

Contemporary Audiovisual Tendencies in the Middle East and North Africa

*Reflection on the Middle East Video Channel, at 'Farewell to Post-Colonialism',
Third Guangzhou Triennial, China*

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The visual culture in the Middle East is an epoch of change. During almost 60 years, when Europe experienced an economic boom and an exponential media boost, the other side of the Mediterranean Sea was suffering from a tense political situation and numerous military conflicts: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1948-2003), the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991), the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979), the re-appearance of Islamic grouping in Algeria (1980-2003), the gulf wars (1991 and 2003), diasporas and streams of refugees towards Europe and North America.

Within this context of extreme political and social instability the Arab world had to define its own media landscape and audiovisual identity. The long monopoly or colonization of the global airwave space, mainly by Western media giants like the BBC, Voice of America and CNN, has been defiantly penetrated. Through these groups' relentless broadcasting of audiovisual material to the third world and to the Middle East for many years, the identity and living conditions of the target groups have been subject to the serious influence of Western norms. With limited alternatives, the viewers subscribed to the Western values broadcast to them in local languages up until the beginning of the 'satellite era' about twenty years ago. By then, the monopoly was reduced, if not endangered, particularly with the birth of antagonistic, semi-independent satellite news stations like Al-Jazeera, Al-Mamnoua TV, Al'Alam TV and Al-Manar from the Arab world, alongside other broadcasting entities like PRESS TV, from Asia and Africa.

The emergence of the massive number of satellite stations worldwide upset the existing media industry. Competition over viewers, national interests and patriotism, aroused

by wars and conflicts, resulted in uncertain and aggressive broadcasting. In addition to this, notions like independence, neutrality, reliability and responsibility were challenged, if not changed.

One of the major changes in regard to the media has been the decline of so-called 'signal colonialism'. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto explains, 'when there no longer is a physical space to conquer, virtual space is colonized' (*Real Virtuality*, 1996). The current new media world order is an ambivalent order due to the massive number of transnational TV stations each with its own political interests and arrangements. Media critic Michael Parenti, for example, explains how in a capitalist democracy the corporate news broadcast media faithfully reflect the ideology of the dominant class in their reportage and commentary. At the same time, these media leave the impression that they are free and independent, capable of balanced coverage and objective commentary.

No longer strictly a Western category, worldwide media practices have also been subject to drastic technological changes. With the increased availability and affordability of film and editing equipment, terms like enthusiast filmmaker, video maker, video activist, internet video blogger and experimental documentary maker have emerged. During the last 20-30 years, there has been a remarkable interaction in audiovisual culture between cinema, video, photography, animation, computer graphics, etc. Trends and genres are integrated into one another, and a variety of technologies and methods are used within one framework.

Investigational, Independent Video Documentary on the March

When addressing the changing climate of visual culture in contemporary Arab society, one might best describe what the region is witnessing today as cultural growth and

expansion. This expansion applies to the visual expressions and experiences of the region in terms of electronic development, an expanding media industry, a changing motion picture culture, and new practices within Arab visual culture. A new generation of video makers and documentarists is on the rise, offering alternative sources of information and entertainment and enjoying social awareness of the new media, from Morocco to Iraq.

The worldwide popularity of video documentary as a medium began in the sixties. While for many years video documentary was operating on the margins of the Western society, it ultimately won its autonomous position in the West as well as in the Middle East. Video documentary as a medium started to gain popularity across the Arab world around the eighties, where several new experimental, independent media producers emerged in cities like Beirut, Damascus and Algiers, but also in Tehran and Istanbul. Originating from those creative production centres, video documentarists like Akram Zaateri, Hamdi Attia, Wael Shawqy, Annemarie Jacir, Khaled Hafez, Monira Al-Solh, Jacqueline Salloum, Azza El Hassan, Mahmoud Hojeij and Jalal Toufic, have managed to expand our understanding of the production of video making from the Middle East, are making their own rules of engagement and shaping a new contemporary visual order in the region.

These artists' video format takes no commercial or industrial approach. It attempts to tell the grass-roots story from a grass-roots level, since most of its practitioners and activists work independently, with clear motives: to make the marginal story central, to make the invisible visible, to improve people's lives, to make them feel that someone cares and that someone is willing to listen to their story. Without adding hidden modifications, and unlike contemporary journalism, which is characterized by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan as a traumatized industry, video liberators work with people and engage them in their own stories.

The result of their interventionist practice is more visible and recognized now than ever before. We have seen how video and documentary theorists in both the East, and especially the West, are making larger space for the history, memory, and nature of such practices, regarding them as a discursive experimental genre, in which aesthetics and cultural theory are combined in a constantly evolving formal combination.

(1) Artists often use film and video alongside more conventional arts such as painting, sculpture and photography.

Because of the aesthetic concerns, and the critical and analytical con-

ceptual approaches, these filmmakers have been celebrated on an international scale. Their independent work has been the subject of numerous scholarly publications and essays, has featured in several major international academic conferences and forums in Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul and Sharjah, and has claimed space at the center of significant scholarly discussions about memory, truth, verification, and visual representation.

In addition to academic institutions, contemporary art museums as well as film festivals seem to be the favoured exhibition and reception spaces for these independent creations. A growing number of important international film festivals, such as the International Film Festival Rotterdam, FID Marseille, Cinéma du Réel (Georges Pompidou Center, Paris), *a priori* not specialized in Arab cinema, have opened their doors to these productions. Furthermore a series of major exhibitions (Documenta, the biennials of Sharjah, Bruxelles, Thessaloniki, etc.), initiated by curators like Catherine David or Jack Persekian, have largely contributed to the introduction of Arab independent documentaries to an international audience. In the form of mainly political exhibitions (Contemporary Arab Representations. The Iraqi Equation, Berlin, 2005-2006; DI/VISIONS. Kultur und Politik im Nahen Osten, Berlin, 2007, etc.), these events are subject to a growing interest. Upcoming exhibitions in 2009 at the Biennial of Lyon or the 53rd Venice Biennial – for the first time there will be pavilions from Palestine and the UAE as well as an Abu Dhabi exhibition – are other examples that reflect this continuing interest.

Video Art and Experimental Cinema – an Act of Resistance

Within this art context, and in parallel with the increasing number of independent Arab documentary filmmakers, one can observe over the last ten years a growing number of contemporary visual artists also working with film and video but in a more experimental way (1). Even if the frontiers between these two groups are often blurred by a similar documentary approach, analogue interests in socio-political and cultural issues, and artists switching from one genre to another, the formal aspect can usually be clearly distinguished. While pure documentarists feel more concerned about a specific subject and its clear cinematographic presentation, the development of a new visual language through the unconventional use of images, sounds and texts seem to

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be a central motivation for contemporary artists. A personal point of view is generally emphasized; autobiographical, intimate and poetic thoughts are not excluded. The results are exciting, and so is the freedom of expression and the audacity taken by the video makers.

Artists like Taysir Batniji, Waël Noureddine, Usama Alshaibi, Ayman Ramadan, Zineb Sedira, Al Fadhil or Mounir Fatmi, amongst others, have not only taken the risk to overcome taboos, censorship, political or religious control, but also visual traditions and conventions. Their complex works, often inspired by Western and Arab references, show an extremely inventive approach. Living generally between their home countries and Europe or North America, their identities have been shaped by the cultures they have encountered during forced or voluntary states of migration and exile. In their works, recurring themes such as displacement, identity, war, immigration, alienation, occupation, colonialism and memory are portrayed and visually orchestrated, revealing essential experiences of our time.

It is not astonishing that two generations of artists, born between the sixties and the seventies, teenage witnesses of the political and social seism of the second half of the 20th century, have found in experimental cinema and video art a vector to analyse a reality dominated by a Western doxa; they have started looking for critical languages as an alternative to the dominant discourse. Comparable with the engagement of poets and novelists at the beginning of the 20th century, who were among the more radical critics within the Arab world (2), some of the artists place their video works in this tradition. A number of them started as writers, as if writing had a correlation to film. Since video has become more accessible, it has somehow taken up the role of the pen: a handy medium, portable and, if necessary, disposable, that has the facility of condensing and expressing social and political situations in a personal manner.

In a way, due to its engagement and persistence, this generation of video artists and independent documentary filmmakers can be described as a resisting generation. It is not necessarily a political resistance and is far from an organized common movement. It is rather a colourful mosaic of individual statements, a diversification of points of view, a playful association of ideas; resistance in the sense of Deleuze's: "Creating is not communication, but resisting (...). Art is

what resists: it resists against death, servitude, infamy, shame." These films are not in themselves a form of

(2) Many of these writers took an active role in socialist and feminist politics.

resistance against a particular system, but are rather manifestations of resistance through thinking and filmmaking, images and sounds. Visual thinking is a new kind of contemplation taking place in the Middle East. Artists in particular are communicating through the usage of represented footage and images. In this connection, alternative film expressions are emerging in the region, forming a category that goes behind the recognized classical film or documentary structure. The visual language that is used questions notions like time and place, and acts in a different and more interactive way.

The Middle East Video Channel at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, China

In Autumn 2008 and at the 3rd Guangzhou Triennial we put together a screening file on the line of experimental video and short documentary produced mainly by artists from the Arab world, Turkey and Iran.

The collection of video and experimental documentaries addresses the above concerns. The self-presenting video collection does not focus on how the world views the Middle East, but rather on how the region views and documents itself, primarily at the hands of its own cultural activists and video makers. The wider theme of the Middle East Video Channel is to be found in the notion of exploration, the search for characteristic independence and memory/history in contemporary audiovisual culture in the Middle East. The Middle East Video Channel presents how video makers from the Middle East tackle, view and reconstruct their memories, reality and virtuality, how they define their sociological truth, and how the use of new media influences their artistic practices.

The selected videos are concerned with social and political change. They could be said to be seeking to explain or deepen our understanding of certain elements of society. Maneuvering on the borders of traditional documentary form, many works are deeply conscious of the truth they represent.

The video programme "Middle East Video Channel" mainly focuses on categories like sociological or anthropological video trends, short illustrative documentary and video as a tool of political activism. It also deals with autobiographical videos, testimonial interviews, archival footage, and socio-political issues, with the aim of altering, de-authorizing and deconstructing the limits of experimental video

and documentary from the region. Independently produced experimental video and investigational artistic documentary were in the spotlight of the Middle East Video Channel.

With the selection of over thirty videos, we wanted to transmit the messages they present, help articulate the aesthetic context of this type of video making and explore the characteristics of its expansion. The “Middle East Video Channel” programme was shown simultaneously to the Third Guangzhou Triennial at the UCCA in Beijing.

In Conclusion

Examining the contemporary art of media in the Arab world and the role it is taking in local societies, one can conclude the following: The Middle East/Arab world is witnessing important cultural and social changes and, parallel with these changes, a notable expansion of visual culture is taking place. Video as a medium was successfully liberated by the efforts and engagement of independent film enthusiasts, artists and experimental filmmakers, who offer their societies alternative investigational narratives to the events taking place in the social and political space in the Middle East and North Africa. The independence of video production comes as an answer to a media condition that is recognized worldwide.

The increased access to new media technology results in new artistic practices with a multiplicity of visual expressions. The work of video and film makers is rapidly crystallizing and gaining attention. Through the work of their lenses, local history and the narration of the region are now being documented, unlike in colonial times, when the history of the region had to be written in a representational form. Distancing themselves from the usual stereotypes, the artists and filmmakers aim to explore the existential, political and aesthetic issues of our times, while opening up to new narrative perspectives that break with the monotonous and repetitive imagery of our media. The exploration and articulation of these subjects in this type of video making is just beginning in the Middle East, yet more surprising works are about to be born.

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