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Guest Editor's Introduction: The Politics in and of Middle Eastern Television Drama

Nour Halabi & Christa Salamandra

The mass uprisings that spread through Middle East in 2011, and the succession of social movements and that have followed it, sparked a burgeoning of academic interest in the politics of Middle Eastern media. Most analysts have focused on the role social media has played in these phenomena, debating, for instance, the extent to which protests should be considered 'Twitter Revolutions' or 'Facebook Revolutions.' User-generated media has displaced television in academic literature, but not in in the Middle East itself, where TV drama forms the primary platform for sociopolitical commentary. As contributions to this special issue evince, multi-media convergence has in fact intensified television drama's reach and relevance. The Internet offers a virtual, year-round simulation of Ramadan—the longstanding TV broadcast season in Arabic- language media. Digital technologies enable binge watching, breathing new life into long-form television. Audiences watch serials through streaming services and video sharing sites. Fan cultures abound on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Media makers use these platforms to promote their works and—sometime from sites of diaspora—communicate with each other and their audiences. Viewers are themselves producing and posting mashups, spoofs, critiques, and homages to TV serials and their creators.

Television serials and their production worlds offer a unique vantage point from which to study social and cultural life. As an art form, TV drama also merits consideration for its aesthetics qualities and formal innovations. Given its breadth and reach, television drama should occupy a place in academic analysis that reflects its significance. Sadly, scholarly attention to

this key cultural form appears inversely proportional to its socio-political relevance. Film—particularly of the auteur variety that local audiences rarely see—retains much higher status. This may reflect lingering allegiance to Frankfurt School positions on mass cultural industries as monolithic purveyors of dominant ideologies. Decades after the British Cultural studies theorists complicated the analysis of mass cultural forms and their consumption, the *musalsal* is dismissed as sophisticated propaganda. This stance not only ignores the complexities of fictional television, it also underestimates the structural contingencies of art film production; highbrow cinema's funding sources, exhibition and reception all belie the autonomy that scholarly attention to it implies. This paradoxical regime of academic value is by no means restricted to the Middle East; China's impressive drama industry has likewise received only scant attention.[1] In addition, the Television Study Scholarly Interest Group is among the smallest sections within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the leading US-based organization for scholarship on fictional broadcast media. Its members complain of marginality. Indeed, 'media' was added the organization's name only in 2002, a seeming afterthought.

In the Middle East, television drama creators serve as public intellectuals who, with uncanny prescience, tell the world something. As Armbrust—and Salamandra's screenwriter interlocutor—note, academics and others would do well to pay more attention. Given their depth of socio-political critique and formal innovation, serial dramas deserve greater attention. Minimally, the academy should keep pace with the media market; Netflix, the streaming service that now offers subtitled versions Turkish, Egyptian, and Syrian-Lebanese productions.

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[1] Ying Zhu, Michael Keane & Ruoyun Bai, (eds). (2008) Introduction, p.2, in: Ying Zhu, Michael Keane & Ruoyun Bai, (eds) *TV Drama in China*, pp. 1-18 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).

This special issue seeks to realign scholarly interest with lived media realities in the Middle East. Contributors from variety of disciplines—anthropology, communication, and law—analyze case studies from the region's leading drama industries. They include seasoned academics who have dedicated their careers to following the debates occurring in and around Middle Eastern media and politics, as well as emerging scholars who build on earlier work by introducing fresh perspectives. All contributions attend to the complex nexus of relations linking producers, productions, broadcasting, and reception.

Television drama reveals a complex and sometimes contradictory deployment of history as commentary on the contemporary moment. Josh Carney analyzes a war of dramatic pasts in contemporary Turkey. Comparing two highly successful Ottoman-period Turkish dramas, he argues that Ottoman revivalist serials represent nostalgic projects that reprise the past and recreate it in the process. The first, *The Magnificent Century,* with its depiction of sexual exploits and palace intrigues in Sultan Suleyman's court, presented a narrative of history that conflicted with the aims of the conservative Turkish government led by the (AKP) Justice and Development Party. For that very reason, *Century* inspired a second neo-Ottoman revivalist serial, *Resurrection,* which was produced by a former AKP politician. The latter show restores a more conservative view of Ottoman past.

Christa Salamandra's essay explores the multilayered chronopolitics that runs through key Syrian dramatic genres, in which television creators pose, and attempt to answer the question: 'what went wrong?'. Historical and folkloric dramas evoke the heroism and cultural flourishing of bygone ages, critiquing present through implied comparison. Serials set in the present invert this logic, identifying the sources of contemporary ills in recent historical errors and injustices. Through a technique of narrative allochrony, drama creators point to select

practices and attitudes as lapses in national—and regional—modernizing projects. This signifying process has intensified in dramas that followed the 2011 anti-regime uprising-turned-civil and proxy wars, as dramas remain relevant by offering analyses of the conflict that draw on the past for explication.

Drama creators have grappled with the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and their aftermaths from a variety of ideological standpoints. Two essays in this issue highlight state-sanctioned narratives of the protest movements. Gianluca Parolin argues that drama has supported the reinvigoration of authoritarian governance that occurred after Egypt's 2011 Revolution. Analyzing *Kalabsh* [*Handcuffs*] of 2017, he contends that drama provided an avenue to revisit—and discredit—key revolutionary figures. The serial portrays anti-regime activists as opportunists, foreign agents, naïve youths, or simple troublemakers. *Kalabsh*, Parolin argues, dismisses revolutionary movements as disruptive, cumbersome events that fail to generate substantial, positive political change.

Similarly damning depictions of protestors appear in recent Syrian drama. As Nour Halabi's shows, the spatially-grounded, socioeconomic inequality that has fed Syria's conflict is documented in television serials as nowhere else. Her contribution explores the *drama al-ashwa'iyat* [informal settlement] genre that depicts the impoverished conditions in the informal settlements that housed an estimated 50% of Syria's prewar population. Comparing two serials, *al-Intizar* aired in 2006, and *Zawal*, aired in 2016, Halabi argues that spatial inequality played a central—and overlooked—role in mobilizing protests. She notes that wartime television depictions of informal settlements have strayed from an earlier tendency to highlight structural inequality and state neglect, and instead blame informal settlement dwellers for their own dire situation.

Occasionally, serials serve as straightforward state propaganda tools. In her contribution, Esha Momeni revisits *Ravayat-e Fath* [The Story of Conquest], an Iranian docudrama produced between 1984 to 1987, to explore the role that television played in framing the Iranian population's impression and experience of the Iran-Iraq war. Momeni argues that although the serial was presented as a documentary, *Ravayat-e Fath* entered the fictional realm through its reliance on epic narratives and dramatic cinematography. The serial worked to cultivate a culture of survivors' guilt and a glorification of martyrdom that the Iranian government used to recruit soldiers. *Ravayat-e Fath* promoted a valorization of martyrdom that shamed living war veterans as failures, and justified the state's refusal to support all but the most physically disabled among them.

Walter Armbrust focuses on a very different treatment of political Islam. His contribution ponders a question that has plagued analysts of Egypt since the 2013 Rab'a massacre: regardless of attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, how could the Egyptian public have tolerated the brutal treatment of the al Rab'a protestors? Armbrust's answer turns to fictional television, illustrating how the serial drama *al-Gama'a* [*The Organization*] vilified and demonized the Muslim Brotherhood through decontextualization of the group's history. By juxtaposing the present of 2010 with a biopic of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, *al-Gama'a* painted the organization as inherently violent and alien to Egyptian society. The serial aired before the massacre unfolded, and thereby paved the way for television news and talk shows to justify the murderous crackdown on Rab'a protestors in 2013.

Television serials like those analyzed in this special issue remain crucial to audiences living, as Middle Easterners do, in a post-literate societies. The authoritarian entrenchments that have followed the 2011 uprisings have only exacerbated constraints on journalistic and academic

freedom in Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, countries with thriving TV drama industries. This in turn reinforces the serial drama's significance for citizens of these nations, and audiences beyond who follow Middle Eastern programs on transnational satellite networks and the Internet. The region's hegemons will likely continue their efforts to coopt this crucial medium, and drama makers will try to evade or sidestep them. Thus, as the studies in this special issue illustrate, television drama serves a vehicle for TV creators, audiences and academics alike to identify, reflect upon, and debate the most pressing issues facing Arab societies, from religious extremism, to legal reform, to economic inequality.