

**Review of *Middle Eastern Television Drama. Politics, Aesthetics, Practices*, Edited by Christa Salamandra and Nour Halabi, ISBN: 9781032027814, Routledge. 2023.**

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Since the early 2000s Netflix has been destabilizing the dominance of English-language television drama by offering a platform for the global distribution of drama serials from all over the world. The catalogues of the streaming service nowadays include drama serials not only from the established television nations but also from countries such as South Korea, Denmark and Lebanon. Recently, the global television industry has seen an upsurge in Middle Eastern television drama. However, the growing popularity of series originating in Egypt and Turkey, among others, has not yet turned into vast scholarly interest. Salamandra and Halabi's (2023) *Middle Eastern Television Drama. Politics, Aesthetics, Practices* sets out to fill in this gap by offering nine articles with a broad range of topics, approaches and series.

In addition to the expanding circulation of Middle Eastern television drama, there is another reason why television scholars should turn their focus to the Middle East. As Nour Halabi and Christa Salamandra state in their introductory chapter, "fictional television drama serves as a key site of sociopolitical commentary in Middle East" (p. 1). The articles included in the book highlight the various ways in which politics is closely intertwined both with the production and the reception of television drama. To understand the ways in which television drama interrelates with its sociopolitical context, one must understand the prevailing media landscape as well as the cultural and political history of the Middle East.

In a number of Middle Eastern countries, media is heavily regulated by the state. Gianluca P. Parolin's article provides an example from Egypt, where the Drama Commission of the Supreme Council is overseeing "the encoding of the new hegemonic vision" in television drama (p. 82). Parolin as well as Walter Armbrust both present in their articles that Egyptian television drama aims at modifying public opinion—either before or after major societal changes. Armbrust analyses a drama titled *al-Gam'a* (2010) which anticipated the discourse used for excommunicating Muslim Brotherhood during the 2011 revolution. Parolin investigates *Kalabsh* (2017) as a counterrevolutionary serial drama, which aimed at modifying public beliefs on social media activism after the revolution.

Unlike in Western television fiction, historical events are often used in Middle Eastern television drama to comment on the prevailing sociopolitical context. Josh Carney's article on the Turkish *Resurrection* suggests, that period drama may not only be created to attract viewers but also to represent the conservative values of the ruling party (p. 6). Located in the Ottoman empire, *Resurrection* supports the current regime by promoting strong and authoritarian leadership (p. 20). Esha Momeni writes on a TV docudrama series that served as state propaganda by generating new understandings of martyrdom in Iran. The docudrama also exemplifies how historical events and central religious figures were used in a television series to legitimate the war between Iran and Iraq. Martyrdom was essential in the formation of Iran's identity after 1980 and is still useful to the Islamic Republic (p. 30). Christa Salamandra explores Syrian drama from two temporal directions: first, historical drama as a sociopolitical critique and second, dramatic representations of contemporary society as being always about the past (p. 103). Salamandra states that serials set in the early days of Arab conquest idealize historic figures (p. 106).

In the Western countries the question of historicity or historical accuracy is often raised in discussions concerning period dramas such as *The Crown*. However, whether a serial succeeds in presenting historical facts does not usually have far-reaching societal consequences. In the Middle East history,

religion and politics are inseparably intertwined which places a different emphasis also on the relationship between fact and fiction. The past is seen as a depository of examples and lessons which can be exploited for different purposes. Historical figures may be seen as sacred and therefore, when depicting the past one must balance between historical facts and myths in a way that differs from that of period drama productions in the Western countries (see p. 14-15).

The political situation may not only impact the meaning-making process but also the production and distribution of television series. Producing a television drama serial is never an easy task but producing a television drama serial in a politically unstable situation is even more challenging. In Afghanistan, many media professionals were killed or fled to other countries as refugees, as Wazmah Osman remarks (p. 144). The difficulty of finding female actors in a highly religious society may complicate the production of drama serials (p. 147). The distribution of television series may be affected by the sociopolitical context as well. As Arzu Öztürkmen states, the trade of Turkish drama series has become a huge business (p.164). However, Turkey's changing political stance toward some Arab countries led to a ban of Turkish series on MBC, the main media conglomerate in the Middle East (p. 165). Despite the state having a strong hold over media in many countries, some drama series manage to evade the regulations. Mehdi Semati and Nima Behroozi present *Gando*, the Iranian serialized spy drama as an example. *Gando* violates the IRIB's 'aesthetics of modesty' by showing consumption of alcohol outside Iran (p. 130). More importantly, the series taps into current political anxieties and discourses, such as concerns over national security and Western sanctions (p. 125).

In addition to providing a range of analyses on television series, *Middle Eastern Television Drama* gives an excellent overview of the broadcasting systems and television industries in the Middle East. The authors give interesting insights on media in Turkey, Iran, and Egypt as well as on the history of these countries. These contextualizations are essential to understanding the role that the series under study play. Semati and Behroozi's article, for example, presents an overview of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and the Iranian broadcasting landscape in general. The main Iranian broadcast houses multiple operations including terrestrial and satellite channels, streaming capabilities and an affiliated university (p. 129). Esha Momeni dwells deeper in the history of Iran by analyzing the use of war propaganda back when the country had only two television channels (p. 27-28). Together these articles build a solid base for understanding Iranian serial drama.

Parolin's article on social media activism in Egyptian television drama presents a new approach to the 2011 revolution and the following counterrevolution. Halabi's text on fictional television in Syria does not only analyse drama serials but also discusses the geography of inequality by shedding light on the informal settlements that grew to house rural migrants and became a housing solution for half of the population (p. 89). The sociopolitical role of drama series in Syria is indicated by the fact that informal settlement drama has become a distinct genre in Syrian television (p. 94).

The Middle East is often seen as a geopolitical entity mostly defined by religion, but the region includes a broad range of histories, cultures, languages and regimes. As the articles indicate, there is also great variation in terms of media system. Therefore, a critical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of using the Middle East as a defining concept for a book on television drama would have enriched the Introduction. Diverse cultural and political climates in these countries provide diverse challenges for both television production and related research. Emphasizing the differences between the countries

involved would have contributed to the research on Middle Eastern media by stressing that there is no such thing as ‘Middle Eastern television drama’. Instead, there are countless number of series, genres, productions, practices, etc. The editors suggest that scholars should understand Middle Eastern drama series as ‘expressions of regional concern’. But to truly enhance the understanding of non-Western television they should acknowledge the diversity of Middle Eastern drama series and study them as expressions of national and local concerns.

Diversity is, however, present in the methods employed in the articles. Analyzing Middle Eastern television drama calls not only for understanding the sociopolitical context of production and reception, but it also craves for somewhat different approaches than those mostly used in studying US or European drama series. The authors of the book represent various academic disciplines, such as anthropology, communication, folklore, and law (p. 2). Although many of the articles focus on textual analysis, various backgrounds of the authors give each text a completely different flavor. Short discussions on the challenges that the authors may have encountered while studying Middle Eastern television drama would have highlighted the different realities in which media scholars work. Television producers, directors and script writers are not easy to reach for research interviews in the Western countries, and in regions like the Middle East it is probably even harder.

One of the most interesting articles in terms of method is Arzu Öztürkmen’s study on the distribution of the Turkish *dizi* genre. Turkish drama series have in recent years attracted attention well beyond the Middle East. Öztürkmen began by doing interviews, moved on to ethnography and became a “circumstantial activist” (p. 157). Her hands-on approach to the topic paints a vivid picture on how television drama from a particular linguistic and geopolitical region can break through to the global market. The international success of *dizi* genre not only transformed the role of Turkey in the global television business but also destabilized the Turkish television industry by creating new dynamics between distributors and producers (p. 155).

While some of the articles would have benefited from a more precise description of the method and data, their arguments provide a valuable contribution to the research of contemporary television. Thus, they pave the way for future studies on Middle Eastern television drama. The global television industry already has their eyes on the Middle East and audiences around the globe are increasingly consuming television fiction from outside the Anglo-American cultural sphere. Now it is time for television studies to show interest in content that is consumed by millions of people and, as the articles indicate, has a remarkable influence on their lives.

### **Disclosure statement**

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## References

Salamandra, C., & Halabi, N. (2023). *Middle Eastern television drama; politics, aesthetics, practices*. Routledge.

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