

Book Review: *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, edited by Tarik Sabry (I.B.Tauris, 2011)

Reviewed by Ramy Aly

Arab cultural studies is, as Tarik Sabry suggests, a field unconscious of its own existence as an epistemic project. As an anthropologist, I find that the spirit of this book is reminiscent of the ‘crises of representation’ scholarship which emerged in response to traditional anthropology in the 1980s. The desire to create a reflexive disciplinary self-consciousness lies at the heart of this volume which brings together fourteen contributions from both established and emerging scholars who comment critically on the deficits in contemporary Arab cultural studies. The book’s strength lies in its unapologetic diagnosis of the weaknesses in Arab media and communication studies, Arab literary studies and in collective conceptions of ‘culture’. Most important, it simultaneously offers suggested ways out of these disciplinary impasses.

Sabry lucidly brings together these rich and insightful contributions in the opening chapter. He asks how we might understand and practice Arab cultural studies as an intellectual movement engaged with the grounded and heterogeneous modes of expression, practices and discourses of situated, everyday Arab-ness. Sabry does not seek to define or foreclose what Arab culture is or what Arab cultural studies might be; instead he seeks to work against the established certainties and claims which purport to know and police what the nature and purposes of Arab culture are. Against this established corpus of certainty Sabry conceptualises an Arab cultural studies in which scholarship assumes a position of *difference* in relation to its subjects and objects of study, providing space in which new fields can be established, new concepts and paradigms of thought can emerge, be tested and can make way for others.

Providing an overview of some of the most prominent intellectual trends in contemporary Arab intellectual history, Sabry draws his reader into the open space of *tajawuz* or ‘transcendence’—a concept which, he argues, offers resolution to the binary of authentic indigenous thought on the one hand and the tainted colonised mind of post-colonialism on the other. For far too long Arab cultural studies scholars have been caught in the intellectual violence of this bind. Although *tajawuz* is a marginal intellectual movement within Arab scholarship its promise is twofold. Firstly, it offers a progressive ‘ethics of otherness’ and secondly, it is a plane of double critique where territorialisation and deterritorialisation, location and dislocation, the universal and the local, indigenous and foreign are not mutually exclusive ends but the topographic features of a non-linear hermeneutic space where we can create, destroy, and reflect critically on our paradigms and modes of representation.

In Chapter 2, Walter Armbrust lays out a critique of Arab media studies scholarship, a field which he argues is far too ahistorical and caught up with technological determinism and instant scholarship. Armbrust’s project is to chart the development of new media in Egypt. In contradistinction to the customary association of the term ‘new media’ with the virtual or digital, Armbrust locates the emergence of new media in Egypt between 1919 and 1970.

Within this period, he argues, massive transformations of mediation took place, such as the emergence of a mass print culture, the nationalisation of the modes of cultural production and the transition from a predominantly aural to an increasingly ascendant ocular media culture. In effect, what Armbrust seeks is a cultural history of the media in Egypt and the wider Middle East. Currently there is a large gap in the scholarship around the history of early television broadcasting in Egypt, illustrated magazines, radio and cinema. The absence of history in Arab media studies can therefore lead us to fundamentally misunderstand what we look at today. Indeed, as Sabry points out in his chapter and Armbrust confirms in his, ‘the media’ is often synonymous with ‘the news,’ as if all other forms of media production and consumption are of a less intellectual or cultural import. Although Arab media studies are now increasingly diverse, below the surface is a historical void whereby the assumption that mass media necessarily cause dramatic change remains largely unchallenged. Armbrust’s media history tells us a different story of gradual sedimentation and changing of habits and practices.

In Chapter 3, Mohamed Zayani takes up the legacy of ‘a thin Arab media studies’ arguing that Arab media studies have been captive to a narrow and technical ‘communications’ paradigm. Zayani catalogues a broad range of reasons for the weakness of Arab media studies. ‘The media’ in the Arab world remains largely a tool of political and social control and the continued absence of intellectual freedom and collaborative and interdisciplinary research means that the discipline has failed to keep pace with Arab mediascapes. Zayani is concerned that West-centric approaches are uncritically replicated, leaving little room for innovative and situated approaches to emerge. A cultural studies perspective, he argues, holds much promise for reinvigorating Arab media studies particularly if emphasis is placed on the quotidian as the locus of investigation and theory. A focus on the complexities and dynamics embedded in everyday media practices is, he suggests, one of the only ways in which a more robust scholarship of media ecology in the Middle East can emerge.

Muhammad Ayish, in Chapter 4, highlights the implications of the way in which culture is understood within academic communication programmes in the region. Ayish argues that the broader approach to culture in the Arab world—an approach which casts culture as a sacred, patriarchal, unquestionable and almost biological characteristic of the regions’ nations and peoples—is so wanting that the call to incorporate ‘cultural studies’ into Arab media studies education is unrealistic at present. Like Zayani, Ayish laments the pre-eminence of American functionalist communication studies in the region, which he sees as paving the way to an unhealthy isolation of media studies from the interdisciplinarity that could turn it into cultural studies. He identifies two ‘culture’ camps engaged in an unequal confrontation—one traditionalist and aligned to state institutions and elite interests, the other a ‘cultural criticism’ fringe of non-institutionalised individuals and groups who are customarily accused of spreading confusion and disorientation with their deconstructive gestures. Cultural criticism, Ayish postulates, is a central component of cultural studies and yet remains resoundingly absent from the institutions of higher education in the region. He is careful to make the point that he does not advocate a straightforward transposition of western cultural studies into Arab

higher education, but he is concurrently resigned to the fact that Arab societies have not yet 'commanded the liberal culture needed to accommodate such critical orientations.'

Continuing the theme of locating and understanding the features of Arab media and cultural studies education and scholarship, Riyadh Ferjani explores the theoretical closure which the dichotomy of local Arab vs. foreign and western knowledge creates. Ferjani turns his attention to the conditions of knowledge production in Arab academe. Echoing Armbrust, Zayani and Ayish, he draws our attention to the developmentalist and technological determinist currents in the discipline, alluding to the insistence on a narrow use of an *itissal* (transmission) paradigm at the expense of a more heterogeneous and grounded interest in *tawassol* (communication). Ferjani looks closely at a number of works which show how the indigenous knowledge-making project slips uncritically into an Islamised development discourse with all the associated trappings of cultural reductionism.

The central role of the Arab state system in the making of formal national cultures is taken up by Dina Matar in Chapter 6. Matar's main point is to restate the need to work against the isolation of media and communication analysis from the wider structural contexts in which they operate, not least those of the state. While the state and institutions are important driving forces and determinants of elitist 'culture,' Matar reminds us of the follies of seeing the state and the interests it represents as a coherent whole. She perceptively points out the way in which the term *dawla* diverges from European notions of a fixed polity by virtue of the inherent circularity and flux denoted by its Arabic etymology. This fluidity has been ignored by the elites and forces that deploy strictly defined 'national culture' for their political ends. Along with her call to unpack our understanding of 'the state' in the Arab world, Matar, like her co-contributors, ends with a call for interdisciplinarity as a necessary step in the direction of more nuanced scholarship.

In Chapter 7, the interdependence of the politics of struggle on the one hand and resistance and national culture on the other is taken up by Helga Tawil-Souri. She charts the way in which Palestinian cultural production remains circumscribed by the political history of the existential struggle for Palestine. Palestinian culture in this context is in itself a form of resistance; however, Tawil-Souri asks how Palestinian art and cultural production might express itself beyond the political struggle and its legacy. Is it possible, she asks, to look at being Palestinian independent of the confrontation with Israel without receiving the customary condemnation that these forms of artistic expression are apolitical, unpatriotic and disengaged? There is no simple answer to the dialectic conundrum between Palestinian art and politics which remain a principle locus of resistance, counter memory and counter history in the face of the continued Zionist project of Palestinian erasure.

Layal Ftouni embarks on the ambitious project of formulating an Arab feminist epistemology in Chapter 8. Ftouni provides an excellent overview of how feminist scholarship has developed, innovated and yet remained trapped in what she describes as reactionary and deconstructive paradigms. Similar to broader trends in cultural studies scholarship, the project of creating indigenous knowledge often involves a reappropriation and reinterpretation of Islam from both patriarchal and Orientalist colonial formulations. The

minefield of positions that these re-articulations create entangles Arab and Islamist feminist epistemology in sexism, ethnocentrism, Orientalism and Occidentalism. Indeed, as Ftouni points out, the feminist project in and of itself is constantly the subject of claims and counterclaims regarding its inherent Occidentalism, universality or indigenous-ness.

I do disagree with the assumed limitation Ftouni places upon deconstructive and post-structuralist analysis which she characterises as only being an analysis of texts and not lived experience. The chapter contains a number of references to the textual reductionism of deconstruction, an interpretation which, to my mind, suggests that the linguistic turn in anthropology and cultural studies is not based on the assumption that discourse *is* practice and has corporeal and material causes and consequences. A strictly semiotic interest in representation is unrepresentative of the uses to which these analytical approaches have been put. Indeed, the chapter begins with the assertion that the task at hand is the a priori recognition of the existential reality of being a woman before any other signifier. The problem with this assertion is manifestly in the counter-assertion that *womanhood* is not prior to culture; it is, as some like myself have argued, something that is culturally and contextually structured and produced through imperfect repetition within structures of subjection— not something that one is born with. Ftouni's argument attempts to order, prioritise and isolate the biological from the sequential processes and everyday work of *subjectification*, intersectionality and interpellation that simultaneously produce the gendered, raced, classed, moralised and sexualised (to name but a few) subject, simultaneously and in situ. Disagreements of this sort aside, Ftouni's exploration stirs the scholarly waters of gender scholarship in the region, and is emphatic, insightful and timely.

An analysis of modernity, gender and class in contemporary Egyptian comedy is the subject of Iman Hamam's chapter (9). Hamam's reading of the *sha'abi* (popular) genre exposes the ways in which masculinity, social mobility, corruption, survival and cultural critique are all embedded in seemingly formulaic, fragmentary and meaningless films. However, a closer look shows how vernacular popular comedy lampoons Egypt's suffocating and often obnoxious bourgeois culture.

In Chapter 10, Naomi Sakr takes up the task of a political-economy reading of the cinema and its absence in Saudi Arabia. Sakr outlines the divergent social attitudes and financial motivations within the Kingdom's ruling elite whereby conservative clerics and state officials on the one hand and economically 'liberal' media tycoons from the ruling family on the other engage in a tug of war over the continued ban on cinema. Sakr's account highlights the moral absurdities of aspiring Saudi media moguls who invest in cinema and television while these mediums are essentially frowned upon and banned within the Kingdom, pushing their production and consumption beyond the country's borders. Perhaps the most interesting part of Sakr's account is the fringe Saudi film production scene which struggles to survive in the duplicitous Kingdom.

The book continues with two chapters centred on Saudi Arabia, with Marwan Kraidy introducing Anglophile readers to Saudi intellectual Abdullah Al-Ghathami's incisive writing on Arab literary and cultural studies, followed by a translated excerpt from Al-Ghathami's

2005 book *The Tale of Modernity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Al-Ghathami's work is a strikingly relevant inclusion because of the way in which it highlights the uncompromising monopoly on thought within either a cultural *salafist* or *turathya* context, as described by Sabry in his introduction. Kraidy cites copiously from Al-Ghathami's book in which he attempts to treat the ambivalent relationship to modernity within the Kingdom and the role of media and literary studies in that struggle. Saudi modernity, according to Al-Ghathami, reflects a socio-cultural schizophrenia which remains unresolved. Al-Ghathami's sensitive and nuanced dissection of the story of multiple modernities in Saudi Arabia has largely been lost on the country's conservative cultural gatekeepers who have condemned and pathologised him as tainted with alien western thought.

Yet Al-Ghathami has not shied away from the confrontation and continues to write in Arabic, from within a Saudi Arabian university and with grounded insights from his national context. In Chapter 12, we read him in his own voice on the subject of theory and methods of cultural criticism in the Arab world, courtesy of a translation by Muhammad Ayish. The chapter is moving, complex, insightful and purposeful. Not only does it provide an excellent critique of the stagnant, institutionalised and outdated modes of cultural and literary criticism which prevail in the region, but more importantly it outlines a set of concrete areas where innovation and change may yield a more critical and progressive approach. The complexity of Al-Ghathami's exposition may be lost on those unversed in literary criticism yet persevering with this chapter is manifestly rewarding and informative in so far as it lays out a pathway out of the sacralised and closed modes of literary studies in the Arab world and towards viable practices of literary criticism.

In the penultimate chapter (13), Atef Alshaer broaches the issue of the Arabic language and notions of collective culture and destiny. Alshaer provides an overview of key schools of thought and debates around the cultural relevance of the Arabic language, suggesting that thinking of Arabic as a 'culture of communication' is a fitting way of understanding cultural embodiment through the use of language

The final chapter by Susan O'Rourke and Rosser Johnson examines the transposition and 'reversioning' of a Media Studies degree from New Zealand to Omani higher education. The chapter is an interesting read, but figures as quite a disjuncture from the previous chapters. Detailing the human and technical processes of cross-cultural negotiation, institutionalisation and working relationships, O'Rourke and Johnson's chapter speaks directly to but does not engage with the critiques of education development in the chapters by Zayani, Ayish and Ferjani.

Ultimately, some of the chapters in the book are less hard hitting and critically insightful than others. However, *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field* is one of the most coherent attempts at exploring, evaluating and forging a disciplinary movement available today. It contains a wealth of new insights on gender, popular culture, media and communication studies and cultural criticism, the great majority of which are fascinating, inspiring, well thought out, and therefore essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Arab media and cultural studies.

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