

REVIEW ARTICLE

Joel Gordon

POP CULTURE ROUNDUP

HISHAM AIDI, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014)

DANIEL J. GILMAN, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2014)

MALU HALASA, ZAHER OMAREEN, and NAWARA MAHFOUD, eds., *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi Books, 2014)

MARWAN M. KRAIDY, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017)

NAHID SIAMDOUST, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017)

JONATHAN SMOLIN, *Moroccan Noir: Police, Crime, and Politics in Popular Culture* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2013)

STEPHANIE VAN DE PEER, ed., *Animation in the Middle East: Practice and Aesthetics from Baghdad to Casablanca* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2017)

Two decades ago I published an article in this journal about Egyptian biographical films.¹ It was the first study published in *IJMES* about Arab/Middle East film and the first to feature photographic illustrations. The editor sent it to four reviewers, some presumably to check my history, others my cultural scope. Three approved wholeheartedly, but one protested that *IJMES* should not publish a piece that was not based upon “Arabic sources.” Admittedly, there was little critical literature in Arabic on this topic; my primary theorization came from a recent study of Hollywood “biopics.” But Stephen Humphreys, the forward-thinking editor, recognized that my “Arabic sources” were the films analyzed and disregarded the negative review.

Pop culture studies in our field has come a long way since then—although we still tend to be the last speaker or panel at conferences that treat historical or contemporary moments. Key to the birth of the field was Walter Armbrust’s edited volume, *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000). Armbrust’s collection (of which I was a part) featured essays on popular music and film, public space and leisure, intersections of official and vernacular discourse regarding production and dissemination, and early attempts to assess audience reception. Popular culture was no longer

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“folk” culture. Such studies have proliferated in succeeding years, both as monographs and as edited volumes.² They are supplemented by scores of articles, including a growing number in venerable journals like this one, that perhaps once needed a degree of coaxing. Most collections seek to transcend linguistic boundaries and many have caught up with Armburst’s call to look “beyond” the Middle East. Globalization, religious cultural expression, and the links between homelands and diaspora have become de rigueur.

In this essay I want to explore the state of the field of pop culture studies by looking at a small number of the growing corpus published in recent years. I have tried to limit my review to monographs set in specific national settings and particular genres, although I include two sweeping studies, one that explores “creative insurgency” across the Arab Spring, the other that gazes outward from a European Muslim diaspora toward traditional and new homelands to reveal hybrid musical expressions that constitute both radical breaks with the past and nostalgic reincarnations of seemingly better days. I also include two edited volumes that I find unique, one for its exposition of dissident expression in Syria, the other for confronting a heretofore unstudied aspect of cultural production. Some of these books were published as long as five years ago, others are more current. The as yet failed hopes of the Arab Spring resound in some way through all of them. Each employs a different lens through which to view contemporary culture and society, and each is to be recommended in its own right and on its own terms.

Syria Speaks becomes more painful to read with each passing year—not that it was not a hard read when it first appeared in 2014. It is a compendium of dissident expression—written, sketched, sculpted, photographed, and spray painted—giving voice to that resistance, the dwindling hopes of success, and the terrible physical and emotional costs entailed as the country quickly fell into civil war. Many of the authors/artists were and will be unknown to readers. All evoke a unique power in their chosen mode of personal expression, so it would be unfair to highlight a favorite. They must be read as a collective, especially now, as this phase of the struggle appears to be in its waning days.

When they went to press the editors suspected that the volume might well become a historical testament to a failed moment. In their introduction they note the decline in revolutionary enthusiasm and the onset of “deep depression and disappointment” as the revolution has become “so complicated.” The unity of purpose has fractured; the enemies are no longer the same for all; many of the dissident voices now hail from abroad. Nonetheless, they insist that the work cataloged here in this remarkable multimedia show, performance art captured on paper between book covers, constitutes an “outpouring of free expression” that “surprised them, and also shocked the country’s custodians of official culture” (vii–viii).

The Naked Blogger of Cairo also ends with a mournful sense of defeat—revolutionary art that is increasingly pessimistic, even bitter, much of it produced outside the region, from a safe but detached vista. On a recent trip to Egypt, one of Marwan Kraidy’s three primary settings (in addition to Tunisia and Syria), I was stunned by the extent to which much of the mural art, especially the often light, but sometimes outraged faces of the martyrs—with the exception of those images disparaging the Muslim Brotherhood and the ousted president—had been whitewashed, erased as a form of daily reminder for the populace of what once was and what might have been.

Kraidy’s book is more a series of short essays and vignettes than a traditional academic study. That is what makes it such a captivating read. (I have reviewed *The Naked Blogger*

in much greater depth elsewhere.)³ He moves seamlessly from dissident street performance—the clownish Bread Man of Tunis—to web-based video blogging, and from public murals painted in painstaking detail, sometimes with humor, other times with vitriol, to the hasty, rudimentary, often-secretive guerilla raid of the stenciled image or shout—Spray Man, for example—reproduced almost endlessly throughout the insurgent landscape. He includes recorded puppetry, especially the Syrian webcast *Top Goon*, and the animated comical postings of the Jordanian platform Kharabeesh.

Of course he starts with the most dramatic, uniquely tragic exposition of performative politics, the self-immolation by Muhammed Buazizi (abu 'Azizi), a twenty-six-year-old Tunisian cart owner, in the streets of Sidi Bouzid. This single action sparked outrage throughout the country, led the dictator Bin 'Ali to flee, and subsequently instigated mass protests throughout the region. Buazizi's sacrifice inspires a particular focus throughout the book on the use of the human body, so often the target of torturous state repression, for the symbolic expressions of outrage, as well as social satire. He had been humiliated, slapped, apparently, by a policewoman, and had enough. In Egypt, Buazizi's burnt figure invoked shocking images of the broken body of Khalid Sa'id, the twenty-eight-year-old blogger tortured and murdered by police thugs a year earlier. Likewise, the boys beaten mercilessly by Syrian authorities in Deraa in February 2011 helped move many fellow citizens to action, razing their own wall of fear.

There were also, to be sure, playful bodily caricatures, depicting the ruler as an ass or, in the particular case of Husni Mubarak, a laughing cow—increasingly demonic over the course of his career, a constant source of both light and dark ridicule in the enthusiasm of January–February 2011. Yet bodily imagery often turned inward, particularly as women became the special target of roaming bands of young men, orchestrated in many cases by the deeper elements of the state. The brassiere of an anonymous young woman ruthlessly exposed by police dragging her through the streets and captured digitally, became a symbolic representation stenciled across Cairo as “Blue Bra Girl.” Harassed one time too many for walking in public with her boyfriend, 'Aliya al-Mahdy, the “Naked Blogger,” posted a nude image of herself on the Internet, drawing far more ire than praise. After fleeing the country, the Naked Blogger's self-depictions have become increasingly inflammatory.

Kraidy ends his book on a wistful note, sensing that creative insurgency, consigned to safer canvases, loses its punch and even becomes coopted by the international art market. Still, for all the books that have attempted to chronicle the art of resistance (most often visual art), his is among the most inventive. It should inspire others to look beyond the moment he has so indelibly captured, to pursue the diverse, more multivocal trends that have emerged or may yet emerge, perhaps in less public venues as the regime tightens its grip. A new insurgent coalition may one day heal the divisions of 2013 and recapture the halcyon days of early 2011.

This is a question that hovers around the edges of *Cairo Pop*, a study focused on a particular musical art form. *Musīqa shabābiyya* (youth music) stands apart, in Daniel Gilman's taxonomy of genres, from *musīqa klāsikiyya/al-turāth* (classical/heritage music) and the crude urban *sha'bi* (popular) that emerged in the 1970s. The former invokes tradition, but also for its aging devotees a sense of *tarab* (ecstasy)—Gilman prefers to refer to it as *musīqa al-ṭarab*—the latter at least has raw soul. Popular youth music, Gilman confesses, is quite often “terrible” (p. 20)—superficial, meaningless, replete with gratuitous eroticism and crass pandering to mass-market tastes. Many of the singers have so little vocal talent

that they, or their producers, rely heavily on technology that corrects for key or missed notes. Others, laughably ungifted tonally, rely purely on their physical attributes. Gilman has much to say that is insightful about what constitutes allure in both male and female singers, and the ever-present tug and pull within Egyptian sensibilities about non-Egyptian, especially Lebanese, looks (Nancy Ajram, Hayfa Wahbi), which highlight lighter skin tones, versus the browner sons and daughters of the Nile (Shirin 'Abd al-Wahhab and Ruby, the ultimate video vamp), who evoke more home-grown attractions.

Yet he also resists the repeated invocation that all new music is worse than it was in the past. Throwing down a cultural gauntlet, he asserts that the “slippery slope” toward popular acceptance of singers with poor voices and lesser technical training began with the amplification of 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz, the superstar crooner of the 1950s–1960s and a cultural icon (p. 69). It is, of course, worth recalling that Halim was known as the “Brown Nightingale” (al-Andalib al-Asmar), and that his rise and especially his fall, a victim of bilharzia, the Egyptian national disease, were so inextricably linked to his Delta roots—even more than Umm Kulthum or Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, and certainly against the grain of Asmahan, Farid al-Atrash, Layla Murad, Shadia, and so many others with more cosmopolitan, hybrid roots.

Despite his own ambivalence, Gilman succeeds in giving voice to his youthful informants. This is more a work of musical ethnography, reception, and appreciation, than a deep study of the music itself—or, one might say, of music that is, by its very nature, shallow. It is, as Gilman describes, a confused fusion of Western and more traditional Arabic modalities, with just enough Arabic roots to maintain a degree of cultural authenticity. This music is popular precisely because it is noninventive. Its fans “do not necessarily seek unique poetic compositions in their music, least of all in love songs” (p. 155), but rather take comfort in familiar beats, tropes, and emotional evocative styles, with just enough differentiation to distinguish one hit from another.

This lack of artistic creativity is, of course, what drives the connoisseurs, the guardians of artistic culture, wild with complaints about “vulgarity” in form and content, tenuous links to tradition, and lack of real emotion. Ironically, many of Gilman’s informants confess that one day they might grow to appreciate—to “endure”—the demanding music of the venerated classicists. For now, though, “Umm Kulthum was of her time” (p. 58). Turning the notion of heritage on its head, they boldly proclaim that to embrace such artists would, for them and their age mates, be “inauthentic,” at least for now.

That “now” was suddenly turned upside down by Egypt’s Arab Spring, when pop musicians—not all to be sure, but a significant number—got caught up in the enthusiasm of Tahrir Square. For a number of years at least, the careers of many popular artists, actors as well as musicians, both young and old, teetered on scales of public opinion. Gilman discusses the most significant political songs and videos, written and produced by young pop singers. For a moment it seemed to constitute a sea change, until—echoing the editors of *Syria Speaks*—things grew more complicated. The movement began to fracture and, at least for his *shabābiyya* artists, the market again kicked in. “The January 25 uprising was not the nationalization of the Suez Canal,” he notes. “Being too direct in a pop song could make a person a lot of enemies and potentially scuttle a singing career” (p. 191). Consequently most singers soon refrained from taking a particular political stand and, retreating to “relatively safe territory,” instead sang songs memorializing the martyrs (p. 192).

In the aftermath of the reimposition of military rule in 2013 the army began to produce its own music videos featuring prominent *sha'bi* and *shabābiyya* artists beseeching/commanding Egyptians to “kiss the hands” (*tislam al-ayādī*) of their deliverers. Great changes were afoot as Gilman’s book went to press and the subsequent chapter awaits his or another’s treatment.

Soundtrack of the Revolution in many ways stands opposite to *Cairo Pop*. Nahid Siamdoust treats weighty pop music, the anthems and artists that have moved and inspired generations of Iranians through the trials and tribulations of revolution and war. It is a study of the music of politics as much as her subtitled “politics of music.” Her draw is naturally the shifting state of popular music and the still-constrained avenues for public performance, especially by female artists, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. But there is far more to meet the eyes and ears than a narrow tale of restriction. This is a full-fledged history of Iranian popular music from the earliest days of recording through the shifting artistic policies of the state Khomeini founded and bequeathed to his successors. The Ayatollah’s own ambivalence toward music and musical performance is repeatedly played out as his inheritors grapple to find a balance between artistic freedom and theological censorial responsibility.

Siamdoust approaches different eras and generations of music by focusing on representative singers, giving each two chapters, one to set the time, the other focusing more closely on the artist. Mohammad Reza Shajarian, a national champion Qur’an reciter who was later advised to hew closer to pop music, became the bard of the revolution in the last days of Pahlavi rule and early years of the Islamic Republic, but grew increasingly disenchanted over time. He represents a link to the progenitors of modern pop in Iran. Alireza Assar, born nine years prior to the revolution, never suffered the early ban on music, arguably an official misunderstanding of Ayatollah Khomeini’s stated hostility to certain genres and themes. He represents the officially sanctioned pop music that emerged in the 1990s, after the lamentations of the Iran–Iraq war and, as Siamdoust argues, very much an antidote to them. Mohsen Namjoo, expelled from the Tehran Conservatory for musical insubordination, is the absurdist-nihilist, blending eastern and western strings and fusing religious themes, sometimes borderline objectionable, with rock music. Tolerated—and somewhat compromising—during the Khatami reform years, he proudly placed himself in the “them” (versus “us”) camp denoted by the less tolerant Mahmud Ahmadinejad, becoming, not unlike the president, ever more irrepressible.

Recent years are marked by the rise of the Khatami generation, reared on relative social openness and groomed by new social media. (Siamdoust recalls warmly the earlier days of VHS recordings of Pink Floyd and Michael Jackson.) Their preferred vehicle is rap, which has become, especially in the years after the 2009 Green Uprising, “increasingly synonymous with the unauthorized sphere of music in Iran” (p. 225). Performing primarily in secret, underground venues, rap artists struggle to survive, despite official efforts to demonize their music as deviant or Satanic. Siamdoust’s featured artist is Hichkas (born Soroush Lashkary), a quintessential “street rapper” whose stage name means “no one” and who adopts the persona of a social bandit-godfather (*luti*), with lyrics decrying poverty, injustice, and occasionally patriotism, but always tainted by disillusion.

Siamdoust’s book is elegantly presented, the lyrics beautifully rendered in English. (I cannot vouch for their accuracy so much as their lyric power.) This is a book best read slowly, perhaps with YouTube at hand to enhance the text with sounds and images.

She takes her story beyond the Green Uprising, however, disheartening that moment to participants and outside observers, to indicate small but potentially wider fissures for a more open musical field: banned bands occasionally permitted to perform live, women occasionally allowed to sing stage center, and a state-sanctioned degree of permissible “joy” that, however “empty,” perhaps will eventually slip beyond the grasp of those who try to monitor “fun” (280–81).

Rebel Music is a journey, from Orient to Occident, across the Black Atlantic and back again. It is about far more than music and certainly more than Muslim youth. In thirteen chapters (including a substantial prologue), each of which might be read as a stand-alone essay, Hisham Aidi traces intersections of Muslim identity in Western Europe, the Americas, and the Maghrib, primarily over the course of the last century, but with earlier journeys undertaken, voluntarily and by force, with and amongst conquistadors, colonizers, and slavers. If Aidi does not intentionally decenter the Muslim world away from Mecca-Medina, he certainly forces us to reconsider the multiplicity of sites in which converts and reconverts have discovered, rediscovered, and above all proclaimed—through jazz, soul, funk, rap, and hip-hop (to name the most prominent musical formations)—their proud resistance to discrimination, assimilation, and social isolation, violent and nonviolent. At the root of his vision is a fundamental “blackness”—he explores the shifting attitudes towards official US efforts to racially categorize Arabs/Muslims in a fascinating middle chapter—and growing pride in being particularly dark in the eyes of self and other. Malcolm X, to whose grave young Euro-Diaspora Muslims flock, is at once Black and Muslim, nationalist and internationalist, without contradiction or distinction. America—the USA—so long held to be a final frontier for Muslim migrants, becomes the motherland, centered not in Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island, but in Harlem, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago’s south side, where Ahmadi converts made music in the shadows of Moorish Science temples and where Salafi rappers wear their pants hiked and sport Sunni/“Philly” beards.

Young Muslims reveal a power through African American music, however hybrid and global it has now become (or always was!), that earlier generations of “Negro” converts discovered in the ghettos of the North, where they adopted Islam (not always orthodoxy) to proclaim themselves Jazz “Messengers” and to celebrate nights in Tunisia or (depending on one’s aural orientation) “Allah Supreme.” The old guard had once trekked to Morocco to discover the Afro-Muslim musical heritage of gnaoua. Their inheritors fuse bhangra with hip-hop, Punjabi with English, or Arabic with French, while State Department soft power operatives seek to promote Sufi quiescence to contest more hardcore, *taqwa*-core influences.

Aidi starts his journey in Brazil, with its infamous *téléfnovelas*, in which Arab is beautiful, if still somewhat exotic, a brave new world that was colonized centuries ago and where hybridity is celebrated. He ends his journey in North Africa, once a haven for the victims of the Spanish Reconquista and until modern times itself a thriving center for, especially, Muslim–Jewish coexistence. The old musicians, he finds, are rediscovering each other, albeit with the prodding of younger, romantic fans, often based in Europe. They have mixed feelings about the circumstances in which their Jewish brothers had to leave. There is, as always, the complication of Zionism/Israel, in which some have landed and which others cannot help but celebrate. But there is, thankfully, the music, an audience that remains intrigued, and a Moroccan state that has discovered cultural capital in

promoting both gnaoua and Andalusian-Arab pop. So long as the old masters play they can point us to fresh understandings of, and perhaps reconciliation with the past.

Moroccan Noir takes us in totally different, often sinister directions. Jonathan Smolin's book is about new tabloid newspapers that emerged in Morocco in the 1990s, followed by police novels and television dramas, and the ways in which the coverage of crime—the grislier, the better—and detection first weakened and ultimately reinforced state power, albeit not without growing public contestation.

His immediate background is a period known as the Years of Lead (*sanawāt al-raṣāṣ/les années de plomb*), starting in the early 1970s following two attempts on the life of King Hasan II. The authoritarian, police-based state dated to independence, but these were years, Smolin writes, when “freedom of expression was severely restricted . . . and fear of the police spread throughout society.” By the 1990s the state was ready to renegotiate “its strategies for maintaining the public's consent to its authority, moving away from violence and coercion . . . in the context of political liberalization” (pp. 2–3). Key to this was the opening of state print media, followed by privatization and a reconceptualization of broadcast media, especially television.

The media revolution—until the 1990s Moroccans enjoyed only one TV channel and lived with a dry, tightly regulated press—was sparked by the arrest in 1993 and subsequent trial of a high-level police official charged with abducting and sexually assaulting over 500 women, acts he recorded on home video. The story could not but demand public attention and the tabloid print media jumped, crossing a series of previously intractable boundaries: criticizing a public official and printing lurid details and, eventually, photographs. They sold their stories, amenable to authorities, as about a society on the verge of moral collapse save for the presence of competent crime busters and forensic experts. Broadcast media held firm to old statutes, but in the aftermath entered the fray by adapting the new police novels, the first of which appeared in 1997, for the little screen. Seeking to promote the image of a human, highly competent force of detectives, the police supported these filmed adaptations by providing uniforms, equipment, and technical advice to promote realism, and by opening police stations to film crews. Concurrently, in 1998, the first independent daily, *al-Ahdath al-Maghribiyya* (Moroccan Events), hit newsstands, softening the cruder tabloid edges in order to garner a more cultured audience, but not eschewing coverage of sensational crimes, not least a string of serial killings constructed, so the story went, as homo/sexual deviance.

The public read these accounts and watched the growing number of téléfilms (Smolin counts some fourteen between 2001 and 2003), but the old police images from the Years of Lead died hard. The terror attack of May 2003 fostered a fresh crisis of authority to which the state responded by creating a new, sharply dressed community police force, the Groupes urbains de sécurité (GUS). An ever-cynical public responded with complaints—of bribery, public humiliation, and ultimately police killings—and derision, mocking the uniforms as parade wear and referring to their alleged saviors from terrorism as “death squads” or, invoking the brutal leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, “Zarqawi” (p. 231). The GUS was disbanded in 2006, its members reassigned, its uniforms recalled by one newspaper as “the biggest act of taxation piracy in the history of Morocco” (p. 232). The police remain, as their slogan emblazoned upon every station house proclaims, “At the Service of the People,” but Moroccans, ever wary, recognize that they serve to protect the state as much as its citizens.

I began this essay with a montage of dissident expression from Syria, a multimedia show rather than an academic study. I then explored three monographs set in discrete national settings and two that range wider to explore the mentalities of insurgent artists and dislocated youth seeking a spiritual home in the never land between their countries of origin and a deep-rooted diaspora. I end with an edited collection that covers the width and breadth of the classical Middle East, Iran to Morocco, and that focuses on one particular form of artistic expression.

Stephanie van der Peet's *Animation in the Middle East* is the first volume to my knowledge to explore this particular art form in the Middle East. The book is very much a beginning, laying the foundations for what might—indeed should—be more developed studies of animated film in all of these countries, and beyond. It is less theoretical than technical, perhaps as needed, and encyclopedic, a compendium of names of initiators and foundational works, in two cases penned by leading animators themselves.

Many readers, myself included, will be unfamiliar with the history or techniques of animation, especially when computer generated. We know it when we see it, but we have little grasp of what skills, arts, and crafts are involved. This is especially vital for understanding the work of animators in countries without major state or private support, and especially those working under strict censorship.

For many viewers in the Middle East, animation first came via imports. For most it was American cartoons, initially at the cinema (Popeye, Mickey Mouse), later on television (Flintstones, Simpsons, Sponge Bob) or the Internet (South Park). This important cultural history is alluded to by some, particularly more recent cartoonists, but might have been emphasized in a theoretical introduction to speak to a wider audience that perhaps needs to recall how central animation has been on a global level. For this reason, this is a valuable, overdue opening, and to that extent the encyclopedic nature of the volume is warranted.

Each text reviewed here reminds us that, however wide our gaze, there are always new vistas to explore and that they sometimes have been staring us in the face. For those of us who grew up synchronizing our childhood schedules with televised cartoon shows, and even for those who still remember, as my older Egyptian informants do, Tom and Jerry before the feature film, it also serves as a reminder that for all that is new and still unexplored, there are histories that are yet to be uncovered, recalled, and situated into our ongoing efforts to comprehend contemporary pop culture.

NOTES

¹Joel Gordon, "Film, Fame and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from *Mustafa Kamil* to *Nasser 56*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 61–79.

²Some of the best recent edited collections are Karin van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2011); Anastasia Valassopoulos, ed., *Arab Cultural Studies: History, Politics, and the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, eds., *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle, eds., *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2013); Abir Hamdar and Lindsey Moore, eds., *Islamism and Cultural Expression in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine, and Martin Stokes, eds., *Islam and Popular Culture* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2016).

³Joel Gordon, "If the People One Day Decide They Want Life," *Bustan* 8 (2017): 111–31.