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MASS CULTURE AND MODERNISM IN EGYPT



Walter Armbrust

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WALTER ARMBRUST

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Note on transliteration</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 “The White Flag”	11
3 The split vernacular	37
4 The gifted musician	63
5 Classic, clunker, national narrative	94
6 Popular commentary, real lives	116
7 “Vulgarity”	165
<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>References</i>	257
<i>Index</i>	267

Illustrations

Plates

1	"From the offices of the government"	page 61
2	"To the men of the cinema"	62
3	"Beauty of today and beauty of the past"	78
4	"'Ustaz' Yusuf Wahbi heard that power was half of beauty"	79
5	"Why does the ministry want to ban pictures of women in bathing suits?"	81
6	"Effendi, appearances don't matter"	85
7	Galal Effendi: at Ismail Bey's gate	96
8	Fatima goes to ask Muhammad to remarry her	106
9	Zuzu feeds Dr. Said at a riverside café	120
10	A poster from <i>Crabs</i>	140
11	Mahmud Mukhtar's <i>Egypt Awakening</i>	160
12	Salah Inani's <i>A Hundred Years of Enlightenment</i>	191
13	Fatima Rushdi with Husayn Sidqi	204
14	Ragab and the village notables discussing the need for agricultural modernization	208
15	Ragab's big adventure in the city	211

Figures

3.1	Ferguson's model of functional diglossia	49
3.2	An elaborated model of diglossia	49
3.3	Diglossic practice in ideological context	59
6.1	Income distribution according to education level	133
6.2	Class origins of subsamples of professional engineers, engineering and law students	134

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Note on transliteration

The text follows the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration standard for words in literary Arabic. Diphthongs are written "au," or "ay" where appropriate. The "l" in the definite article "al-" is always retained, but the "a" is elided when the definite article is preceded by the prepositions "bi-," "fi," "li-" and "alā," as well as "wa-" (and).

Transliterations of colloquial text follow *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* (Badawi and Hinds 1986) with some modifications: consonants that conform to literary pronunciation are rendered according to *IJMES* guidelines; long vowels in colloquial texts are marked with a macron as in *IJMES* rather than the doubled letter used in Badawi and Hinds.

Names are only fully transliterated the first time they appear in the text; in later citations long vowels and emphatic consonants are dropped. Names of Egyptians have been rendered as they are pronounced in Egypt, e.g. "Gamāl" rather than "Jamāl." Names regularly cited in English are written according to common usage (e.g. Abdel Nasser and Naguib Mahfouz).

Introduction

In November of 1993 I attended a swearing-in ceremony at the Egyptian Bar Association. A friend's daughter was to be inducted, and I was asked to join her and her mother at the Bar Association's headquarters in downtown Cairo to photograph the event. They were not a wealthy family, and a ceremony to commemorate their daughter having made it both through college and into the Bar was for them a momentous occasion. Unfortunately, in the view of the legal establishment it was just another first Tuesday of the month – the day when the swearing-in routine takes place and another group of unemployable lawyers is turned out into an unimpressed labor market.

Almost no pomp and circumstance were invested in the event – it was an absence of ritual where one was expected to take place. No attempt was made to tell the proud new lawyers what they should do, or when. Instead, the entrance to the swearing-in chamber was forcibly barred, and prospective lawyers and their families pressed against the door in a frantic mob. The guards were letting small groups trickle in, but no attempt was made to convey information about how the ceremony was to be organized. It was survival of the fittest, and my friends were simply not willing enough to engage in physical combat to be among the first into the room. Finally we gave up and had a cup of tea while waiting for the crowd to thin down.

The young woman who was to have celebrated her professional triumph lashed out in irritation: "This is like trying to get on the bus – they treat us like a bunch of peasants. Before you know it they'll be taking off their belts and whipping us. I thought this was a respectable place, and what do I find? Chaos." While we were having our tea the girl murmured to her mother: "*Zahma ya dunyā zahma / Zahma wi-tāhū al-ḥabāyib*" (how crowded is the world; crowded and friends lose their way). Her mother

smiled, and replied: “*Zahma wi-la-‘ad-shi rahma*” (crowded and merciless). I knew the next line, so I added: “*Mūlid wi-ṣaḥb-u ghāyib*” (a saint’s festival without the saint [the point being that everything was utterly chaotic]).

These lines were quoted formulaically, as one might a proverb. But “how crowded is the world” was no proverbial wisdom, or at least not the kind that comes from an imagined pristine folk culture. Rather, it was a line from a popular song – the sort spread by modern technology such as cassette tapes or a microphone in a nightclub. Reciting a verse from “How Crowded Is the World” was an ironic way of commenting on a frustrating predicament. Part of the irony lay not just in the words to the song, but in the singer, Aḥmad ‘Adawīya, who is scorned by the official media as hopelessly vulgar. The song first became popular in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The mother and her daughter in the Bar Association probably knew it from pirated cassette tapes sold in places such as al-‘Ataba al-Khaḍrā, a neighborhood located in a transitional zone between European-built downtown Cairo and more traditional areas. My friends at the swearing-in ceremony frequently recommended al-‘Ataba as a place to buy things cheap; the media often denounces it as a wild place where stolen goods are fenced and bad taste runs rampant.

Adawiya is rarely given air time on the radio or television. I knew him and the song quoted at the Bar Association not from a pirated cassette sold in al-‘Ataba, but from a film called *Sha‘bān taht al-ṣifr* (Shaban below zero, 1980). My friends probably hadn’t seen the film because women go to the cinema less often than men, and they could not afford a VCR to watch it at home. *Shaban below Zero* starred a popular comedian named ‘Ādil Imām, who is similar to Adawiya and the neighborhood of al-‘Ataba in that most of his *oeuvre* is cited in establishment media as a symbol of vulgarity. The film was in fact a remake of a 1942 movie called *Lau kunti ghanī* (If I were rich). The original film from the 1940s was a light comedy which ended with the triumph of a new middle class. The 1980 remake of the film in which Adawiya sang “How Crowded Is the World” ended with the problems of its beleaguered characters unresolved.

This was the context of a brief invocation of a popular song: middle-class people feeling humiliated at the hands of an institution that is supposed to enable their upward mobility. They respond by reciting words from a song that the sort of people who control institutions such as the Bar Association, not to mention the establishment media, denounce. The song itself was bought and sold in a particular popular-culture context which included a range of potential associations of place and person also considered unsavory by the media. “How Crowded Is the World” occurred

in a film that reverberated with connotations of class; and finally, the film resonated with historical significance – comparative snapshots of the middle class separated by almost forty years.

Popular culture features in the lives of most Egyptians and, to some extent, in all of the Arabic-speaking Middle East.¹ Academic disinterest in mass-mediated popular culture of the region is therefore puzzling. Something like a “postmodern condition” in which reality and images blur into each other, perhaps even define each other, has come into being under our noses. This cannot be the same postmodern condition as pertains to the West. Or can it? So far academics have made only the most minimal attempt to analyze the phenomenon or even to comment on it.

The chief barrier to studying Egyptian popular culture is that it is commercial and oriented toward an Arabic-speaking market. Commercial culture is sometimes depicted as erasing authentic non-Western cultures, and in Egypt the dilution of local culture by Western influence is, in fact, a common element in both artistic performance and critical opinion on the part of layman and expert alike. But to interpret Egyptian popular culture either as a straightforward imitation of the West or, conversely, as cryptic resistance to hegemonic power, would as often as not lead one to misunderstand the character of the art. A concern with Egypt’s relationship to the West is one of the defining characteristics of Egyptian popular culture, yet blind adoption of Western culture has never been an unambiguous or uncontested feature of modern Egypt.² At the very least, as Appadurai and Breckenridge note, “every society appears to bring to these [popular] forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncracies” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, 5).

The commercial nature of Egyptian popular culture automatically excludes it from the incipient canon of “Third World” cultural productions which is defined by Western scholars in metropolitan institutions, and tends to include only works that make sense to monolingual audiences in that context (Ahmad 1992, 78–81). Many of the works slotted into the Third World canon are postcolonial, critical of the West, and endorse nationalism as the only effective strategy of potential resistance (Jameson 1986).³ This implies either that the only difference between works selected and those not selected is aesthetic sophistication – as if attributions of sophistication or naiveté were unproblematic – or that works not selected are rejected on some unspecified ground (Ahmad 1992, 107).

Critics who point out the metropolitan character of the “Third World