

ON INTERNATIONALISM

REORIENT – RESISTING ROMANTICISM IN DEPICTIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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Hassan Hajjaj, Rider, 2010, Metallic lambda print on 3mm white dibond, 62.2 cm x 90.5 cm;
Taymour Grahne Gallery

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*"...it is no coincidence that it was before the region was corrupted by these foreign influences that the Middle East... experienced a "golden age." ...in order to revive this glorious past one must purify the region from all the pernicious foreign influences and return to the original and uncorrupted form of society."*¹

*"And when I finally got myself invited to a North Tehran party, I saw miniskirts and backless tops on braless young women in their mid-twenties and thirties, to say nothing of the heavy flirting and the dirty dancing. Even among the non-elite and working class, female friends and students of mine often made a point of shaking my hand (against convention), lifting their head scarves to reveal their hair, and even showing me cell-phone photos of themselves uncovered."*²

¹ Valbjørn, Morten. "Culture in the Middle East: The "Western Question" and the Sovereignty of Post-imperial States in the Middle East." In *Sovereignty After Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, edited by Cummings Sally N. and Hinnebusch Raymond, 222-41. Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

² Edwards, Brian T. "Watching Shrek In Tehran: The Seen And The Unseen In Iranian Cinema" *The Believer*, March/April, 2010. http://www.believermag.com/issues/201003/?read=article_edwards

One of the greatest difficulties of talking about the Middle East is that the term suggests a homogenous entity, glossing over variances of religion, language, and culture. However, this communicative disability is characteristic of contemporary discourse, perhaps all discourse on humanity – using language and knowledge which is inherently limited to speak of people, inherently complex. As a result, modernization has come to be synonymous with westernization and the Middle East has come to be synonymous with Islam, and even religious oppression. While one cannot ignore the complexities and significant effect of either Western capitalism or religious orthodoxy in the region, it would be too naive to contemplate contemporary Middle Eastern culture with a simple binary of East vs the West.³

No matter how dominant, the principles of a collective stereotype is always contested by the spirit and intellect of its individuals. Culture after all is not a static identity but a site of performance for different conflicting identities that, depending on the situation can reinforce or resist dominating ideologies – nationalist and globalist alike.⁴ Nothing exemplifies this better than the Middle East's contemporary engagement with the Internet.⁵ The capacity of the digital medium and the fluidity of its platform has created a paradigm shift for the way cultural objects, especially from the west, is consumed, processed, and reproduced. Here it helpful to keep in mind that cultural objects change meaning as they enter new contexts, in this case the socio-political dynamic of the specific Middle Eastern region. Examples of this can be seen in the Iranian version of Shrek and the various fashion blogs of Middle Eastern women that display a stunning combination of traditional modesty and western flair.⁶

Perhaps that is the key to understanding the tension between orthodox values, personal freedom, and manifestations of western influence. The modernization and globalization of the Middle East is not so much a narrative of erasure as it is one of hybridization. While the East and the West may argue over the promise or peril of the West, the Middle Eastern youth resists such labels by insisting on curating its own identity and by selectively adapting and blending elements not just from the West, but the world.⁷

³ Valbjørn, "Culture in the Middle East: The "Western Question," 225

⁴ LeVine, Mark. "Chaos and Globalization in the Middle East." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33, no. 3 (2005): 394-411. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23654379>.

⁵ Karagueuzian and Badine. "YOUTH, PEACE, AND NEW MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST," 301-22

⁶ Edwards, Brian T. "American culture in its Middle East circulation." In *On the Ground – New Directions in Middle East and North African Studies*, Northwestern University of Qatar, <http://ontheground.qatar.northwestern.edu/uncategorized/chapter-8-american-culture-in-its-middle-east-circulation/>

Also, <http://fashionbi.com/insights/marketing-analysis/fashion-in-the-middle-east>

⁷ LeVine, "Chaos and Globalization in the Middle East." 399

Also, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/06/world/middleeast/06iraq.html>

And ARSLAN, SAVAŞ. "PROJECTING A BRIDGE FOR YOUTH: Islamic "Enlightenment" versus Westernization in Turkish Cinema." In *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, edited by SHARY TIMOTHY and SEIBEL ALEXANDRA, 157-72. University of Texas Press, 2007