

1

THE TRUMAN SHOW

During a short research fieldwork in 2009 with mainly Egyptian migrant workers employed at a security company in Doha, I had the following dream:

I was in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis in northern Egypt, taking a walk in the fields with my old friend M. Suddenly we arrived at a huge, new, high-tech office complex. The buildings, seven to ten stories high and built of dark glass and steel, formed a block in the middle of the Egyptian countryside, and at the center stood the station of an elevated high-speed train line, also brand new, which could take one to Cairo in thirty minutes instead of three hours. I said: “This is great, now I can come from Cairo to here on the high-speed line and walk to the village.” M. told me that this was “the Smart Village No. 2,” built as a copy of the original Smart Village on the outskirts of Cairo.²

Arriving at a place like Doha unsettles one’s sense of reality. The way this nighttime dream brought together a spectacle of ostentatious hypermodernity and the rural setting from where two of my friends and interlocutors in Doha hail probably reflected my own confusion about the reality encountered by the migrant workers with whom I was staying.

The previous evening, I had gone with Tawfiq, who worked as a security guard at a bank in downtown Doha, to visit our mutual friend Amr, who, like Tawfiq, comes from Nazlat al-Rayyis. Amr was posted as a security guard at the Eurasian Sports Association (not its real name),

where he manned the reception desk at the entrance. His work site was near the National Stadium and the Aspire Sports Academy, which are among the most conspicuously hypermodern spaces of Doha. Nearby stands Villaggio, one of the city's fanciest shopping malls. Villaggio is a simulation of Venice, its shops constructed as Disneyfied imitations of Italian houses. There is an ice-skating rink and a canal where one can take a gondola ride, and the ceiling is painted to look like the sky—blue, with white clouds and diffuse light. It was Thursday evening (the beginning of the weekend in Qatar) and the mall was full. Tawfiq and I entered to buy some food to share with Amr at his workplace.

At first, Tawfiq was intrigued, pleased to see the many attractively dressed young women strolling around, but he quickly became disturbed and, finally, appalled. He said:

Now I realize what a good, decent place Egypt is (*addi eb Masr bint nas*, literally: how much Egypt is the daughter of good people). This is the purest falsification. This is *The Truman Show*. I have never missed Egypt as badly as I do now.

Two things upset Tawfiq. For one thing, Villaggio is an extreme display of conspicuous consumption, an insult flung in the face of the conditions of exploitation Tawfiq and his fellow migrant workers faced in Qatar. Tawfiq had to count every penny of his meager salary. Like other migrant workers I met, he was extremely price conscious, becoming angry at the thought of anyone, rich and poor alike, spending more money than was necessary. Conspicuous consumption was an offense against both his position in the system and his main goal in being there: saving money for his future.

Second, Tawfiq hated the mall because it was such a comprehensive simulation. Comparing the mall with the Hollywood film *The Truman Show* (1998), in which the hero Truman is the unknowing star of a reality television show, Tawfiq described it as a fake, artificial world that made it impossible to find any footing in the real world (which he explicitly

located in Egypt). His observation echoes a concept that has gained currency in the study of the Arab Gulf: hyperreality.

Hyperreality (Baudrillard 1993; Steiner 2014; Wippel et al. 2014) is a form of simulation so convincing that the original appears less real. Regarding the ambitious construction projects in Gulf cities, the air-conditioned worlds of luxury and material pleasure, the skyscrapers rising along the coastline in past years, and the combined sense of awe and disorientation these structures often generate, there is certainly something to be said for applying the notion of hyperreality when trying to understand them. Had Tawfiq known about the concept, he well might have used it. Had he been familiar with the work of the geographer Yasser Elsheshtawy, he would also have likely agreed that prestige projects in the Gulf cities are indeed “spectacles” (in the sense of Debord 1977), where ultimately “falseness becomes a virtue, a model” (Elsheshtawy 2013, 112).

Tawfiq’s anger at the sight of Villagio mall reminds us that there is another, darker side to the hyperrealities of the Arab Gulf (see also Elsheshtawy 2010). They are built, maintained, and serviced by a labor force that lives in a very different sort of reality from the glass and steel palaces along the coast. Tawfiq described the contrast through another popular cultural reference, the science fiction novel *Utopia* by Egyptian writer Ahmad Khaled Towfiq (2008; 2011). His book is a nightmare vision of extreme class polarization, where the rich live in the isolated city of “Utopia,” protected by high walls separating it from the extreme misery on the outside. Tawfiq explained: “Doha is also such a utopia. As for the other side of the utopia, that is the dystopia where we live.”

If the sports park and the Villagio mall were prime examples of utopian hyperreality, the daily life of Tawfiq and his colleagues might be described as a kind of *hyporeality*, a dystopian existence that is somehow less than real: a dim state of routine, focused on something other than the immediate material spot in which they are present—a life of enduring for the sake of something other than this.

However, concepts like hyperreality or “hyporeality” only take us so far. They may help us to understand the powerful effect of the Gulf as a dream world where everything seems possible. But unlike Baudrillard’s hyperbolic “desert of the real,” fantasies often do not take one away from reality; rather, they change reality. Falseness may be a virtue in shopping malls, yet they structure the material ways in which people actually move, eat, shop, and work. They make some people rich while providing others a meager income. The aspirations of migrant workers ordinarily involve more mundane projects: home, marriage, family. The workers’ less-than-real sense of existence in Doha was intrinsically connected to an immensely productive process of realizing things at home; they were building lives somewhere else.

This is what I try to trace in the following chapters: the dialectics of the pressing dream of movement and advancement; the experience of the life of the migrant, which is felt to not really be a life yet is entirely concerned with building a life; the troubled temporality of a constantly deferred future, as produced by this dialectic under the conditions of an oppressive labor regime; the tangible material effects that migrants’ strivings have; and, last but not least, the way those material effects in turn shape new dreams. This process is especially pronounced among low-income migrant laborers relocating to the Gulf states on temporary contracts, and it is this group my book discusses. The concrete questions I try to answer are as follows. What does being a migrant worker do to one’s dreams? And what impact do those dreams have on the world in which one lives?