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Arab Pop: Whose Gaze is it Anyway?

How does the West view the Arab world? Edward Said described the guiding aim of the Western gaze as 'corrective study'.¹ Later, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam would come to use the term 'eurocentrism' to refer to this hegemonic mode of 'unthinking' representation.² More recently, in the wake of countless attempts to dramatise the 'violent lives' of Arab people, major scholarship has arisen that seeks to unpack the stultifying effects of neo-colonial mythmaking (including two important books by Lina Khatib: *Filming the Modern Middle East* [2006] and *Image Politics in the Middle East* [2012]). As Lucia Nagib has argued, the global South is often analysed through a number of narrow aesthetic formulas derived solely from the Western canon of art and culture. When broaching the Arab experience the critical imperative in postcolonial theory has instead demanded a more acute awareness of one's own critical standpoint, echoing the demand made by Spivak in her warning about 'the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation'.³ Yet, even if we recognise our hegemonic perspective, the extent to which Western self-awareness of exteriority can understand the Arab experience is disputable. We have some staid notion of the Occident vs the Orient; in response, a critical discourse on the cultural specificity of each text arises. Yet, as Omar Kholeif's exhibition demonstrates, the popular culture of the Arab world is a far more fluid discourse.

Whose Gaze is it Anyway? originally appeared as a strand of 2014's Safar Film Festival, as a collaboration between the Arab British Centre and the Institute for Contemporary Arts, bringing popular Arab cinema to a London audience. Its 'tour' to Leicester represents an impressive move on the part of ICA. Beyond the cosy surroundings of Pall Mall, The Cube Gallery at Leicester's Phoenix engages a different kind of audience. Phoenix is, first and foremost, an arthouse cinema, but it is also a cultural hub in the culturally-diverse East Midlands. It also functions as a site of public education (including events like filmmaking courses and my own recent course on politics in cinema). However, unlike ICA, it feels distant from the contemporary art scene. The demographic is diverse, often coming from outside arts practice or education. This is all surely part of ICA's plan to expand the purview of contemporary art spectatorship, and with it access to a greater global reach. The show presents some of Lebanese cinephile Abboudi Bou Jaoudeh's vast collection of paraphernalia. Jaoudeh has been collecting posters for

popular Arab cinema since the 1970s. A Benjaminian feat that confronts the Western habit of canon-making, Jaoudeh's collection is incredibly enlightening.



*Fig. 1: Entering the display, a selection of the posters (including *The Sparrow* [Youssef Chahine, 1972] and *Watch Out for Zouzou* [1971]) on the second to far right and far right respectively.*

The content appears to disrupt the dichotomising tendencies of East and West. Each of these posters clearly co-opts the generic iconography of Hollywood. In the high colour contrasts and the foregrounding of an imposing bodily presence, one recalls the images – and, indeed, promotional material – of *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946) or *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956). The lust-fuelled image of the belly dancer in the poster for Hassan Al Imam's *Watch out for Zouzou* (1971) and the beach-bodies of Samir A. Khouri's *The Lady of the Black Moons* (1971) testify to the provocative tone of the posters. These images play on the exotic gaze, yet viewed today the overt sexuality on display counters the conservatism of contemporary theocratic regimes.

However, sex is not the most striking theme in these works. Throughout there is a clear concern with confronting both the myth and actuality of sexual violence as cultural norm. It is the highly oppositional cinema of exploitation that is clearly being utilised here in its extremely self-conscious foregrounding of malign cultural myth. Turning this co-opting of convention to contemporaneous matters of iconography, a spotlight is placed on the way the Arab world's own iconographical

procedures have differed so vastly from the one constructed of it in the West. This resonates with Glauber Rocha's 'aesthetic of hunger',⁴ which sought to systematically digest a number of Western aesthetic conventions, reconfiguring their effects toward violent confrontations with popular misconceptions about Brazilian culture. As such, a provocative narrative develops across *Whose Gaze is it Anyway?*, which works to broach the incendiary topic of Oriental violence. This is no more explicit than when gender politics is brought into the foreground, like it is in the work of Sophia Al-Maria.



Fig. 2: Beretta poster.

Amidst the bright colours and emotive poses of the other works is mounted a black rectangle, a woman's face peeking out from within, and a silver glimmer – a gun – near the bottom of the frame. Illustrative of an increasing aesthetic subtlety demonstrated across the images from old to new, the promotional poster of Al-Maria's *Beretta* tones down the confrontational imagery. It is unassuming and assertive, firmly situating the wronged protagonist in a position of power. It recalls the likes of *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) in its exploitative mobilisation of redemption narratives. Still, it is not hard to imagine the sorts of Western colonial fantasies Al-Maria's work might play into. I met with Sumitra Upham, a curator at

ICA in London, who has worked closely with Kohleif on the project's transfer to Phoenix. Upham described Al-Maria's exasperating experience of trying to get *Beretta* made. First, there is the obviously precarious nature of dealing with exploitation in Arab film. *Beretta* is a contemporary Egyptian rape-revenge thriller. Following a violent rape at the outset, the mute heroine Suad embarks on a killing spree, murdering misogynistic men. The story's contemporary setting frames the exploitation of the woman in the social and historical climate of Egypt's post-Arab Spring impasse.



Fig. 3: Al-Maria's work in progress.

While exploitation films usually work by self-consciously mobilising vicious myths about a people in order to act out a spectacular feat of justice on a fictional stage, the dual character of Al-Maria's situation complicates matters somewhat. For instance, while *Beretta* shares similarities with Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981), Ferrara did not experience a theocratic policing of his film's production. It is one thing to contend cultural myths but quite another to do so in the highly-volatile contemporary discourse of Arab stereotypes, and it is practically insurmountable to carry out such work within Egypt. Based in Dubai and London, Al-Maria has worked tirelessly to continue shooting but has so far only managed to bring her written materials to public attention. Exhibited here in a glass cabinet, one attains a special access to the artist's method. To gain access to an artist's work, halted part-way through her practice, we discover another fascinating aspect and a

further development in the exhibition's disruption of a temporal regime. That is, while we experience a number of materials outside of their original era and culture, through the contextual lens of a volatile contemporary gaze, *Whose Gaze is it Anyway?* might have just as easily been called *When's Gaze is it Anyway?*. Part time capsule, part vortex, the works share a disorienting temporal effect as much as they do a spatial one. This comes to the fore in Al-Maria's work. While her primary aim is to shed light on a prohibited film, it simultaneously locates us in medias res of the process of a prohibited artist stopped short and caught in a limbo, exhibited behind glass.

Al-Maria is one of a number of contemporary artists brought into the fold by the exhibition's curator, Omar Kholeif. One of the key players on the British art scene at present, Kholeif is the curator for Whitechapel Gallery, visiting curator at Manchester's major new site, HOME, and was previously curator for FACT in Liverpool. Kholeif recently curated an exhibition at HOME focusing solely on Al-Maria. The show *Virgin with a Memory* (2014) gave a fuller insight into Al-Maria's socio-political engagement. This is but one of a number of exhibitions Kholeif has curated in recent years that bring the social and cultural politics of the Arab world into the spotlight for a Western audience. In his role as an editor for *Ibraaz* (a leading forum for Middle Eastern and North African visual culture) and as a writer for a number of publications (ranging from *The Guardian* to *Film International*), it is fair to say that Kohleif has been instrumental in the construction of a space for exploring Arab visual culture. The role Kohleif seems to embody then is a conduit between British and Arab culture. Speaking openly about his own past in a *Guardian* article in 2010, Kohleif demands policy arrangements that support diversity schemes in the art world:

while exhibitions of Middle Eastern art are certainly better than having none at all, they are equally polemical if the environment for taste brokering is not diverse itself. To avoid imperialistic tendencies, minority groups must be allowed equal footing in the forum, where they can create their own canon.⁵

Might we approach this conflation of the high and the low, the amateur and the expert, the Orient and the Occident, as indicative of the Arab canon? If so, is there a shared iconography for this canon? Two further contemporary film works amplify the iconographical purchase of the exhibition, building on the self-conscious historicism of Al-Maria's work but diverging from her exploitation aesthetics. Maha Maamoun's *Domestic Tourism II* (2009) – a cinematic montage following the photographic precursor – reconfigures scenes from a number of Egyptian films that use the Giza pyramids as a backdrop. Reified through the global tourist industry, Maamoun's film disrupts the blandness of this iconic image. In her words, the dominant perspective on the pyramids 'banishes them from the present time and place, shown mostly with the endless desert as their background and referring only to

ancient Egyptian civilization'.[6] In response, this montage recasts them historically, charting their appearance in recent films, before working its way back to 1950 and ultimately returning to the present (an inverted pyramid structure). In doing so, the political resonance of this iconic image comes to signify something highly-charged beneath its usually stifled presence.

The second work is a very personal short by Raed Yassin, an autobiographical piece focusing on his disco-obsessed father who becomes a star in the Egyptian horror film market. The story quickly shifts into outright fiction as we come to follow the father's star persona in an unrelated narrative. Seamlessly integrating culturally-specific insight on Egyptian pop culture with a wider global critique of celebrity and desire, Yassin's video aesthetic pulls together the show's themes in a smart five-and-a-half-minute diary.



Fig. 4: Still from Raed Yassin's Disco (2010).

The clear intention of Kholeif's choices is to recast our gaze toward a very different vision of the Arab world than that usually allowed or, indeed, presented. By playing the old works off against the new contemporary Arab artists are shown to be revisiting the margins of their cultural heritage, revitalising its gloss and shock to newly politicised ends. The effect is to enter into a space of contraband, gaining access to a world where pop culture and social criticism are fused in a way rarely seen by Western spectators.

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Notes

1. Said 1978, p. 40.
2. Shohat & Stam 1994.
3. Spivak 1988, p. 104.
4. Rocha 1995 (orig. in 1965).
5. Kholeif 2010.
6. Maamoun 2009.