

The Sobky Recipe and the Struggle over “The Popular” in Egypt by Chihab El Khachab¹

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In Ramadan 2013, the young anchor and comedian Akram Hosny hosted a satirical television show called *Wasim Hudhud* on the Egyptian satellite channel Dream 2. The thirty-episode series had an original premise: in 2053, a sixty-two-year-old historian named Wasim Hudhud narrates a program that describes the state of Egypt in 2013 to the young generation. The episodes covered a wide range of themes, including education, religion, sports, domestic politics, and international relations. Part of the show’s comedic effect came from imagining what would have happened if the Muslim Brotherhood had remained in power until 2053. The show was filmed prior to the 4 July 2013 military coup, in which the minister of defense, Gen. ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, deposed the Brotherhood-affiliated president Muhammad Mursi after a wave of protests. There was no end in sight to the Mursi presidency at the time of filming, and the show imagines that the country’s plight would worsen dramatically over time. Exemplifying this satirical decline, the twenty-fifth episode began with a monologue explaining that the entertainment venue known as a “Sobky” was once called a movie theater, suggesting that all theaters were, unfortunately, showcasing Sobky movies by 2053.

In 2013, I started to conduct ethnographic work on everyday practices of film production in Cairo, mainly at New Century Film Production and Al Batrik Art Production. My research included active observation on the set of *Décor* (2014), production and screenwriting work in *Ward Masmum* (Poisonous Roses, 2018), and interviews with numerous creative and technical workers across the industry.² The term “Sobky” surfaced repeatedly in the course of my research.

Early on, I learned that the Sobkys were a family of successful film producers, and that the term “Sobky” had come to signify a genre of commercial entertainment with a narrative formula dubbed “the Sobky recipe” (*al-khalta al-subkiyya*). The cartoonist Islam Gawish illustrates the common perception of this recipe in figure 1. It combines a thug (*baltagi*), a *baladi* dancer, and a few comedic lines (*iffihat*) to create a successful action/musical/drama film in the mold of the wildly popular *‘Abdu Muta* (Killer Abdo, 2012) or *Qalb al-Asad* (Lion Heart, 2013). These movies rank among the highest-grossing productions in the history of Egyptian cinema. *‘Abdu Muta* has earned over twenty-two million Egyptian pounds in domestic theaters, while *Qalb al-Asad* made around fourteen million pounds in the few days between its opening and the closure of every cinema in Cairo following the Rabi‘a Square massacre on 14 August 2013.³ Given that each production cost no more than ten million pounds to make, the profits from domestic ticket sales alone were dizzying.

Since the 2011 revolution, the Sobky recipe has become so dominant that it seems as if the Sobkys are producing every movie in Egypt. Considering the Sobky genre’s immense success, it is surprising that recent scholarship on Egyptian cinema has neglected it. This neglect might be the result of a prevailing scholarly interest in pre-1990s cinema, prior to the Sobky era.⁴ Yet even studies of post-revolutionary Egypt have not addressed the Sobky genre’s significance. Instead, scholars examine representations of political Islam in Egyptian cinema, majority-minority relations, gender relations, “clean cinema,” or topical issues like drug consumption, migration, and protest.⁵ This neglect might be due to the implicit hierarchy of value that Walter Armbrust describes among students of Egyptian cinema, who deem world-renowned auteurs such as Youssef Chahine to be worthier of study than purveyors of lowbrow entertainment.⁶ The

contrast between the amount of scholarship on Chahine alone, as opposed to Sobky, is telling in this sense.⁷

Scholarship on Egyptian cinema usually focuses on a given film's narrative, historical context, and ideological underpinnings. Yet Sobky movies cannot be treated as autonomous texts in this way, because they are better understood as a series of film fragments with material and social effects beyond their projection in cinema halls.⁸ Analyzing the Sobky genre requires us to turn our attention to songs, Internet comics, talk shows, dubious dealings, and even red meat. This article also extends a line of investigation into the category of "the popular" begun by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. For Hall, the popular does not merely designate works that are commercially successful or that derive from the practices and beliefs of an "authentic" working class. Rather, it is a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate class-cultural formations, whose boundaries are constituted by the struggle itself.⁹ Popular culture does not reflect essential class or cultural boundaries between "the people" and "the elite." Rather, those categories emerge historically through conflicts over the meaning of the popular.

Sobky films lay bare this dynamic. While appropriating narratives and markers of the so-called popular (*sha'bi*) classes in Cairo, these films fuel a highly profitable commercial enterprise. The Sobky brothers built this enterprise by exploiting workers to accumulate capital, which contrasts with the image that the producers project about being members of the popular classes. Without pointing out these contradictions, press and social media commentators criticize Sobky productions as being "vulgar" because they appear too "*sha'bi*," to use the local term. The categorical term *sha'bi* describes an "authentic" Egyptian underclass in an essentialist manner. The term is associated with a cluster of unchanging cultural traits such as living in one of Cairo's *sha'bi* neighborhoods, speaking with a *sha'bi* accent, attending *sha'bi* weddings, and listening to

sha'bi music. This cluster exists in historical suspension, as if there were a single “authentic” popular class with identifiable cultural traits outside the political, economic, and discursive pressures that shape the category of the popular and the people included in it.

Building on Hall’s analysis, I argue that the cultural and material struggles over what is considered “popular” do not simply reflect class-cultural positions but also generate them. For instance, conflicts between the Sobkys and the press reveal a distinction between a moralizing middle-class public and a public that this middle class considers both popular and vulgar. The struggle between the Sobkys and their workers, by contrast, reveals a distinction between entrepreneurs ascending the class-cultural ladder and their exploited labor force. Each struggle draws a different boundary between who or what counts as “popular.” In the first case, the Sobkys embody the popular masses; in the second, they embody the business elite.

The Sobky genre illuminates the parameters of the struggle over what constitutes the popular in post-revolutionary Egypt. These parameters are not a simple binary between state-sponsored highbrow culture and lowbrow street culture, as the English- and French-language scholarship on Egyptian popular culture would suggest.¹⁰ Rather, this struggle occurs in several areas: between a moralizing discourse on the Sobky genre’s vulgarity and the public image that the Sobky brothers cultivate; between wealthy producers and their workers; and between the music emerging from Cairo’s *sha'bi* neighborhoods and the Sobkys’ appropriation of this music in video clips. This article addresses each of these conflicts in succession. I begin by analyzing the discourse of vulgarity surrounding Sobky productions in the press and online, then move to examining the Sobky brothers’ business practices, before concluding by discussing Sobky video clips as a highbrow form of *sha'bi* music.

The Sobky Brand

The story of the Sobky family starts in a small butcher shop in Dokki, on the western bank of the Nile in metropolitan Cairo. In the 1970s, Hassan El Sobky opened a stall on Tahrir Street, the major east-west artery in Dokki, which he later expanded into a larger shop. In 1985, Hassan's sons Ahmed and Mohamed opened a video store above the butcher. As the business grew, the brothers established a reputation as major players in VHS distribution.¹¹ Some film workers attribute Sobky productions' commercial appeal to this initial business venture, which allegedly allowed the brothers to learn their popular audience's taste.¹² The Sobky brothers produced their first film, *'Uyun al-Saqr* (The Eyes of the Falcon), in 1992. They made many more box-office successes, notably comedies such as *Sawwaq al-Hanim* (The Lady's Driver, 1994) and *al-Limbi* (2002). The Sobky brothers continued to produce films together until 2007, when a conflict between them led Mohamed to create a separate company. Together, these companies are among the most prolific producers of commercial films since the 2011 revolution, a period in which the Egyptian film industry's established financiers have been unwilling to invest in production.¹³

Journalists and film critics denounce the Sobkys as a scourge.¹⁴ While there are two Sobky brothers, the press often refers to them as a single "Sobky" and uses their pictures interchangeably, as if they were a metonym for light entertainment, obscene dialogue, and lewd imagery. Critics accuse the Sobkys of being interested in commercial gain at the expense of production quality and, indeed, moral integrity. They rarely direct such vitriol at other producers because they see them as creating a more cultured type of film or, at least, making honest profits while boosting the industry's revenues. The press constantly denigrates the Sobkys' success, however, with unavoidable overtones of class prejudice. They deem the brothers "crude" or

“lacking in refinement”: in short, “vulgar.”¹⁵ Armbrust analyzed a similar discourse of vulgarity directed at the *sha‘bi* singer Ahmad ‘Adawiyya in the 1980s and 1990s. Loved by many in Cairo, but hated by those committed to a modernist definition of high culture, ‘Adawiyya revealed a core contradiction in the so-called Egyptian middle class. Those who knew his tunes by heart and those who dismissed his music could very well be the same (middle-class) people. But by asserting ‘Adawiyya’s vulgarity, his detractors established a class-cultural distinction between a respectable, moral middle class and a vulgar, popular one.¹⁶

The discourse of vulgarity surrounding the Sobkys reinforces a similar distinction. This discourse is most visible in the press’s regular invocation of their background as “butchers” (*jazzarin*). This label implies that the Sobkys are incompetent in the art of filmmaking and should stick to their lowly trade. The press extends this discourse to the Sobkys’ imagined audience as well: the male youth hailing from Cairo’s *sha‘bi* neighborhoods.¹⁷ One cliché portrayal of this audience is the sea of young men crowding ticket counters in downtown Cairo to see the latest box-office hit during Eid al-Fitr (fig. 2). Critics perceive these audiences, much like the Sobky brothers, as being tasteless, vulgar, and attracted to Sobky cinema in almost mimetic fashion.¹⁸ As the general manager of New Century Film Production, Ahmad Badawy, complained, “If you make a film that’s artistically good, people don’t go watch it. . . .They go watch [Sobky], and they just want to see a guy playing with a knife, with a few dancers, and that’s it.”¹⁹ Not all practitioners in the film industry share this disdainful view of the Sobkys’ audience. But many nonetheless assume that these audiences just want to “empty their minds” (*fassi dimaghhum*), to quote the assistant director Abdallah al-Ghaly.²⁰

The apparent contrast between high-culture cinema and the lowbrow way in which the Sobkys “sell movies like they sell meat,” according to a common cliché, cements an association

between the popular and the vulgar in the eyes of a moralizing public (fig. 3). The coarseness of the Sobky brothers' own public image reinforces the disdain.²¹ This image was never as evident as in a well-known mishap on Tamer Amin's talk show *Min al-Akhir* (The Last Word) on 20 October 2014. The show invited Mohamed El Sobky to debate the late film magnate Mohamed Hassan Ramzy.²² After Ramzy made a veiled threat against his competitor's upcoming production, Sobky's anger mounted to the point where he emitted a vulgar grunt (*shakhra*), the Egyptian equivalent of saying the "f-word" on national television.²³ The moment became an Internet meme (fig. 4).

The Sobkys' family background, public image, and imagined audience generate outrage in the press and on social media.²⁴ During the Eid al-Adha season in 2013, a woman accused Ahmed El Sobky of touching her inappropriately while he was distributing tickets at Cinema Metro, a well-known downtown theater. Security camera records exonerated the producer some days later, but by then, the media frenzy over the vulgarity of Sobky films had morphed into fury at Ahmed himself.²⁵ Earlier in 2013, protesters had launched an online campaign to boycott Sobky cinema on moral grounds (fig. 5–7).²⁶ "We will boycott unseemliness (*isfaf*) during the Eid," stated one slogan. Another warned, "Careful! Egypt is not a dancer and a thug!" In figure 5, the image creator used red prohibition signs to signify the rejection of three commercial movies to be released that year, even though only one was actually produced by a Sobky company. The Sobkys' opponents believe that the brothers and their films are contaminating public morals and the minds of *sha'bi* male youth. The strong negative association is visible in the way in which some anti-sexual harassment campaigns have branded the Sobky brothers, their audiences, and their films as prime drivers of sexual harassment.²⁷

This kind of confusion between the brother's personalities, their products, and their consumers rests on two gendered assumptions that allow a moralizing public to constitute itself in contrast to the vulgar/popular classes. The first is that Sobky film audiences are unsophisticated and mindless men who cannot contain their cravings just as they cannot keep themselves from imitating popular cinema. This assumption is problematic because it portrays sexual harassment as the result of a moral flaw unique to *sha'bi* men, ignoring the fact that middle- and upper-class men commit acts of patriarchal violence as well.²⁸ Furthermore, this assumption ignores the gender diversity among Sobky film audiences. Consider how the crowd of young men in figure 2 contrasts with figure 8, which shows women crowding the ticket counters in a downtown theater to watch what could well be a Sobky film. The assumed masculinity of Sobky audiences contributes to a conception of the popular classes that presumes men to be the only watchers of public entertainment and restricts women to becoming either objects on screen or invisible domestic subjects.

The second assumption is that the Sobky brothers behave in a coarse manner and produce coarse films because they hail from a family of butchers. Of course, Ahmed and Mohamed El Sobky are only butchers to the extent that they inherited their father's shop in Dokki, where Ahmed's company is still located. Both brothers are university graduates: Ahmed in commerce and Mohamed in law. Clearly, their financial success squarely places them among the ascending entrepreneurial class that thrived under President Anwar al-Sadat's economic liberalization policies (*infitah*). The Sobkys' production capital grew from their VHS business in the 1980s, at a time when the medium was expanding wildly while the liberalizing national economy afforded advantageous tariffs. Furthermore, Sadat's easing of restrictions on meat prices bolstered the butcher shop's revenues.²⁹ Thus, when their detractors refer to them as butchers, they express

class prejudice—disdain for what they view as the brothers’ lowly origins despite their newly and vulgarly acquired wealth, a common trope in high-culture criticism of the post-1970s *nouveaux riches* in Egypt.³⁰

While the Sobkys are not unambiguously “popular” in terms of their socioeconomic position, those who consider themselves to be educated, refined, and respectable portray the family as representatives of a uniformly vulgar/popular class. Yet the Sobkys’ educational background and wealth paints a different picture. One could argue that the numerous accusations of sexual harassment made by female workers against Mohamed El Sobky are not manifestations of a latent and uncontrollable popular male desire, but rather a typical case of a businessman abusing his professional status to harass colleagues with impunity.³¹ The Egyptian press seldom mentions this interpretation, even as it dutifully reports on rampant sexual abuses in Hollywood. This tendency indicates a strong bias toward considering the Sobkys exclusively through the lens of vulgarity, when they should also be seen as entrepreneurs trying to ascend the class-cultural ladder on the backs of their workers, in contrast with the “popular” spirit that the press deems them to embody.

The Sobky Business

The public discourse surrounding the Sobkys’ vulgarity is unlike the criticism that they face within the Egyptian film industry. It is impossible to meet any industry insider today who has no opinion on the Sobkys’ exploitative labor practices.³² Sandy Samuel, an assistant director who only recently began working in the industry, told me that she had heard that the Sobkys pay low salaries and cheat on payments.³³ The production manager Mohammed Setohy, who has worked on several occasions with Mohamed El Sobky, had a more nuanced take. While Ahmed El

Sobky cheats workers out of their final payment, he explained, Mohamed always pays out what was agreed upon, even if he pays low wages. In another interview, I asked Setohy how Sobky manages to sign up workers at such low wages. He answered, “Sobky makes only one offer and says it’s all he can give, so people have to accept against their will.”³⁴ Against their will, in this case, means against their ability to exert leverage in negotiations by pointing out other job possibilities or offers. In a labor market with scarce opportunities, having a job with a Sobky company is perhaps better than no job at all.

Samuel described how, in recent years, both Sobky brothers would wait until the Ramadan working season was over to hire workers at a much cheaper rate. Both brothers seek to sign their workers for multiple contracts to get a “bulk rate.” For example, Ahmed El Sobky’s company once contacted assistant director Habi Seoud.³⁵ After discussion, Seoud found the salary unsatisfactory and declined the offer. Months later, Sobky’s production crew offered him two comparable deals. He refused twice, only to get a phone call from Ahmed El Sobky himself, summoning him to his office. Seoud met him above the butcher shop in Dokki. Sobky asked him, “Why don’t you want to work with me?” Seoud answered that the pay was unsatisfactory, even by the standards of poorly paid independent productions. Sobky made a counter-offer to contract him for eight films: five as an assistant director, three as a director. “The first one will be less well paid, but the second one is Kuwaiti money,” Sobky allegedly said, implying that the Kuwaiti advance on distribution would compensate for the salary difference.³⁶ Seoud refused the offer because working with a Sobky company would have diminished his reputation as a director, but he semi-jokingly expressed remorse at not having taken such a stable job when he had little to no work.

The Sobkys are constantly trying to save on production costs. This mindset is evidently common to all film producers: I have heard on numerous occasions producers justify cost-saving by claiming that they “fear for their money” (*kha 'ifin 'ala fulushum*). The lengths to which the Sobkys go, however, have become fabled among industry insiders. For instance, the Sobkys do not pay their actors and actresses well because they consider that showcasing them on screen in an expected box-office hit is enough compensation. According to the screenwriter and director Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, the megastar Mohamed Ramadan, who now commands a salary in the tens of millions, was only paid thirty thousand Egyptian pounds to make *'Abdu Muta*, one of the highest-grossing productions in the history of Egyptian cinema. To “temper the star’s enviousness” (*yiksar 'ainhu*), in Fawzi Saleh’s words, Ahmed El Sobky gave him an expensive car. Likewise, the Sobky brothers gave the star Mohamed Saad a BMW after *al-Limbi* became a multi-million-pound success, perhaps because they had initially paid him peanuts.³⁷ The production manager Setohy, for his part, recalled how Mohamed El Sobky grounded him because he had offered an actress a five-hundred-pound contract. It was a pittance compared to the ten thousand pounds that she had demanded, but Mohamed El Sobky was displeased. “What! I told you not to give her any money!” recalled a laughing Setohy, imitating the gruff producer.³⁸ According to multiple interlocutors, the Sobky brothers have even paid some workers with kilos of meat from their butcher shop.

Film workers perceive such cheapness as a symptom of general disrespect for their profession. “Cheapness” is not just a neutral description of the low wages given by the Sobkys, in this sense, but a way of expressing discontent at how capital owners treat their work force. All of my interlocutors decried the regularity with which the Sobkys pushed the limits of the conventional twelve-hour shift, although demanding overtime is common in the industry.³⁹

“Sobky treats all his employees like bureaucrats (*muwazzafin*),” according to Setohy.⁴⁰ He means that Mohamed El Sobky does not recognize or appreciate the differences in specialization among different crafts in film production. An employee is a body at his disposal, no matter his or her skillset, someone he can manipulate without respect for his or her position in the industry’s hierarchies. “Sobky buys people,” summarized the clapper Abdelsalam Radwan, who now refuses to work with the brothers, although he has done so in the past. In Radwan’s estimation, the Sobkys buy people and exploit them to the core, much like how they buy cameras and furnished apartments to limit long-term rental costs.⁴¹

Workers also deem the Sobkys’ hands-on approach to the filmmaking process as disrespectful toward the industry’s professional standards and customs (*urf*). Unlike most producers in Egypt, the brothers regularly bypass the usual division of labor between the producer (*muntij*), who finances the movie, the line producer (*muntij fanni*), who manages logistics and budgeting, and the director, who makes creative decisions. The assistant director Osama Abol Ata, who worked with Mohamed El Sobky on three projects, described him as a “real” producer in this sense. “He reads the script, he reads the breakdown (*tafrigh*), he’s always there in person, on location. . . . He knows how to take care of his product.”⁴² Film workers do not widely share this opinion, however, and instead tend to see the producer’s involvement on set as an encroachment on their territory.

I had a brief glimpse of an Ahmed El Sobky shoot at Studio Misr, one of the largest and oldest studios in Egypt.⁴³ It was late, maybe ten or eleven at night, and I was standing next to studio number one with the production assistant Hany Abdel Latif. The driver Diab arrived with a van full of props for an upcoming shoot and assistants started to unload it. As I was watching, Diab asked Abdel Latif who I was. “He’s a spy from Sobky,” he joked. Diab began cursing

Sobky in a jocular tone and prayed that his employer's movies would win at the box office: "Inshallah New Century will overtake Sobky!" I thought that Abdel Latif was joking as usual about my spy-like presence on set. New Century crew members grew used to describing my incessant questions and note-taking in this way. My nickname at New Century was "Mr. X," the spoof gangster character played by the star comedian Fouad el-Mohandes in the 1970s, allegedly the "most dangerous man in the world."

On this occasion, however, the reference was timely. Sobky was shooting on Studio Misr's alleyway (*hara*) set. This set is supposed to mimic a generic *sha 'bi* neighborhood in Cairo, but it is more akin to the stereotyped space imagined as a *hara* in Egyptian cinema.⁴⁴ Sobky's crew had only minimally modified the permanent set, which, according to Diab, reflected Sobky's cost-effective approach: "Sobky never builds a set, and [he] pays everyone very little." He astutely remarked that there were no production cars on set, a sign of Sobky's unwillingness to invest in his movies. Diab echoed Sandy Samuel's point about how the Sobkys bind workers to several projects in the low season to drive wages down. On a stage covered with a stereotypical ornamented wedding tent, the actresses Ayten Amer and Horeya Farghaly, along with a young dancer, were the only women visible among hundreds of men. The men included the main singer, Tarek El Sheikh, his band, the extras watching the show, and the film crew.⁴⁵ Ahmed El Sobky himself was directing the actors, positioning them on stage and barking orders to the cameraman on the crane. Diab argued that the director was very weak: "[He] doesn't know what he's saying. . . . [The director] keeps asking for lens changes, and Sobky says, 'keep rolling.'" Film workers usually perceive such interventions as a professional *faux pas* at best and an affront to artistic creation at worst.

Given these production practices, industry insiders do not perceive the Sobky brothers to be mere representatives of a vulgar/popular class, but as entrepreneurs with little respect for their workers. In fact, many insiders see the Sobkys' willingness to invest in film production after the 2011 revolution as their most important contribution to the commercial film industry. "I admire him, but I wouldn't work with him [Sobky]," said the screenwriter and director Daoud Abdel Sayed.⁴⁶ In a similar spirit, the producer and editor Mohamed Samir told me, "You know what? I have no problem with Sobky."⁴⁷ After reading the overwhelmingly negative coverage of Sobky productions in the press, I had not expected that Abdel Sayed and Samir, two filmmakers who strive to create an alternative to the mainstream cinema represented by the Sobkys, would have such a conciliatory view. Samir respected the Sobkys' commercial vocation and the fact that they, unlike larger production houses, do not pretend to balance art and entertainment. The well-known screenwriter Mariam Naoum echoed this view in 2013, stating that "a lot of people talk about Sobky with arrogance, but the reality is, he's the only one still producing in the market."⁴⁸ She added that the major investors who kept their money in their pockets are responsible for the industry's bad shape. Ahmed Fawzi Saleh went further, arguing that without the Sobkys, theater audiences would have disappeared after 2011, and it would have been impossible to bring them back.

Indeed, the Sobkys have become successful not because of their popular roots, but because their productions have faced so little competition in domestic theaters after 2011 and because their business model has maximized gains by cutting labor costs. Thus, the Sobkys' success is not inherent to a specific class-based appeal but tied to the political-economic juncture in which it has occurred. The independent director and producer Hala Galal summarized this juncture by calling the Sobkys the "clowns" (*arajuz*) of the contemporary film industry.⁴⁹ She

contrasts the brothers, who create the lowbrow mass entertainment in theaters, with the much more powerful production houses that have wide distribution networks, own theaters and maintain strong relations with state institutions. In Galal's metaphor, the Sobkys broker capital gains without owning "serious" fixed capital or maintaining serious relations with the security apparatus.

In 2013, the cinema journalist Walid Abul Seoud was adamant that the brothers did not have a sustainable production model for this very reason. In his view, the Sobkys had become ruthless (*tawahhashu*) because they controlled a very large share of the domestic exhibition market without owning theaters of their own. He added that the Sobkys would soon collapse because their movies had been exploiting a fashionable "dancer-and-thug" narrative, but that they would have a hard time once the fashion fades away.⁵⁰ On an earlier occasion, he argued that Karim El Sobky would run his father Ahmed's business into the ground by changing the Sobky brand and making American-style movies. "The market can't stomach it," he speculated.⁵¹ Since 2013, none of Abul Seoud's predictions have materialized. Neither production practice, nor genre, nor aesthetics seem to have diminished the Sobkys' commercial success. This continued commercial appeal is not simply due to the brothers' so-called recipe, however, but also to the historical juncture in which they have emerged.

The Sobkys' business and labor practices squarely position them as the kind of entrepreneurs who cannot be subsumed under a blanket notion of the popular. There is a structural difference between the way in which the Sobkys accumulate capital and the way in which most wage workers make a living in *sha'bi* neighborhoods, but this difference is flattened when journalists, film critics, and most of my interlocutors assign the Sobkys to the realm of the popular as if they were automobile mechanics, low-level bureaucrats, or even butchers.

Furthermore, film workers' antipathy to the brothers' way of doing business—driving down wages, breaking industry norms, and even “buying people”—shows why the Sobkys cannot be considered simply “of the people,” as some press and social media commentators allege them to be. Comparing the Sobkys' public image and their production practices highlights this contradiction. The Sobkys are business owners who are made out to be members of the vulgar/popular classes, when in fact, they appropriate popular tropes to enhance their ability to accumulate capital. The following section demonstrates why Sobky products cannot be conflated with other forms of popular cultural production, since the brothers' production practices and their products are aesthetically and materially distinct.

The Sobky Video Clip

Journalists and film critics often associate the commercial success of Sobky films with the family's roots in the “authentic” culture of Cairo's *sha 'bi* neighborhoods, which supposedly brings them closer to their imagined popular, male, young audiences. Two considerations problematize this association. First, as I have detailed, the Sobky brothers are commercial producers engaging in a process of capital accumulation no different in its exploitation of workers than other production houses. Workers are not well paid or well treated on Sobky productions, which cannot sit well with the image of an “authentically” *sha 'bi* production house. When journalists, social media commentators, and my interlocutors talk about the *sha 'bi* classes, they assume that it is a subculture in which inequality and exploitation result from external pressures from government and big business upon Cairo's underclasses. The Sobkys' business practices contradict this assumption, to the extent that they engage in the very capital accumulation and labor exploitation that commentators deem external to the vulgar/popular

realm. This is not to say that there is an ideal mode of popular production in which wages are fair and industry norms are respected. Rather, I am pointing out the contradiction in a discourse that assigns Sobky productions to a vulgar/popular class without acknowledging how they reproduce the same practices as the mainstream film industry, or how these practices differ from other types of cultural production in *sha'bi* neighborhoods.

Second, what draws people to watch Sobky films is not some mimetic impulse among the popular classes to see themselves represented on screen. As Iman Hamam argues, the kind of popular culture exemplified by Sobky productions is “a ‘ventriloquised’ version of the ‘manners and customs’ of the Egyptian people in ‘traditional quarters.’”⁵² The audience relates to the Sobky genre in a more complex and fragmented manner, notably through video clips. More than the repetitive storylines, Sobky music videos offer an important site for audience engagement with the genre beyond the few weeks in which films are shown in theaters. Daniel Gilman argues that “*sha'bi* has a lesser visual presence than other musical genres in Egypt,” because it is not “captured in filmed concert performances and television broadcasts.”⁵³ Gilman restricts *sha'bi* video clips to a narrow range of productions beyond the cinema industry, which misses the importance of Sobky video clips to the contemporary *sha'bi* genre.

Each Sobky company regularly uploads teasers, trailers, and video clips to its YouTube channel. Songs excerpted from films are by far the most widely watched clips on these channels.⁵⁴ Judging by the frequency with which cafés, minibuses, and motorcycles blast these songs, they are undoubtedly the most widespread iteration of Sobky entertainment. For instance, the song that I watched being filmed at Studio Misr featured in a film called *Salim Abu Ukhtu* (2014). While the film was a minor box-office success, the song has been viewed around seven-and-a-half million times on Ahmed El Sobky’s YouTube page, and played some three million

more times on SoundCloud. Given how viral they become on satellite television and online, video clips act as effective advertising tools. Consequently, crew members shoot them as free-standing units without direct links to the narrative. Film critics tend to attack the lack of connection between musical numbers and narrative in Sobky films, although this disjunction makes sense within the tradition of Egyptian song-and-dance cinema.⁵⁵ The Sobkys' major contribution to the aesthetics of Egyptian cinema is that they revived this commercial song-and-dance tradition, albeit in a form that most critics would characterize as “vulgar.”⁵⁶

The broad genre under which Sobky songs fall is locally known as *sha 'bi* music. Specialists in Egyptian music have long debated what defines the genre, but they have not settled upon a single, substantive definition because the genre's contours shift in relation to other genres and over time. Scholars apply the term *sha 'bi* to whatever music contrasts with the “high culture” promoted by the Egyptian state and the professional youth music industry driven by satellite television channels.⁵⁷ As Nicolas Puig argues, the label *sha 'bi* “implicitly contains a value judgment, not only about music itself but also about the audiences that it mainly targets . . . overall, the representatives of the working classes and the lower-middle classes.”⁵⁸ The commercial genre most call *sha 'bi* music today emerged with the spread of audiocassettes in the 1970s. The new medium provided an infrastructure for recording and distributing music that high-culture settings like the national radio would not broadcast. Following the spread of synthesizers and the MP3 revolution, a new genre known as *mahrajanat* (“festival” music) emerged with a distinctive syncopated rhythm struck by unrelenting cymbals. Rugged, nasal, mostly male voices characterize these iterations of *sha 'bi* music, even though the *mahrajanat* producers use auto-tuned voices profusely.⁵⁹ The rhythm alternates between slow sections—sometimes sung in the style of a *mawwal* (lament), other times in a spoken-word tone—and

faster sections that repeat the chorus to a joyous dancing tune. Instrumentation varies in combinations between the flute (*nay*), the violin (*kaman*), various drums (*duff*, *ri'*, *tabla*), and the synthesizer (*org*). These musicians address themes inspired by situations and issues from lived experiences in Cairo's *sha'bi* neighborhoods.

Sobky video clips recuperate both old and new iterations of *sha'bi* music, but with a distinct aesthetic shaped by their relatively high production value. This difference illuminates another aspect of the struggle over the definition of the popular in Sobky productions. The Sobkys appropriate *sha'bi* musical references to fuel the very capital accumulation that distinguishes their products from *sha'bi* music made outside the film industry. This struggle is not inherent in a pre-existing class-cultural difference between the Sobky brothers and their competitors, just as the Sobkys cannot be univocally characterized as vulgar producers or bourgeois entrepreneurs. Rather, the brothers enact this difference through their production methods and the specific aesthetics that their products embody. One can read Sobky video clips as enacting a separation between a highbrow and a lowbrow form of *sha'bi* music in this sense. Unlike the distinction between high and low culture described by other scholars of Egyptian popular culture, it is not state-sanctioned intellectuals who set the terms of this hierarchy of value, but the very actors working within the culture industries.

The distinctive aesthetic of Sobky video clips is above all visible in their setting and shooting style. A typical clip occurs in one of two locations: a cabaret or a *sha'bi* wedding. Both locations have historically been central to the performance of *sha'bi* music, and the Sobkys have both available to them at cheap rates. In a typical film, when the main characters arrive at the cabaret or wedding, they disappear into a large crowd of young men watching the song. These men stand in for the imagined audience of Sobky movies, inviting a *sha'bi* male gaze upon the

dancer and the singer. The title video clip of *Halawat Ruh* (Ruh's Beauty/The Sweetness of a Soul, 2014) illustrates this well. The clip features the well-known *sha 'bi* singer Hakim and, exceptionally, the star Haifa Wehbe herself as a dancer. The filmmakers shot the video in such a way as to attract the viewer's attention to Wehbe's body, with multiple detailed shots of her feet, hips, torso, and legs, and of the male audience looking on in bewilderment. The editing is rapid, shifting between inserts on the dancer, the singer, the main characters, and the overall party.

The video clip has a distinct sound aesthetic. The film suddenly shifts from on-location sound, with all its imperfections and "dirty" noises, to crystal-clear studio sound. Hakim's voice dominates the screen, backed by impeccably balanced instruments. The sound quality differs noticeably from *sha 'bi* music audiocassettes, MP3s, or clips broadcast on specialist *sha 'bi* satellite channels. While stereotypes associated with Sobky songs include mindless joy, fast dance moves, and a hammered chorus, the lyrics in "Halawat Ruh" are deeper in unexpected ways. The clip exploits a tension between the song and the image that creates the specific Sobky brand of highbrow *sha 'bi* music videos. The Sobky brothers built this brand not only on higher production values, but also on the attempt to showcase "respectable" narratives in song. Consider the opening lament in "Halawat Ruh":

O you who likes beauty, the sweet one's sweetness is in the soul.
There are very beautiful people with a sweet soul.
What's the use of beauty if you live with it scarred?
Beware of feeling pride in beauty or being deceived by it,
Because if beauty makes you arrogant, it will scorch you with the fire of its nights.
Whatever beauty there is, tomorrow it will all be gone.
The love of the flesh is not eternal, but what is eternal is the sweetness of a soul.

The moral implied by these lyrics could not contrast more starkly with Wehbe's lascivious dance, the camera's delight in her bodily movements, and the male crowd's reaction to the scene. Here again, the Sobky genre's ambiguous position emerges between the popular and the respectable middle class, except that the Sobky clip itself claims respectability.

The film *Halawat Ruh* incited a moral panic in which this complex relationship to respectability played out. The movie is an adaptation of the Italian film *Malèna*, starring Monica Bellucci as a widow forced into prostitution after her husband goes to war. The choice of Haifa Wehbe for the Egyptian version combined her box-office power with her sexually illicit aura, which derives from her long career as a singer in sultry pop video clips broadcast on Gulf-based satellite television channels. Wehbe's casting in itself would have been enough to attract criticism from the press and social media commentators, but the panic grew when rumors arose that the film featured a scene in which an underage boy touched or paid to have sex with Wehbe. The attacks became so vehement that the government censored the film in an unorthodox fashion before its scheduled release in April 2014. Although the Censorship Authority had cleared the film's theatrical release, Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab reversed the decision and banned the film after an unprecedented emergency meeting with the Cinema Industry Chamber.

In response to the ban, Mohamed El Sobky came out to defend his film in numerous newspaper and television interviews.⁶⁰ He complained of the debts that he had accumulated in making his film as well as the prime minister's use of extralegal authority to censor it. Yet he also made a moral argument. On Tony Khalife's show *Ajra' al-Kalam* (The Most Audacious Talk), Sobky claimed that the rumors about the illicit scene were unfounded. In fact, he said, his film was showing Wehbe's lifestyle in order to set an example of what *not* to do.⁶¹ He claimed that his films displayed bad behavior in order to enjoin his audiences to avoid it, and he assured Khalife's viewers that not a single scene would ever contravene public morals. Sobky's perspective is not uncontroversial, which Khalife highlighted repeatedly. It shows, however, that Sobky sought to position himself amid a widespread moral panic not just as an entrepreneur, and certainly not as a vulgar producer, but as a patriarch with respectable objectives. The film was

eventually released in domestic theaters after a court decision in November 2014. The publicity generated by its censorship made it a box-office success.⁶²

Many Sobky video clips reveal this kind of moral positioning, including the most-watched one since 2016: the feature song of the comedy *Ocean 14*, entitled “Ah Laww La‘ibt Ya Zahr” (Oh, If the Dice Could Roll My Way, 2016). Performed by Ahmad Shiba, the song garnered hundreds of millions of views on YouTube.⁶³ Like “Halawat Ruh,” the clip has high production value, a glamorous dancer, and pristine sound quality, while the song’s main theme is a classic *mawwal* lamenting the link between financial debt and social indebtedness.

Whoever is owed money doesn’t sleep, imagine whoever owes any.
God damn you, poverty, you have turned me over to the rascals.
You humiliated a proud man because he’s penniless.
God damn you, neediness, the humiliation of the question [asking for money] is lethal.
Oh, if only the dice could roll my way, and the circumstances changed,
And I took the first ride on the road to wealth,
I’ll go to the first person I needed to ask [for money].
He dashed my hopes at the time and made me taste the bitterness of poverty.
I’ll do what’s right by him, and support him if he wavers,
And stand by him in hard times and be patient.

The theme of male friendship being made and unmade by poverty and debt recalls a number of *sha‘bi* musical laments, such as the opening of Ahmad ‘Adawiyya’s version of “Ya Bta‘ al-Tuffah” (Oh Apple Seller):

O world, who did you go for, and who are you still going for?
Who did you go for, and who will you go for?
I played all the cards, poor me, and I found bitterness in the joker.
I’m the one who bought friends, and they’re the ones who sold me.
I’m the one who cared for friends, and they’re the ones who let me down.
When I got my luck back, o fate, my friends [*‘awazli*] begrudged me.

‘Adawiyya’s opening is steeped in bitterness toward his former friends: the cycle of debt and indebtedness broke their bonds. In “Ah Laww La‘ibt Ya Zahr,” by contrast, the narrator takes a moral high ground. After being dragged into debt and tasting the social humiliation that it involves, he vows to remain in solidarity with whoever did not support him when he had no

money. While remaining within an older *sha'bi* musical and lyrical tradition, the video clip is distinguished by its high production value and moral position. This distinction encapsulates the Sobky brothers' struggle to articulate a highbrow version of popular entertainment. This version reflects their appropriation of the setting, style, and issues lived by residents of Cairo's *sha'bi* neighborhoods and their broader objective of accumulating capital as respectable entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Ahmed Fawzi Saleh once told me that the Sobkys “embody the failure of modernism in Egypt.”⁶⁴ He was quoting from Armbrust's *Mass Culture and Modernism*, an important reference for scholars of popular culture in Egypt. The book explores the tension between a modernist high culture promoted by the Egyptian state and the subversions of this culture in lowbrow entertainment such as magazines, songs, televised plays, TV serial dramas, and commercial cinema. According to Fawzi Saleh, the university as a modernist institution had failed the Sobky brothers (because they did not find jobs in their respective fields), so they decided to invest in the VHS business. This new technology allowed them to enter the film market, where they began by producing films with a high-culture aspiration, working with renowned directors such as Ali Badrakhan and the late Mohamed Khan. Yet their initial investment in high culture was not profitable, which, Fawzi Saleh said, prompted the Sobkys to enter “the postmodern era.” They became set on making cheap, mass entertainment films that broke all cinematic conventions, beginning with *al-Limbi* (2002).

Fawzi Saleh's interpretation of the Sobky story is not just interesting because it engages with Euro-American scholarship, but because he attends to the Sobkys' position within the contested category of “popular culture.” While Fawzi Saleh traces a broad shift from modernism

to postmodernism, I have traced a series of struggles between the Sobkys and the press, their critics on social media, their workers, and their competitors in *sha'bi* music production. The Sobky genre cannot be understood as an unproblematic representation of Egyptian popular culture in this sense. Nor can we simply define the Sobkys' version of popular entertainment through a binary opposition against the state's modernist program. This article has shown how Sobky films illuminate the contours of multiple struggles constituting multiple class-cultural formations, whether between an educated middle class and the vulgar/popular classes, exploitative entrepreneurs and their exploited work force, or highbrow and lowbrow *sha'bi* musical production. The Sobkys cannot sit unambiguously in any of these categories, because their peculiar position and their specific mode of capital accumulation emerge on several fronts in these struggles. Each struggle—each set of historical, political, economic, social parameters—shapes the category of “the popular” in contemporary Egypt.

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² A more detailed account of the Egyptian film industry's operations can be found in Chihab El Khachab, “Technology, Labor, and Mediation in Egyptian Film Production” (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017).

³ The exchange rate for the Egyptian pound and the US dollar in the years between 2012 and 2015 oscillated between about 6.5 and 7.5 pounds to the dollar.

⁴ See Magda Wassef, ed., *Égypte: 100 ans de cinéma* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe/Éditions Plume, 1995); Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Walter Armbrust, ed., *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002); Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007); Kay Dickinson, “I Have One Daughter and That Is Egyptian Cinema: ‘Aziza Amir amid the Histories and Geographies of National Allegory,” *Camera Obscura* 22, no. 1 (2007), 137–177; and Ifdal Elsaket, “Jungle Films in Egypt: Race, Anti-Blackness, and Empire,” *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 2 (2017), 8–32.

⁵ On political Islam in cinema, see Walter Armbrust, “Islamists in Egyptian Cinema,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), 922–931; Lina Khatib, “Nationalism and Otherness: The Representation of Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Cinema,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006), 63–80; and Ilhem Allagui and Abeer Najjar, “Framing Political Islam in Popular Egyptian Cinema,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*

4, no. 2 (2011), 203–224. On majority-minority relations, see Karima Laachir, “Sectarian Strife and ‘National Unity’ in Egyptian Films: A Case Study of *Hassan and Morqos*,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31, no. 1 (2011), 217–226; Deborah Starr, “Masquerade and the Performance of National Imaginaries: Levantine Ethics, Aesthetics, and Identities in Egyptian Cinema,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011), 31–57; Yaron Shemer, “From Chahine’s *al-Iskandariyya . . . leh* to *Salata baladi* and ‘An Yahud Misr: Rethinking Egyptian Jews’ Cosmopolitanism, Belonging, and Nostalgia in Cinema,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 7 (2014), 351–375; and Deborah Starr, “In Bed Together: Coexistence in Togo Mizrahi’s Alexandria Films,” in *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict*, ed. Rebecca Bryant (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015): 129–156. On gender, see Sabrina Joseph, “Representations of Private/Public Domains: The Feminine Ideal and Modernist Agendas in Egyptian Film, mid-1950s–1980s,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, no. 2 (2009), 72–109; Dalia Said Mostafa, “Cinematic Representations of the Changing Gender Relations in Today’s Cairo,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2009), 1–19; and Valérie Orlando, “Scheherazade Tell Me a Story (Yousry Nasrallah, 2009): Talking Women’s Rights, Feminism and the ‘Arab Spring’,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 7 (2014), 679–691. On “clean cinema,” see Viola Shafik, “Prostitute for Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24, no. 6 (2001), 711–725; Karim Tartoussieh, “Pious Stardom: Cinema and Islamic Revival in Egypt,” *Arab Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (2007), 30–43; and Karin van Nieuwkerk, *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt’s Islamic Revival* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013). On hashish consumption, see Sobhi Al-Zobaidi, “Hashish and the ‘Carnavalesque’ in Egyptian Cinema,” *Middle Eastern Journal of Culture and Communication* 3, no. 3 (2010), 375–392. On emigration, see Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, “Les mirages de l’émigration au miroir du cinéma égyptien,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 134 (2016), 99–115. On protests in cinema, see Nabil Mouline, “‘Dégage—We’re Filming!’: Egyptian Cinema and the Arab Uprisings,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 7 (2014), 330–350.

⁶ Walter Armbrust, “New Cinema, Commercial Cinema, and the Modernist Tradition in Egypt,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995), 81–129.

⁷ See Maureen Kiernan, “Cultural Hegemony and National Film Language: Youssef Chahine,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995), 130–152; Ibrahim Fawal, *Youssef Chahine* (London: Palgrave BFI, 2001); Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine’s Cinema* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010); and Wisam Abdul-Jabbar, “Towards a Minor Cinema: A Deleuzian Reflection on Chahine’s *Alexandria Why?* (1978),” *Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 2 (2015), 159–171.

⁸ This insight was developed by anthropologists of South Asian cinema, see for instance Sara Dickey, “The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2, 340–372; Lotte Hoek, *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 157–180; and Emmanuel Grimaud, *Bollywood Film Studio, ou Comment les films se font à Bombay* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2003), 479–502.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, ed. John Storey (London: Verso, 1988), 442–453.

¹⁰ Arabic-language studies of Egyptian “popular culture” (*al-thaqafa al-sha’biyya*) do not tackle this struggle in the name of a substantive, static, and folkloristic notion of Egyptian culture. See Ahmad Shamseldin Al-Haggagi, *Mawlid al-Batal fi al-Sira al-Sha’biyya* [The Birth of the Hero in the Popular Epic] (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1991); Abdelhamid Hawwas, *Awraq fi al-Thaqafa al-Sha’biyya al-Misriyya* [Essays on Egyptian Popular Culture] (Cairo: National Cultural Palaces Organization, 2005). For English and French-language scholarship, see Walter Armbrust, “The National Vernacular: Folklore and Egyptian Popular Culture,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 31, no. 4 (1992), 525–542; Nicolas Puig, “Sha’abi ‘populaire’: usages et significations d’une notion ambiguë dans le monde de la musique en Égypte,” *Civilisations* 53, no. 1–2 (2006), 23–44; James Grippo, “What’s Not on Egyptian Television and Radio! Locating the ‘Popular’ in Egyptian Sha’bi,” in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 137–162; Iman Hamam, “Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture: The Case of Egyptian Comedies,” in *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, ed. Tarik Sabry (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 186–213.

¹¹ An experienced producer, Hussein el-Qalla, himself a major video distributor in the 1980s, told me that the Sobkys competed with him, Yousry el-Hayatmi, and Wassef Fayez for a share in the booming VHS market. The rise of satellite television and the gradual spread of VCD technology eventually crushed this market in the 1990s. To this day, the Sobkys retain an important share of the VCD market, but it is difficult to assess the extent to which this distribution outlet is still profitable. Interview with Hussein el-Qalla, 25 May 2014.

¹² In the words of the well-known cinematographer Tarek El-Telmissany, the Sobkys understand the “inner composition of the Egyptian people” (*tarkibat al-sha‘b al-misri*). Telephone interview with Tarek El-Telmissany, 13 August 2013.

¹³ Over the last two years, Ahmed’s son, Karim El Sobky, has been personally involved in producing, directing, and distributing some of his father’s movies. Mohamed’s daughters, Rana and Nada El Sobky, have overseen their own production projects within their father’s company. Rana and Nada had been involved in editing Sobky movies in previous years, just like their relatives Sayyed and Mostafa El Sobky are involved in writing screenplays. The predominance of Sobky family members in all phases of production has added to industry insiders’ perception that Sobky movies are homemade, amateurish, lowbrow productions. Regarding financing, Ahmed El Sobky bought and finished two major ongoing productions abandoned by their producers with pending postproduction costs in 2013: *Al-Harb al-‘Alamiyya al-Thalitha (World War III)*, begun by the late tycoon Mohamed Hassan Ramzy, and the widely anticipated sequel to the Egyptian adaptation of *The Godfather*, *Al-Gezira 2 (The Island 2)*, coproduced and directed by Sharif ‘Arafa.

¹⁴ See, for example, Mohamed Mansi, “‘Khataya’ ‘A’ilat al-Sobky: Sabb wa Qadhf wa Mashahid Sakhina wa Alfadh Kharija” [The “Sins” of the Sobky Family: Profanity and Insult and Hot Scenes and Unseemly Words], *Tahrir News*, 11 October 2015, <https://www.tahrirnews.com/posts/318245/>; and Wagih Felbermayer, “‘A’ilat al-Sobky min Mahallat al-Jizara ila Sinima al-Muqawalat” [The Sobky Family Between the Butcher Shops and Lowbrow Cinema], *Euro Arab Press*, 7 August 2015, <http://www.eapress.eu/wordpress/?p=1167>.

¹⁵ See, for example, Nurhan Atef, “Ihdhar! Al-Sinima Tarja‘ ila al-Khalf” [Caution! Cinema Is Going Backwards], *Mohit*, 6 October 2014, <https://www.masress.com/moheet/2150548>; Isam Saad, “Baltaji wa Raqisa wa Mutrib Sha‘bi... al-Khalta al-Sihriyya li-Ifsad al-Mujtama’” [A Thug and a Dancer and a Popular Singer... The Secret Recipe for Corrupting Society], *al-Ahram*, 23 April 2014, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/News/11162/45/279060>; and Hassan al-Rashidi, “al-Aflam al-Habita... wa Niqabat al-Mumaththilin” [Vulgar Films... and the Actors’ Union], *al-Wafd*, 13 October 2015, <https://alwafd.news/essay/2377>.

¹⁶ Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 165–220.

¹⁷ See characterizations of the “Sobky audience” in Gamal Taye, “‘Shaght’ al-Subki al-Sinima’i” [Sobky’s Cinematic Fragmentation], *Rose al-Youssef*, 30 October 2012, <http://www.rosaeveryday.com/article.aspx?articleID=1113>; and Gihan al-Gohari, “‘Shari‘ al-Haram’... Al-Jami‘ ‘Khasran’ ma ‘Ada al-Muntij” [‘Haram Street’... Everyone Is “Losing” Except the Producer], *Sabah al-Khayr*, 27 September 2011, <https://www.masress.com/rosasabah/125974>.

¹⁸ This argument is clearest in articles deploring how male youths mindlessly imitate violent behaviour seen in Sobky movies. See Saad, “Baltaji wa Raqisa”; Fathy Hussein, “Sinima al-Sobky” [Sobky Cinema], *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, 17 April 2014, <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=410797&r=0>; and Fatima Fouad Ammar, “Min Taqlid ‘Kaboria’ ila ‘al-Ustura’... Nasir Hulm Shabab al-‘Ashwa’iyyat... wa Nuqqad: Ramadan Ghayyar Ma‘ayir al-Baltaja” [From the Imitation of ‘Kaboria’ to ‘The Legend’... The Champion of Youth’s Dream in Informal Settlements... and Critics Say: “Ramadan Has Changed the Standards of Thuggishness”], *al-Ahram*, 1 July 2016, <http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/1163781.aspx>.

¹⁹ Interview with Ahmad Badawy, 2 September 2013

²⁰ Interview with Abdallah al-Ghaly, 7 January 2014. Likewise, the screenwriter Mariam Naoum argued that the Sobkys’ commercial success can be attributed to the audience’s tiredness after the 2011 revolution. Refusing to feel any more emotional burden (*nakad*), the audience saw cinema as an escape. The average Egyptian father wants no more than to see a dancer and some gags with his family. Interview with Mariam Naoum, 16 September 2013. The assistant director Safiy el-Din Mahmoud echoed this view: “People want to watch something entertaining, not something that’ll bring them complications (*ta‘qid*).” Interview with Safiy el-Din Mahmoud, 29 September 2013.

²¹ This image is channeled in the Sobkys’ own productions, where they themselves often appear as gruff characters in an ironic and self-reflexive fashion. See Riham Abdel Wahab, “‘Uqdat al-Khawaja’: Awlad al-Subki Yafrudun Anfushum ka Duyuf Sharaf fi Aflamhim” [‘The Stranger’s Complex’: The Sobkys Impose Themselves as Honorary Guests in Their Own Films], *Tahrir News*, 19 December 2017, <https://www.tahrirnews.com/posts/858303/>.

²² In 2014, most Egyptian movie theaters were owned by two major conglomerates: Renaissance Cinemas and the trio composed of Oscar, al-Masa, and al-Nasr. The latter was headed by Mohamed Hassan Ramzy himself, who held additional influence in these conglomerates by virtue of being head of the Cinema Industry Chamber, the representative organ for film producers within the Federation of Egyptian Industries. Without owning exhibition venues of their own, the Sobky brothers were at the mercy of these conglomerates when it came to the domestic distribution of their movies. These decisions were additionally compromised by the fact that the major exhibition conglomerates were also, since the early 2000s, the country’s major production houses.

- ²³ Edited videos of the specific moment when the grunt happens have cropped up on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_03atBdJXo and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ1pOmDJF7Q>. The whole interview is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTvXOvd5KS0>. It was not the first time a Sobky brother acted in a way considered “vulgar” on television. For instance, Ahmed El Sobky audibly insulted the host Wael el-Ebrashi live on the air before hanging up the phone on him in a television interview on *al-‘Ashira Masa’an*.
- ²⁴ This outrage can also lead to prosecution. For instance, Mohamed El Sobky’s daughter Rana was accused of offending public morals because she allegedly inserted obscene images in *Regata* (2015) while acting as the film’s editor. Rana was dragged through courts for several months before being exonerated.
- ²⁵ “Kamira Sinima Mitru Tubarri’ al-Subki min ‘Iddi‘a’at Fata Ittathamathu bi-l-Taharrush” [Cinema Metro’s Camera Proves Sobky’s Innocence of the Accusations of Harassment by a Young Girl], *al-Mubtada’*, 21 October 2013, <https://www.mobtada.com/details/112808>.
- ²⁶ Mohamed Abdel Rahman, “al-Muqata‘a al-Mustahila li-Aflam al-Subki” [The Impossible Boycott of Sobky’s Films], *elcinema.com*, 20 October 2013, <https://www.elcinema.com/press/678934457>.
- ²⁷ For instance, the youth movement Shoft Taharros? (Have You Seen Harassment?) accused the Sobky brothers of being singlehandedly responsible for the rise in cases of sexual harassment in Egypt. See May Elias and Ahmad Adly, “Mubadara Shababiyya Tattahim al-Subki bi-l-Mas’uliyah ‘an Ziyadat Halat al-Taharrush,” [A Youth Movement Blames Sobky for the Increase in Harassment Cases], *Elaph*, 11 August 2013, <http://elaph.com/Web/Entertainment/2013/8/829272.html>; and Marwa Abdel Fadel, “Kayfa Radda al-Subki ‘ala Ittihatimihi bi Ziyadat al-Taharrush al-Jinsi?,” [How Did Sobky Respond to the Accusations of Driving Up Sexual Harassment?], *Sayidati.net*, 14 August 2013, <http://www.sayidaty.net/node/82340/>.
- ²⁸ A more comprehensive critique of the discourse surrounding “predatory” working-class Arab men can be found in Paul Amar, “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (2011), 299–328.
- ²⁹ Sadat’s liberalization policies produced an overall trend toward higher meat prices. Ibrahim Soliman and Shahla Shapouri, “Egyptian Meat Market: Policy Issues in Trade, Prices, and Expected Market Performance”, report submitted to the Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture, 1985.
- ³⁰ Armbrust, *Mass Culture*, 11–36.
- ³¹ The latest case involved a gun threat to a stylist and her partner ending in a yet unserved jail sentence for Mohamed El Sobky. See Saber al-Mahlawi, “Habs Muhammad al-Subki Sana li-Ittihatimihi bi-Taahid Riham Asem wa-Zawjiha” [Mohammed El Sobky Imprisoned for a Year After Being Accused of Threatening Riham Asem and Her Husband], *Masrawy*, 6 January 2018, http://www.masrawy.com/news/news_cases/details/2018/1/6/1236376/.
- ³² I was unable to talk to the Sobkys during my fieldwork. When I asked some interlocutors who worked with them to introduce me in person, they told me that the Sobkys would not want to talk to me because they did not understand “this PhD stuff.” When I managed to acquire Ahmed El Sobky’s contact information, I had a thirty-second exchange with him before he abruptly replied: “I’ll call you when I’m back from abroad,” and hung up without answering calls ever again. I have had numerous phone calls with his son Karim, but he never seemed to have time for an interview while I was in Cairo.
- ³³ Interview with Sandy Samuel, 9 September 2013.
- ³⁴ Interview with Mohammed Setohy, 26 May 2014.
- ³⁵ Interview with Habi Seoud, 25 August 2013.
- ³⁶ The Sobky brothers have good contacts with distributors in the Gulf, including some who still give advances on distribution to finance film production. These advances are part of regular accusations of money laundering, which are not just targeted at Sobky companies. The whole industry has relied on regular funding from Gulf distributors since the early 2000s.
- ³⁷ Interview with Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, 7 October 2013.
- ³⁸ Interview with Mohammed Setohy, 12 November 2013.
- ³⁹ Since the Sobkys generally make movies with low budgets, their crew tends to be unskilled, according to Abdelsalam Radwan. The low-skilled crews, in turn, mean that scenes are longer to shoot because there are many more errors than needed, and workers have shifts lasting longer than the conventional twelve hours. Interview with Abdelsalam Radwan, 16 January 2014.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Mohammed Setohy, 7 November 2013.
- ⁴¹ Interview with Abdelsalam Radwan, 16 January 2014.
- ⁴² Interview with Osama Abol Ata, 25 October 2013.
- ⁴³ The events and conversations relayed in this vignette occurred on 21 December 2013.

- ⁴⁴ On the *hara*'s historical importance, see May Telmissany, *Al-Hara fi al-Sinima al-Misriyya, 1939-2001* [The Alleyway in Egyptian Cinema, 1939-2001], trans. Rania Fathy (Cairo: National Centre for Translation, 2014).
- ⁴⁵ Although the dancer is invariably female, the singer is not always male. There are well-known *sha 'bi* female singers, including Amina and Pussy.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Daoud Abdel Sayed, 20 October 2013.
- ⁴⁷ Interview with Mohamed Samir, 4 April 2013.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Mariam Naoum, 16 September 2013.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Hala Galal, 17 September 2013.
- ⁵⁰ Conversation with Walid Abul Seoud, 21 October 2013.
- ⁵¹ Conversation with Walid Abul Seoud, 14 September 2013.
- ⁵² Hamam, "Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture," 189
- ⁵³ Daniel Gilman, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 12.
- ⁵⁴ Going through both Sobky channels, the most watched videos are invariably songs, and the most watched songs have hundreds of millions of views, while the less watched ones regularly garner in the millions. The channels are available at the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/user/elsobkyforfilm/videos?sort=p&flow=grid&view=0> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/SobkyProduction/videos?flow=grid&sort=p&view=0>.
- ⁵⁵ Even in the "golden age" of the 1940s and 1950s, musicals would be written in such a way as to justify breaking into song at any moment, by situating the metanarrative in a milieu of cabaret singers and dancers, for example, or amid a series of weddings. On disjointed narrative in Sobky films, see Hamam, "Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture"; May Karam and Samar Fathi, "Aswa' Khamsa wa 'Ashrun Filman fi al-'Ashra Sanawat al-Akhira" [The Worst Twenty-Five Films in the Last Ten Years], *Rose al-Youssef al-Usbu 'iyya*, 10 September 2011, <https://www.masress.com/rosaweekly/124264>.
- ⁵⁶ This label ought to be historicized, because the "golden age" song-and-dance sequences now celebrated as refined entertainment were considered vulgar by critics in their own time. See Marjorie Franken, "Egyptian Cinema and Television: Dancing and the Female Image," *Visual Anthropology* 8, no. 2-4 (1996), 267-285; and Carolina Bracco, "Bailarinas del cine egipcio: De la 'edad de oro' a la marginalización," *Secuencias* 35 (2012), 1-30.
- ⁵⁷ An example of the former is the *tarab* singing of Umm Kulthum and Asmahan, while the latter designates the *shababi* music common among video clip artists on Rotana. See Frédéric Lagrange, *Musiques d'Égypte* (Paris & Arles: Cité de la Musique & Actes Sud, 1996); Nicolas Puig, *Farah : Musiciens de noce et scènes urbaines au Caire* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2010); and Gilman, *Cairo Pop*.
- ⁵⁸ Puig, "Sha'abi 'populaire,'" 34-35.
- ⁵⁹ The literature on *sha 'bi* singers concentrates on some of these voices. On Ahmad 'Adawiyya, see Armbrust, "The National Vernacular," 531-542. On Shaaban Abdel Rahim, see Joel Gordon, "Singing the Pulse of the Egyptian-Arab Street: Shaaban Abd al-Rahim and the Geo-pop-politics of Fast Food," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003), 73-88; and James R. Grippo, "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song: Shaaban Abdel Rahim, Egyptian Shaabi, and the Videoclip Phenomenon," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 16, <http://archived.tbsjournal.arabmediasociety.com/Grippo.html>.
- ⁶⁰ In the press, see Ahmad 'Antar, "al-Subki: La Tujad Ayy Mashahid Sakhina fi *Halawat Ruh*, wa Man Hajam al-Film 'Fassaruh 'ala 'add fahmu'" [El Sobky: "There Are No Hot Scenes in *Halawat Ruh*, and Those Who attacked the Film 'Interpreted It Within Their Own Limits'], *al-Watan*, 18 April 2014; "Al-Subki: *Halawat Ruh* Film Nadhi'" [El Sobky: "*Halawat Ruh* Is a Clean Film"], *al-Nahar*, 19 April 2014, <https://www.masress.com/alnahar/200166>; and "Al-Subki: *Halawat Ruh* Qissa Waqi'iyya 'Ishtuha bi-Nafsi'" [El Sobky: "*Halawat Ruh* Is a Realistic Story That I've Lived Myself"], *Masrawy*, 20 April 2014, <https://www.masress.com/masrawy/5880954>. On television, see Mahmoud Saad's show on Al Nahar from 18 April 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZG7SfLzshQ>) and Wael el-Ebrashi's show *al-'Ashira Masa'an* on Dream TV from 19 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVz7W6z2Nt4>.
- ⁶¹ The show aired on 5 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXhGyW64500>
- ⁶² Mohamed El Sobky claimed that his total losses were eight million pounds in a TV interview with Basma Wahba on her show, *Shaykh al-Hara*, on 30 May 2018. It is unclear whether this number designates prospective unattained profits or actual losses on the film's overall budget. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EumM_G-opg
- ⁶³ Shiba shot to fame after a video of an intoxicated man hugging him and praising him as a "hundred, hundred, hundred percent guy" at a wedding. This rise to online celebrity earned him a spot on a Sobky production. Ahmed El Sobky uses this strategy to capitalize on unknown *sha 'bi* singers who go viral. This was the case with the hit song *Mafish Sahib Yatsahib* (There Are No Friends to Be Friends With, 2015), which became a Sobky hit after it was already an online hit.

⁶⁴ Conversation with Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, 28 October 2013.