Arab Cultural Studies

History, Politics and the Popular

Edited by
Anastasia Valassopoulos
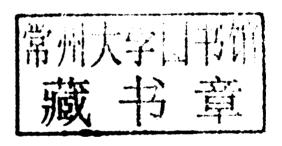
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Anna Bernard is Lecturer in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. She specializes in the relationship between postcolonial studies and Israel/Palestine and the transnational representation and reception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She is the editor, with Ziad Elmarsafy and David Attwell, of *Debating Orientalism* (forthcoming 2012), and with Ziad Elmarsafy, of "Intimacies: In Memoriam Mahmoud Darwish," a special issue of *Interventions* (forthcoming 2012). She has also published essays on Israel/Palestine and "Third-World literature," Palestinian writing after 9/11, transnational genres of partition literature, and the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti. She is completing a book on national narration in contemporary Palestinian and Israeli "world" writing.

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Anastasia Valassopoulos is Lecturer in World Literatures at the University of Manchester and is the author of *Contemporary Arab Women Writers* (Routledge, 2007). She has published articles in *Research in African Literatures, Popular Music and Society* and *Critical Survey* and has written widely on Edward Said and popular culture, Arab and transnational feminism and Arab culture. She has recently edited several journal special issues on the topics of: Arab feminisms; textual responses to the war on terror; Arab cultural studies. She is

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Yousef Awad obtained his BA and MA in English Literature from the University of Jordan in 1998 and 2004 respectively. In 2011, Dr. Awad obtained his PhD from the University of Manchester, UK. His monograph *The Arab Atlantic* (2012) was recently published by Lambert Academic Publishing. He is currently an assistant professor at the University of Jordan

Walter Armbrust is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, and a fellow of St. Antony's College. He is the author of *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996), and numerous articles and book chapters on modern Egyptian mass media and popular culture.

Arab Cultural Studies

This book seeks to both showcase and further develop innovative research and debates on contemporary Arab cultural production. Popular culture in the form of cinema, popular music, literature, visual media and cyber-cultures, both local and imported, enjoy a central role in Arab cultural life, and the contributors to this innovative collection showcase the tremendous cultural output emerging from the Arab world. They present sensitive, conceptual readings whilst remaining mindful of the place of this work within a wider framework that seeks to prevent isolationist readings of cultural phenomena. Making sense of the place of culture in the Arab world, and agreeing upon a broadly recognisable and commonly accepted set of terms within which to discuss this output, is a new and urgent challenge. *Arab Cultural Studies* aspires to understand, communicate and theorise these forms.

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Foreword

Dina Matar

In 2011, the Arab world was rocked by popular protests that brought down seemingly invincible structures of power, toppling systems of governance and expanding the spaces for cultural expression and cultural transformation. While the political outcomes and machinations of these protests are clearly evident, with the ushering in of new forms of government and the rise to power of previously banned parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the changes in the quotidian or the everyday cultural practices and cultural expressions are not so starkly evident. Given the need for grounded empirical evidence and research, these changes might take time to unravel and study critically without losing sight of the historical contexts.

Broadly speaking, the study of cultural transformations and practices in the Arab world has not morphed into a recognized and acknowledged field of study, let alone a discipline. In fact, much of the "recognized" work on the region has been mostly concerned with the formal and the official; with systems of government; with regimes and their practices; with unresolved debates about the concepts of the state and civil society, of power and hegemony; with economic conditions; and with international as well as regional relations. Underlining these concerns, and indeed the mainstream scholarship, was an implicit assumption about the exceptional and unique nature of the Arab world and its "culture", resulting in vague generalizations and imaginations of the region as a coherent, self-sealed and self-explanatory space, with yet again a singular culture (Islam) named as the main obstacle on the road to "modernity".

While such scholarship took centre stage in academic conferences and disciplines, and helped shape public discourses and hegemonic imaginations about the Arab world and what "Arab" means, there has also been an exponential expansion in the number of articles and books dedicated to explaining and understanding Arab culture, media and society. In various ways, this burgeoning scholarship came in response to historical moments; to visible and real cultural (and media) transformations; to diverse modalities of participation and politics in public life (though these modalities might not be conventionally

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called political participation); and to the formation of contested identities in multiple spheres, including the private, the non-official and the mundane. Some aspects of these changes are starkly evident in mediated forms of cultural production and culture as a way of life: there are talk shows that expose gender inequalities; televised discussions of gender and family issues; songwriters and musicians whose material and modes of expression challenge received traditions; bloggers who use the Internet to criticize official politics and generally extend the remit of public debate; performance artists developing new hybrid forms of political art; diaspora activists who develop deterritorialized modes of political engagement with old and new homes; and numerous films that engage with the everydayness of culture. However, as Anastasia Valassopoulos correctly notes in her introduction to this special issue, scattered studies about these cultural forms and practices are not themselves the beginning of what might be called a field of Arab cultural studies — they follow on from other beginnings and inquiries into different aspects of Arab culture. And, crucially, as Tarik Sabry (2011) contends, this compendium of books, articles and treatises is not yet epistemologically conscious of itself or of its part of the whole.

Transformative events, such as the ongoing Arab uprisings, demand transformative intellectual responses, brave new ways of thinking and interrogation, creativity and creation. In this respect, this collection of articles and inquiries into Arab culture provides a timely and rich body of work, critique and analysis, and a language (or episteme) of Arab culture that responds in different ways to these events, and that forms an important part of a new epistemological "beginning" — one concerned with building up, and legitimizing, Arab cultural studies into a coherent and important field of study.

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Sabry, T. (ed.) (2011) *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, I. B. Tauris, London.

Introduction: Arab Cultural Studies

Anastasia Valassopoulos

> The Arab World is, like the rest of the global south, subject to the dynamics of the global capitalist order and its hegemonic culture. Besides, in today's globalised world, we really cannot afford to conceptualise or theorise an Arab cultural studies through the prism of the local alone. (Sabry 2010, p. 189)

So, how to theorize an Arab cultural studies? What to include, what to leave out, what to give prominence to? When I first started working on the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum in the mid nineties, I thought myself quite the trailblazer. I almost immediately found out that Virginia Danielson had already done a terrific job on this (1991), and she went on to write a book on the subject that became the inspiration for a wonderful documentary by Michal Goldman (1996) entitled *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt*. Years later, in 2010, Laura Lohman published another study on the great singer: *Umm Kulthum: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007*. Cleary, Umm Kulthum as subject matter for serious cultural research was here to stay. At the same time, I came across excellent work being done, in English, on entertainers, musicians, dance and also film in the Arab world. It was clear that a discipline was about to emerge but that first some groundwork would have to be done to make the field accessible. Viola Shafik's book *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, first published in German in 1996 and then in English in 1998, was among the first international books that enabled researchers to form a picture of the history of Arab cinema. It was not that there had been no previous work on the subject, but rather that Shafik's method — to break down the history of film-making in the Arab world into epochs and eras and to bring to the discussion issues of influence, censorship, music and the question of independent auteur cinema — heralded a more conceptual way of looking at world cinema. It was now no longer possible to generalize, as Shafik had shown not only how extensive the field really was, but, more importantly, how much more work would have to be done on individual film-makers, their techniques and influences, the history of cinematic movements and schools, the business of production and distribution, and the transnational element behind all

film-making. Using the history of cinema as a way into Arab culture, and therefore as an anchor to Arab cultural studies, looked very productive. After all, the very form and structure of cinema was internationally recognizable: the set-up of film production, the star system and even issues surrounding censorship were all areas that discerning moviegoers would be expected to be familiar with. What Danielson and, subsequently, Walter Armbrust's (1996) seminal work *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* taught me, however, was the extent to which detail was significant: detail and immersion. Where local knowledge was crucial, the framework within which to understand it was paramount. The framework of Arab cultural studies was not yet really formed, and yet Armbrust, Danielson, Shafik, Abu-Lughod and others were beginning to pave the way. In fact, if it were necessary to argue where the discipline of Arab cultural studies in English could locate its beginnings, it would have to be with Lila Abu-Lughod's (1986) *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Here, areas often thought to belong exclusively to anthropology, with its extant methodological boundaries, revealed untold potential. In this dazzling book, Abu-Lughod showed how gendered discourse operated at the level of culture within a community that seemingly disallowed the articulation of personal grievances and pain. Detailed research showed how poetry — both its creation and its verbalization — was a tool used in certain circumscribed and highly controlled moments, and replaced what would otherwise have been tricky altercations between the sexes; a move not traditionally permitted among the community of Bedouins that Abu-Lughod researched. *Veiled Sentiments* opened the door for a discussion of cultural norms and practices that were sophisticated, creative, nuanced and effective. Similarly, Karen van Nieuwkerk's (1996) book, *"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, traced the complex history of entertainers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt, showing how the professionalization of female entertainment enabled native and Muslim women to enter the industry. Van Nieuwkerk's book informed and contextualized the emergence of someone like Umm Kulthum, and gave a voice to the underbelly of the entertainment industry: "On Thursday evenings, employees and labourers rush[ed] back home from work so as not to miss the retransmission of Umm Kulthum's concert" (*Le Monde*, 12 November 1967).[1] What Abu-Lughod's work had shown was that other means of communication could question the codes of honour of a society: in short, that one had to look deeply into any given culture before making generalizations about its political and social mores and regulations. Indeed, Abu-Lughod (1995, p. 66) went on to claim that popular culture had the capacity to enable what she called the "comforting illusion of equality", something that no political discourse had hitherto been able to achieve. Similarly, Armbrust's close look at the reach, subtleties and potential of mass culture to revitalize and recalibrate the meaning of the modern and modernity in the Middle

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1. People who could not afford to attend the live performance would catch the radio broadcast the following day.

East impacted on the entire field of cultural studies in and on the Middle East. Where Shafik and Danielson had engaged with established musicians, film-makers and performing artists, Abu-Lughod, van Nieuwkerk and Armbrust brought to the fore ways in which to talk about popular culture alongside wider national debates on language, westernization, and high and low culture. Here, members of the Al-Alawi tribes jostled for discursive space alongside the vulgar but hilarious Ahmad Adawiya and the performers of Muhammad 'Ali Street — the treatment of these subjects was serious, discerning and insightful, though always attuned to their popular reach. The works did not attempt to co-opt popular artists solely into a Foucauldian framework where "popular" culture served to reflect on wider social paradigms at work. The artists were examined within their own context: the context of production. Thus, their influences, audience, political affiliations, domestic arrangements, class, gender and sexual orientation were all considered worthy of research and debate. Culture, in this sense, was seen to be constituted by persons *within* a context, *for* that context — albeit an ever changing one. The term "popular", by definition, inhabits a transitory space, and so the very popularity of this singer or that, this film or that, tells us as much about the surrounding moments as it tells us about that particular medium. These early works in the field established the language for discussing Arab culture in general, and popular culture in particular.

Research into all areas of Arab culture was soon to become publically prominent. Alia Arasoughly's (1996) often-referenced edited collection, *Screens of Life*, brought a new edge to discussions on Arab film. Here, historiography jostled for space alongside discussions on genre, national cinemas, political ideology through film, and the difficult topic of periodization and its usefulness. Arasoughly's edition privileged the *specifics* of Arab film — details that belonged to one cinematic lineage and not another. Reading the various concerns of Egyptian, Lebanese, Algerian and Syrian cinemas alongside each other made it clear that each had been enabled by a tradition that referenced particular cultural and historical concerns. Cinema, here, was read as an engaging and engaged tool able to fully respond to socio-political as well as aesthetic debates, and also to contribute to emerging opinions on the role of cinema in the Arab world. The "central social role that film plays in the Arab world" (Arasoughly 1996, p. xi) was contextualized and explored, as were the clear links between early Arab cinema (on both technical and thematic fronts) and foreign occupation. Such coverage enabled later scholars to participate in an ongoing project of historicizing Arab film. This level of detail, both on the factual and critical level, is also present in a number of other works, without which the field of Arab cultural studies would be difficult to navigate. I am thinking specifically of Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi's (2008) *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory*, a book intimately connected to a particular critical viewpoint on the Israeli/Palestinian question. Here, sophisticated theoretical arguments are brought to bear on the volatile existence of a Palestinian cinema at all; its emergence as an important factor in

the internationalization of the Palestinian cause; and a repository of serious auteur cinema where issues such as exile, memory, pain and nostalgia are creatively reconceptualized.

Cinema is not, of course, the only, or even the most important, visual medium to have taken hold of the imagination of the Arab people. Television and the media industry have been ubiquitous and ever expanding over the last several decades. The last few years have seen a significant number of publications, all attempting to critique and theorize this fascinating phenomenon. Abu-Lughod's *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (2005) went beyond an examination of how television reflects experience or how experience is influenced by viewing practices. Instead, Abu-Lughod provocatively suggested that state-run television in Egypt, in particular television dramas, "promoted a stance of moral and social development based on ostensibly shared values that unanimously and unquestionably relate[d] to all persons" (Abu-Lughod 2005, quoted in Valassopoulos 2007, p. 205). This, Abu-Lughod argued, ensured that the viewing audience collectively came to accept a predominant ideology that appears to be safeguarding them (rather than being openly hostile or critical). This study on production values, state ideology and critical interpretive frameworks alerts us to the powerful potential of mass media. Not only does effective television reflect particular prominent social and political views, it can also engage on a plethora of levels: inform, shape, predict. Indeed, several books on new Arab media are testament to the centrality of television to the Middle East. *Arab Media* (Ayish *et al.* 2011), *Arab Television Today* (Sakr 2007) and *Arab Television Industries* (Kraidy & Khalil 2009) form part of a group of books that seek to explore the robust presence of television and wider media outlets, including the Internet, radio and printed press. *Arab Media* is keen to reveal the potential of mass media to open up new ways of viewing the Arab world as complex and dynamic in its interaction with global informatics, "news" and the entertainment industry. The particularly fascinating role of satellite channels and their engagement with the Arab diaspora and, in turn, with an ever changing Arab identity paves the way for a cultural studies that is in tune with the transformative power of cultural products across national boundaries. In *Arab Television Today*, Naomi Sakr shows how international television formats have been combined with local interests to form hybrid programming. These choices echo economic and business decisions; decisions that often reflect socio-political pressure and expectation. Rather than being led purely by the financial market, Arab media appears to be quite sensitive to issues of pan-Arab identities, political allegiances, gender and nationalist stances. In *Arab Television Industries*, Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil compellingly narrativize the establishing of television as a complex and multilayered industry aimed at 300 million viewers. Showing it to be a competitive and "internally contested" industry (Kraidy & Khalil 2009, p. 3), the authors perform a thorough investigation into how television came to prominence in the Arab world, talking into account cultural, economic and political reasons for its rise. Here, news channels are discussed alongside