In that sense, Cinema may present a phenomenon through direct embodiment, or introduce a substitute image that replaces the original phenomena, or typify it by relating the produced image to a more general category through a process of abstraction. This research is interested in questioning the type of images that Egyptian Cinema introduces to informal urbanism and how these images were conditioned and reshaped in the last twenty years. The informalities/slums phenomenon first appeared in Egypt and, particularly, Cairo in the early sixties, however, this phenomenon was completely ignored by the state and society until the eighties, and furthermore, its evident representation in Cinema was by the mid-nineties. The Informal City represents the illegal housing developments, and it is a fast growing form of urbanization in Cairo. Yet, this expanding phenomenon is still depicted as the minority, exceptional and marginal through the Cinematic lenses. This paper aims at tracing the forms of representations of the urban informalities in the Egyptian Cinema between 1994 and 2014, and how did that affect the popular mind and its perception of these areas. The paper runs two main lines of inquiry; the first traces the phenomena through a chronological and geographical mapping of the informal urbanism has been portrayed in films. This analysis is based on an academic research work at Cairo University in Fall 2014. The visual tracing through maps and timelines allowed a reading of the phases of ignorance, presence, typifying and repetition in the representation of this huge sector of the city through more than 50 films that has been investigated. The analysis clearly revealed the “portrayed image” of informality by the Cinema through the examined period. However, the second part of the paper explores the “perceived image”. A designed questionnaire is applied to highlight the main features of that image that is perceived by both inhabitants of informalities and other Cairenes based on watching selected films. The questionnaire covers the different images of informalities proposed in the Cinema whether in a comic or a melodramatic background and highlight the descriptive terms used, to see which of them resonate with the mass perceptions and affected their mental images. The two images; “portrayed” and “perceived” are then to be encountered to reflect on issues of repetitions, stereotyping and reality. The formulated stereotype of informal urbanism is finally outlined and justified in relation to both production consumption mechanisms of films and the State official vision of informalities.

Keywords : cinema, informal urbanism, popular mind, representation