

REVIEW

**Hala Auji, Raphael Cormack and Alaaeldin Mahmoud
(eds): *The Arab Nahda as Popular Entertainment: Mass
Culture and Modernity in the Middle East***

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In an opening scenario, this volume’s editors describe a vernacular-poetry dialogue that attracted boisterous crowds in a provincial city in Egypt in 1877. The competition had a self-appointed emcee: a senior state official and local landowner. Fifteen years later, it was described in the periodical founded by the dialogue’s most famous participant, and that’s how today’s scholars know about it. As the editors say, this narrated event “exemplifies the spirit of the age that saw myriad intersections between the revivalist culture of the elite intelligentsia and the populist interests of general audiences” (p. 2). This volume offers archivally rich essays on some of those “intersections”, focusing on popular entertainment – art forms, venues, and geographies that, the editors and contributors propose, have featured insufficiently in scholarship on the cultural-discursive and institution-building movement of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arabophone societies known as the Nahda.

Focusing on performance and visuality, chapters treat overlapping sites: theatre, early cinema, music and its performers, café and nightclub cultures, magazine illustrations, the policing of public spaces and, tangentially, fiction and poetry. Moving away from the traditional geographical foci of Nahda studies (Egypt and Ottoman Syria), contributors offer vignettes and voices of entertainment life further afield, stretching from Liz Matsushita’s analysis of “Andalusi” music in North Africa to Pelle Valentin Olsen’s portrait of nightclubs in Baghdad. One consistent and welcome strain is a focus on the increasing visibility and quasi-independent agency of women as performers, producers, and audiences. “Woman” was a key focus of Nahda discourse. If any issue was the main motor of elite Nahda talk, it was the question of society’s gendered arrangements in a fast-changing world. Within and beyond punditry, tensions between women’s mobility or visibility as elements of “modernity”, on the one hand, and anxiety about the collapse of patriarchal authority structures, voiced as “moral” breakdown, on the other, were stretched to the limit when it came to women of stage and song. These women had to live with such tensions in their lives, and negotiate them in representations of their work and fame, as Diana Abbani’s analysis of Beirut-based performers’ press interviews demonstrates.

If female performers drew audiences beyond a writing elite, they also drew in that elite. Even as pundits disapproved, they attended concerts and plays and bought recordings. And, more often than not, it is through their writings – supportive or critical – that we access so much of these histories, a perennial archival conundrum in studying “the

popular". Likewise, if the 1877 vernacular-poetry slam exemplifies "intersections", it also raises category questions these scholars must confront. 'Abdallah Nadim, the journalist-activist at the event's centre, combined commitment to political work amongst rural and working-class Egyptians – including staging plays as consciousness-raising tools – with more conventional sites of culture production, notably print journalism. (Even there, his techniques were often unconventional.) Nadim has featured within Nahda scholarship. His presence – in his historical moment, and in today's scholarship – challenges the notion of a bifurcated Nahda that these editors see as still dominating scholarly consciousness: intellectuals versus "popular" or "populist" elements. Scholarship, they say, has associated the Nahda with "the literary elite of various metropolises" (p. 2). In the period under study, too, commentators made distinctions between "respectable" cultural output with its didactic aims and classically based language, and "play" or "entertainment", often associated with vernacular texts. Nadim – who both was and was not part of that "literary elite" – was the rare activist who drew on both for his own political-didactic goals, as has long been recognized.

It is important to remember that the "literary elite" of the Nahda was itself quite various. Studying the periodical press, book publication, and translations, reveals that those who aspired to write and publish were not all "high culture" people. Examples these studies adduce challenge the notion of a bifurcated elite/popular divide. It's not only about varying backgrounds and commitments. It's also about outcomes. There was a lot of "everydayness" in even the "high" discourse of the Nahda. These authors read "elite texts" against the grain to elicit evidence for culture production these same texts disparaged – or sometimes embraced.

There is interesting material here for thinking about the political valence of entertainment forms in a context where issues of modernity, colonialism, class, and space/gender arrangements were to the fore. The terms "popular" and "populist" have different meanings, though they appear sometimes to be used interchangeably here. Moreover, "popular" might intersect, but not be coterminous, with "public" (in its varying meanings, traced by Till Grallert). If that double identification – popular/populist – is relevant to a figure such as Nadim with his evident political agenda, it is less appropriate to the work or outlook of others (for instance, Ahmad Shawqi, even in his late works, analysed by Alaaeldin Mahmoud). Might we use the wealth of material amassed here to meditate on the historically specific meanings of these capacious, elusive labels? We need micro-histories of individuals aspiring to join that Nahda "elite" via their culture work – and partaking of the same cultural forms as the "popular" audiences invoked here. Where does one place Nadim's emcee, not a producer of Nahda texts but a funding contributor? Some "elite" participants strove to erect cultural boundary markers, to contain the exuberance they saw around them (and to justify their own engagement in, for instance, "popular" novel-writing). Often, though, their critiques were directed not at "the masses" but at the social (mis)behaviour of those with solid middle-class or "elite" credentials. Meanwhile, entertainers worked to align their images with high-culture spaces and concerns. When divas assume the roles of earlier, elite women by opening salons in their sitting rooms, where do they sit with respect to "popular culture"?

What kinds of assumptions, then, can we make about "non-elite" audiences and their attitudes? Evidence is slim; this is a difficult, perhaps impossible, question to answer. The editors ask: "What would the Arab Nahda look like when taken from the perspective of popular culture or 'ordinary people'?" (p. 2). These essays allow us to think about the variety of audiences that discrete genres and sites might attract. But "perspective" is a step further. And who are these "ordinary people"? By and large, the sites (and costs?) of entertainment varieties studied here suggest they were middle strata; indeed, perhaps

such activities helped to define those strata. Urban-based Nahda intellectuals were largely of these same strata.

The volume also raises questions about historical context. Some chapters focus on the mid-twentieth century. By then, infrastructures and constituents of education and the labour market were not those of fifty years previously. Political scenarios across the region had shifted if not been wholly transformed. The media, products and consumers of culture would have been largely unrecognizable to nightclub audiences of generations past. These contributors see a continuation (if not a continuity) of “Nahda” energies in the arts and entertainment convergences of this later time. But how do we define “Nahda” across this vast and changing temporal landscape? It is to these scholars’ credit that their work raises questions central to Nahda studies, and offers us material through which to ponder answers.