



## **Imaging the Muslim World through Cinema and Popular Culture**

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### **Reviewed works**

Ali Nobil Ahmed, ed. 2016. *Cinema in Muslim societies*. London: Routledge, 163 pp., ISBN: 978-1-138-93452-8.

Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine & Martin Stokes. 2016. *Islam and popular culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 394 pp., ISBN: 978-1477309049, €29,76.

Kamran Rastegar. 2015. *Surviving images: cinema, war, and cultural memory in the Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 235 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-939017-5, €27,16.

Ali Khan & Ali Nobil Ahmed. 2016. *Cinema and society: film and social change in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 398 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-940222-9, €73,50.



### Question of the 'Muslim world'

Is there a Muslim world? In his introduction to the book *Cinema in Muslim societies*, comprising essays he commissioned for a special issue of *Third Text*, Ali Nobil Ahmed tries to answer the much-contested question of the existence of a Muslim world. By citing the communication he had with one of the potential contributors, published anonymously, Ahmed tries to give us an account of the reservations many people have to the idea of a 'Muslim world'. While answering such a detailed letter refusing to undertake, albeit critically, the opportunity to think on the cinematic culture of Islamic societies, Ahmed reiterates that the task at hand was not to make lazy assumptions about what constitutes the 'Muslim world' (Ahmed 2016: 1). At the core of his arguments for the project is the denunciation of the assumption of Islamic culture as homogeneous. And in a period of Islamophobic nationalist projects waving across the world, he points to the benefit of using the framework of "Muslim societies" to study culture beyond the scope of national demarcations. What Ahmed's editorial project does essentially is a regrouping of cultural and political contexts through the narratives of cinema from Muslim societies.

The books reviewed here have a common thread, of presenting the complexities of cultural products from vast areas usually bracketed and otherised as "Muslim" societies, from within narratives which refute the monolithic understanding of Islamic culture. Three of them have cinema at the forefront of their enquiries into the historic moment of the present, as they underline the agency of cinema and its visual culture in exercising social change. The focus on popular culture, including cinema, gives us fresh, and often sidelined points of view about Islamic societies across continents. The major contribution of these books towards understanding Islamic societies is the valiant rebuttal of the common perception of Islam being indifferent or hostile towards popular culture. Even though there has been anthropological curiosity from the west towards Islamic culture, modern geopolitics combined with Islamophobia has painted a rather grim picture about the relationship of Islamic societies with popular culture. What many of the contributions scattered in these four publications do, on one hand, is to present complex and multi-layered relationships that Islam as a religion shares with popular culture in societies that are ethnically diverse, whereby such diversity is often bundled under the homogenising banner of "Islam".

On the other hand, the accounts and arguments collected here essentially push the boundaries of understanding popular culture itself. Not branding popular culture as an umbrella term with the same meaning across all its zones of influence, but by presenting us with nuanced understandings of power equations and various



positions of agency within the realm of culture, these narratives contribute immensely to the field of cultural studies. Historicity, religiosity, nationality, ethnicity, gender, geo-political locations, are some of the vantage points which are employed as well as probed into here to introduce us to the complexities of popular culture in Islamic societies.

### **Uprising of interest**

Arab uprisings, of the recent years, feature as an important catalyst in numerous cultural phenomena discussed in these books. Several contributors rightly feel that the narratives presented to the world by the western media about these uprisings are inadequate and at times even flawed. In their introduction to the book *Islam and popular culture*, Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine, and Martin Stokes write that vibrant politics of popular culture during protests, particularly live performances, caught the attention of the western media. They suggest that the interest and dissemination of information by the West on the cultural expression of protests were mediated by a limited understanding of contexts and a preference for familiar expressions, often so-called secular ones. Their analysis of the role of popular culture in the politics of the Arab uprisings is an important intervention. In their three-fold iterations on the same they opine that firstly, art is not inherently political, but holds potential to encourage change. Secondly, popular culture should not always be seen as being in opposition or in coalition with power; but 'power works through and within' popular culture. The third important observation they make on the Arab spring moment is what they view as the intersection of Islam and popular culture brought to focus by the uprisings. Numerous contributions here underline that unlike the popular culture of protests, as several sources from western media would have us believe, many of the expressions which sprouted in the moment of the spring have deep Islamic undertones, which were brewing in the respective countries for a considerably long period before the uprising.

### **Islam and popular culture**

Given the interest in the cultural expressions of the Arab Spring, the opportunity of setting the record straight in terms of the relationship between Islam and popular culture seems extremely important. The publication *Islam and popular culture* comes out of an international conference with the same name, which was part of the research project 'Islam and Performing Arts' (2007-13) supervised by Nieuwkerk<sup>1</sup>. The introduction to the book offers us a number of "myth-busting" interventions which bind the arguments running through various contributions in the



book. One striking discussion, which lays the platform, is the discussion around "Islamic art" and aesthetics. They discuss the commonly held perception that Islam has a "thorny" relationship with art and aesthetics. Here the authors engage with the history of colonial epistemological mishaps, which formed opinions still prevalent about what is constituted as "Islamic art", that is, geometrical, or ornamental. They point to the works that have helped in debunking the notions of Islam being prohibitive of visual representation. For example, citing Oleg Grabar's book *The mediation of ornament*, among others, they show that ornamentation as a characteristic of Islamic art, has to be read in the historic context of its emergence. The introduction also presents examples, from Islamic history of philosophical thinking on proportions, poetry and calligraphy, pointing to show that indeed there were never rejections of aesthetics. They engage with this misconception about visual examples of Islamic art and about the relationship of Islam with aesthetics to get to the perceptions about Islam and popular culture, which are often looked through the same lens. One key concept they dwell upon is to consider culture as not being static but as something that lives through performance by the people who identify themselves as representatives of that culture.<sup>2</sup>

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One of the important interventions by the editors is to present popular culture in Islamic societies with all its ambiguities. The variety of cultural practices studied by the contributors present us with a plethora of ways to understand or consider the complex relationship that Islam as a religion and societies and communities generally categorised as Islamic, have with popular culture, as produced within and outside their public sphere(s). Various modalities of production and consumption of popular culture show that often the expressions that prevail in popular arts are loaded with dynamics of power.

In the chapter titled "Listening acts, secular and sacred: sound knowledge among Sufi Muslims in secular France", Deborah Kapchan takes us to Montpellier France, where the followers of the Moroccan Sufi order, the Boutshshiyya Qadiriyya, come together to listen and sing songs, some new and some based on mystical poems from eighteenth or nineteenth century. In a secular-fundamentalist society in France, and an age of growing Islamophobia, these 'listening acts' and 'sacred affect' prove to be a crucial exercise for people to conduct their religious behaviour (Kapchan 2016: 23). Kapchan explicates that the knowledge of sounds becomes an integral part of the religious identity of Muslims among complexities of different forms of secularism. She points that the 'literacy of listening' and auditory participation contributes to an aesthetic system of religious expression in which listening plays a dominant role. Here the act of singing and the site of cultural consumption can be closely seen as constituting the behavioural identity of the participants.



One of the key contributions of this publication is the argument about the connection between neoliberalism and the rise of religious formations in some of the sites of the Arab uprising. In an essay relevant both to the above mentioned point, as well as the study of visual cultures in Islamic societies, titled "Islam at the art school: religious young artists in Egypt", Jessica Winegar traces a students' group called *al-warsha*, operating within Cairo's state-run College of Fine Arts, as they organise pious events and events of charity all the while keeping the practice of art as an integral part of their religious identity. In the essay she provides us with the context in which an art school with a history of being 'modern' at a point in time is gradually turned into an institution right at the centre of the discussions on what constitutes a pious practice of art which while being modern in its aesthetics, holds on to Islamic values (Winegar 2016: 187). Winegar notes that the rise of Islamic values across Egypt coincided with expansion of neoliberal economic policies, which made way for the reduction of state regulations and its secular garbs. The essay puts the contradictions of art practices and Islam into light, clarifying against ideas circulated in the western press in the wake of uprisings in the Middle East and nonetheless presenting young Egyptians as secular revolutionaries.

A number of essays in this book point towards the active as well as passive role of the state in setting the course of popular culture in Islamic societies. This also reiterates the statement that power works 'within and through' popular culture. In the essay titled "Islamic popular music in Turkey", following the career of the Turkish musician and music producer, Mehmet Emin Ay, Martin Stokes closely examines the role of social media and popular music and the production and consumption of religious aesthetics in Turkey to underline the impact of popular culture in social transformation (Stokes 2016: 41). Here the rise in the popularity of the musical is read parallel to the rise of Islamic sentiments resulting in the current political scenario, that is, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's emergence to power. This essay also points towards aesthetic overlaps in popular culture that go beyond the borders, where artists refer to particular moments in history or aesthetic styles elsewhere to master a very particular aesthetic, which can be employed as a means of forwarding cultural projects including religious ones.

### **Imaging survival: cinema and trauma**

Putting the focus at the power of cinema, power not only to reflect but also to cultivate collective memories, is the book *Surviving images: cinema, war, and cultural memory in the Middle East*. Kamran Rastegar examines how cinema as a medium has played an active role in the production of cultural memory related to



social trauma. Through his analysis of some of the classics as well as other films which he claims have been understudied, Rastegar weaves a narrative of the history of traumatic memory through images from cinema. His narratives run across periods, from colonial age, struggles of independence, to the postcolonial period. He also examines cinema from various vantage points of agency, from the active involvement of states in the production of memories of social trauma, to cinema that brings out narratives that are suppressed by the state.

Rastegar acknowledges the arbitrariness of the term "middle east" in defining the geographical scope of his study. He points out that the term is not used as a boundary marker, but rather as a region collectively pervasive of the logic, which classifies its categorization. The book is thus not presented as one, which defines the cultural paradigms of cinema from the region usually perceived as 'Middle East'. He has included narratives from parts of northern Africa, like Sudan, without getting into addressing the region by the name of North Africa. By dealing with the geographical placement of his analytical narratives this way, Rastegar subverts notions of treating regions under watertight classifications, which often have a military history or the history of war (Rastegar 2015: 2).

Each chapter here deals with different aspects and examples of social conflict and resulting traumas. Rastegar presents multitudes of ways in which cinema as a medium 'illustrate' trauma. What Rastegar presents is in a way the history of the region carefully disclosed through the study of cinema, while also reiterating that cinema played an active role in shaping the memory of those histories. In one of the in-depth engagements of the book, Rastegar closely monitors the shifting positioning of the concept of trauma in cinematic history when he traverses through the coloniser-colonised divide in the narratives. In a chapter titled "Colonialism, memory, masculinity" (Rastegar 2015: 41), he follows the trajectory of the 1902 novel *Four feathers* in cinematic history. A.E.W. Mason's novel provided a 'popular literary gloss' to the British imperialist project and had been privileged to be made into a film a number of times, with the most recent one being Shekahr Kapur's film by the same name made in 2002, which claimed to have a postcolonial take on the story. Rastegar goes through various productions of the film, situated in various political moments in history to examine how the trauma of the coloniser is glorified in the narrative of one of the most embarrassing defeats of the Anglo-Egyptian army at the hands of Mahadists in Sudan, in 1885. The chapter traces how the trauma faced by the lead character of the novel, Harry Feversham, in order to win back lost honor, is portrayed in various cinematic versions of the novel. From here, the book goes on to examine postcolonial narratives of how struggles for independence get memorialised in films from colonised countries like Egypt and



Tunisia. In a chapter titled "Freedom, then silence: memory and the women of Egyptian and Tunisian independence", which inquires into convenient omissions of women's role from celebrated narratives of the struggles, Rastegar looks at the portrayal of these roles in cinematic narratives and cultural memories. The chapter brings forth the marginalisation of women in post-independence narratives in their respective countries.

Ali Nobil Ahmed's editorial project deals with analytical essays on contemporary cinematic explorations of narratives from Muslim societies, which are geographically far and wide. As a deliberate conceptual intervention, he circumvents cold war era categorizations of 'Middle East' and 'South Asia' to consider more of South-South comparative strategies to study Islamic art and culture. In a provocative gesture, Ahmed asks readers to consider what would happen if religiosity were considered an important factor to study aesthetics, narrative genres, performance styles and visual and sonic forms in cinema (Ahmed 2016: xvii). At the core of it, the book tries to answer the question of the presence of a 'Muslim world'. In his confrontation with the criticism that the project faced at the hands of a few academics, the correspondence with them being the starting point for the introduction of the book, Ahmed tries to emphasise that the attempt of the book and its diverse contributions was not to suggest that there is homogenous Muslim world. In his defence he places the project as a viable means to reclaim agency from the western Islamophobic projection of the homogeneous Muslim world. Here the importance of the cinematic medium is underlined in understanding the nuances of the varied Islamic societies. Cinema being a modern medium, its analysis helps to debunk the often projected common perception of Islamic societies being stuck somewhere in the pre-modern period. In introducing the diverse locations of the contributions, Ahmed tries to highlight the importance of understanding the aesthetic grounds of cinematic expressions, which are rooted in the very diverse and specific contexts of Islamic culture, which forms the background of films. While acknowledging the pitfalls in the act of describing the aesthetic and spiritual impacts of religion on the medium of cinema, he places his editorial project as a counter-response to essentialism, which brackets the cultural expressions from the 'Muslim world'.

### **Cinema and social change**

Bringing the discussion back to the role of cinema in reflecting and impacting history, let us consider the publication *Cinema and society: film and social change in Pakistan*. Edited jointly by Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmed, this book, the most colourful of the collective analysed in this essay, with images of film posters and



film stills, focusses on the histories and trajectories of popular cinema from Pakistan. With a range of contributions discussing recurring themes, genres, modernity, politics of language, reflections on social hierarchies, the social experiences of the locations of cinema consumption, this book makes a strong case for the study of popular culture in order to actively bypass the nationalistic and nationalising statist logic of compartmentalised cultural existence. The book covers historical narratives from locations of cinematic production in the region of the northern expanse of the Indian subcontinent (from Lahore, Karachi, Bombay, to Dacca) to present the web of agents and actors in the formation of 'Pakistani' cinema. And most importantly it brings out historical episodes, which refute phobia against popular culture and cinema as the lone 'Islamic' impulse. Even though contemporary nationalist discourses in Pakistan tend to be cinephobic, (Khan & Ahmed 2016: 4), this book, visually designed deliberately to appeal to a wider audience, tries to bring in historical narratives to counter religio-nationalist discourses against popular culture.

In a remarkable essay, placing Cinema at the centre of the narratives of Pakistan's relationship to modernity, Iftikhar Dadi does an in-depth analysis of two films, *Armaan* (1966) and *Anari* (1975). In *Arman*, Dadi finds the visualisation of the urban, upwardly mobile residents of a 'Housing Society', as part of the 'project of secularized reform' of the Muslim social in Pakistan (Dadi 2016: 89). In *Anari*, Dadi decodes the moral uncertainties or the lack of 'self-assurance' of the Urdu social film genre, reflecting the post 1970s atmosphere in Pakistan. Dadi's analysis also brings out narratives from the history of politics of ethnicity in Pakistan.

In conclusion, the works discussed in this essay do not necessarily outline the project of visualising and therein even shaping a Muslim world by studying cinema and popular culture. Rather, these contributions speak to each other through their common acknowledgement of the distinct reciprocity shared by religion and cultural imaginations in Islamic societies. The books and their contributors bring much needed contemporary light to counter the hegemonic Islamophobic narratives which flood media, both broadcasting and social. These books undertake the task of unpacking the western notion of a homogeneous Muslim world by exposing the diverse threads that weave the layered and complex fabric of a vast and diverse population. By bringing the impact of the technological on the spiritual and religious to focus, several contributions in these books pave way for effectively countering the monotonous, generalizing and problematic framing of a homogenous Islamic culture.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> see Nieuwkerk, Levine & Stokes 2016: 17.

<sup>2</sup> The editors of the book rely here, on the theories provided by Mark Le Vine and John Storey in their understanding of the dynamics and categorization of culture, especially popular culture.

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