

افلام بلورسج لڑکیوں کے ساتھ

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# THE PRINT CULTURE OF FILM

(translation to Arabic on p. 17)

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Film, and the lives of its celebrity actors, has preoccupied the pens of critics, scholars and film buffs alike. Film's social life in the world of print, however, has not been blessed with the same fortune. The publicity that roused the imagination of multitudes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and promised them enjoyment at the cinema has embodied a rich array of printed media. Prints ranged in scale from the one-column press-ad and the 8-page press-book to lobby-cards and posters that turned cinema halls and city walls into permanent exhibition displays. The life of the ghostly image projected for the film's duration is extended in time through all these prints and across the public spectacles they form in everyday modern life. It is not an exaggeration to contend that the social life of film, that is to say its encounter and relations with publics, is prolonged through the materiality of its printed culture.

Snubbed as commercial kitsch, the history of film promotion has been subjected to double trouble in the field of graphic design. On one hand, it has been dismissed from authoritative historical narratives of the profession. On the other, film posters, Arab ones included, are now celebrated with nostalgia for a bygone popular culture. The latter is inscribed in a global economy of vintage prints, memorabilia and post-modern designers' hype over everything vernacular. Though seemingly contradictory, the two contemporary conceptualizations (dismissal and fascination) are interconnected. They stem from particularly narrow understandings of what qualifies as 'graphic design', vernacular graphics being not worthy of this label. For decades now, design critics and historians have criticized a selective historiography of the discipline premised on arbitrary aesthetic criteria. Such a constricted approach has foregrounded period styles, masterpieces and designer heroes, while leaving uncharted a significant body of graphic artefacts that do not comply with the aesthetic canon. Design, they propose, needs to be studied within the wider framework of visual and material culture and not as a privileged site in the production of culture.<sup>1</sup> The print culture of film prompts such a framework of study.

530

The history of cinema in Lebanon in its printed promotions, as narrated by Abboudi Bou Jawdeh in this book, offers an opportunity to write these prints into a global history of graphic design. I shall endeavour to do so in this short essay with two aims in mind: to redress some historical misconceptions commonly attributed to these artefacts; and to trouble hardened binaries such as 'design' and 'vernacular', 'global' and 'local', in contemporary evaluations of creative practices and in associated cultural forms and aesthetics. In other words, I want to argue that modern vernacular graphics, which are claimed to be local, are historically entangled with cosmopolitan practices of design and transnational cultures of circulation.

The rise of the cinema industry in the Arab world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Egypt at the forefront, has contributed to the development of a specialized graphic design practice attached to the promotion of the film product. The emerging profession called for modern creative and technical skills in visual communication and printing, in addition to foregrounding new aesthetic conventions.

Among the various advertising strategies and printed media for film, the poster reigned supreme. *Al-affiche*, as it is referred to in colloquial Egyptian-Arabic, can be excavated among a related series of naturalized French terms constituting the taxonomy of the newly emerging profession. The French reference links the new art form to the Parisian model of the pictorial publicity poster at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Designers claimed creative authorship over their *maquette* — the visual prototype that is approved for mass production. They signed posters



in their own names or in the logotypes of their enterprise, such as 'Société l'Art Graphique Cairo' and 'Studio Ragheb lil-i'lan' (Studio Ragheb for Advertising). The 'studio' nomenclature, prevalent in 1950s Egyptian posters, indexed the modern professional establishment behind the creative output. It referenced the modernity of the visual practice by associating it with the artist's studio and, more pertinently, with the production spaces of new creative industries such as photography and film studios. The new graphic design/advertising 'studio' thus claimed its lineage from the modern technologies of image-making. The graphic practice was henceforth less tied to the established arts and crafts of Arabic calligraphy and even further away from its modern typographic counterpart in the world of publishing. Designers creatively hand-lettered the film titles in harmony with the overall poster image they drew, and in response to the exigencies of urban public display. They did so in ways that forged new calligraphic conventions akin to the thrills that the modern Arab entertainment industry promised and in line with the publicity spectacle that capitalist markets required. These new aesthetics of the printed image transformed Arab cities symbolically, affectively and materially as large-scale graphic hoardings filled the streets.

529

Furthermore, the taxonomy of the emerging profession articulated social relations among its practitioners and delimited its borders. Labour stratifications, whereby creative skills outranked technical and manual ones, were entangled with equally hierarchical relations between cosmopolitan cultural practices and those deemed local and traditional. Sign painters, for instance, were excluded from the emerging poster design profession. Responsible for painting the one-off mega-sized cinema hoardings, as well as large display cut-outs of film stars, sign painters were referred to amongst poster designers in Egypt as '*bita' tabali*' (the *tabali* folks), in contradistinction from '*bita' affiche*' (the *affiche* folks).<sup>2</sup> *Tabali* in colloquial Egyptian refers pejoratively to vulgar scaffolding structures used to paint elevated outdoor signs. The expression implies an embodied aesthetic distinction, which downplays the competencies of an outmoded sign painter in relation to those requisite for designing the modern, cosmopolitan *affiche*. Despite the artistic authority they claimed, however, designers did not run the show. The commercial imperative of the film, as a commodity needing to generate profit at the box office, meant that there were many stakeholders involved in its promotion. Designers often complained about having to acquiesce with the artistic directives of film producers, distributors and directors who quarrelled among themselves on these matters. Over and above that, they had to satisfy the egos of leading actors as to how their star persona was to be represented on posters.<sup>3</sup> Designing for the capitalist cinema industry involved tightrope negotiations between commercial interests and aesthetic motivations. Graphic design in this context thus materialized in disputed anticipation over 'what the public likes'; *algumhur 'awiz kidah*, the favoured idiom of popular Egyptian cinema.

More needs to be said about the specific collection in this book. Is there anything particular about printed publicity for the Lebanese cinema? To answer this question, we have to reckon first with the global circulation of cinema and its printed material culture. The hegemony of Hollywood in world markets, at least since the 1950s, imposed models of advertising design, communication strategies and aesthetic conventions recognizable across the disparate geographies of the cinema industry. The visual codes of different film genres have circulated across posters from Hollywood to Cinecittà, Cairo, Mexico and Bollywood among others. More than a simple process of aesthetic standardization is at stake, however, in this global culture of circulation. Visual codes are culturally negotiated, adapted, and often transfigured at various

national and cultural sites.<sup>4</sup> Film posters are ultimately subsumed into the 'local vernacular', as contemporary claims of Egyptian, or Bollywood, film posters testify for example. And as Walter Armbrust has already argued in his study of popular culture of the Middle East, global media culture is appropriated and naturalized into a vernacular culture 'to the point that origins become secondary to its local significance'.<sup>5</sup>

In this interface between the global and the local, Hollywood mattered less for advertising Lebanese film productions. Rather, it was Egypt that ruled supreme. 'Lebanese' posters were in large part produced in Cairo, designed and printed by well-known names in the industry, such as Ragheb, Vassiliou, Gassour, Abd-el-azziz, and Marcel. Even when local skills picked up the practice in Lebanon, the aesthetic model — just like the spoken Arabic dialect in some Lebanese film productions of the same period — was indelibly Egyptian. Effectively, the transnational circulation of aesthetics stimulated the transfer of skills and the mobility of designers. This is the case, for instance, of the joint entrepreneurship between Gassour — renowned poster designer and owner of a specialized printing establishment in Egypt— with Dar Hani in Beirut in the 1970s. Lebanon is but one location in an Arab geography, which attests to the popularity of cultures of entertainment made in Egypt. The transnational circulation of associated printed publicity instituted conventions of taste that shaped Arab aesthetic landscapes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But here again, local sites are demanding. And the publicists are aware of that fact. As you flip through the book, you will notice that some films had two to three variants of promotional posters. Each edition would be produced in a different locality, Cairo or Beirut, or in the case of the Rahbani films featuring the Lebanese diva Fayruz, a fancy edition would initially be made in Rome. Pan-Arab film distribution agents commissioned these editions to suit the markets they covered. They required adaptations of publicity for the films concerned, so as to attract an imagined public presumed to have particular desires and tastes. Furthermore, aesthetic idiosyncrasies are also shaped historically by contingencies of technology at local sites. The advent of offset printing and photomechanical colour separation in Beirut in the 1960s — while Cairo lagged behind on this front — had material effects on the overall visual output. The soft grain of lithography and tedious manual colour separation, which characterized the vibrant colour density of posters made in Egypt, was substituted by the mechanical dot screen of new reproduction technologies in Lebanon. Additionally, photographic montages of star figures superseded the hand-drawn portraits, while the latter remained, due to technical constraints, a staple of Egyptian poster compositions well into the 1980s.

The Lebanese case of printed film promotions thus expands our understanding of the cultural encounter between the 'global' and the 'local' beyond relations often presumed to be mutually exclusive. It prompts critical historical contextualization of the graphic design practice and its artefacts within cultures of transnational circulation. Finally, this brief historical essay is a small step towards recognizing and probing the intricacies of a professional practice, long discounted from narratives of design. It gives Arab film posters, and associated promotional prints, some material and historical depth, which thickens their contemporary 'vintage' skin.






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1 See for example: Attfield, J. (2000). *Wild Things: the Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg; Dilnot, C. (1984a). The State of Design History, Part I: Mapping the Field. *Design Issues*, 1(1), 4-23; Dilnot, C. (1984b). The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities. *Design Issues*, 1(2), 3-20; Hannah, F., & Putnam, T. (1980). Taking Stock in Design History. *Block* (3), 25-33. Poyner, R. (2011). 'Out of the Studio: Graphic Design History and Visual Studies' posted on *Design Observer* 01/11/11; Walker, J. A., & Attfield, J. (1989). *Design History and the History of Design*. London: Pluto.

2 Sawi M. 'al-wilaya 'ala affiche liman?' (Who reigns over the poster?), *Al-Fann al-Sabeh* April 2001, pp. 12-13.

3 'The Director is a Hunter and You are its Prey', *Al-Jeel* no.423, 7/11/1960.

4 See Gaonkar, D. P., & Povinelli, E. A. (2003). Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition. *Public Culture*, 15(3), 385-397.

5 Armbrust, W. (ed.) (2000). *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. p. 25.

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