Omar Sayfo, **Arab Animation: Images of Identity**, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021, 280 pp., $33.95 (paperback).

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Animation has been a ubiquitous part of popular and visual culture since at least the end of the 19th century and has evolved and transformed as a medium in tandem with cinema, television, and computer graphics. Its quintessential hybridity and dynamism as a visual form—essentially combining the age-old art of drawing with evolving techniques of moving images—allows for an abundance of creative freedom and translates into the dizzying array of aesthetics, styles, narrative structures, themes, techniques, functions, and audiences associated with contemporary animation. The study of animation—as texts, ideologies, industries, or audiences—has long been an established subfield of media and communication scholarship (see, e.g., Batkin, 2017; Wells, 2013), particularly concerning globally relevant and hegemonic animation industries like Japanese anime (Napier, 2001) and Disney animation (Pallant, 2011). The fact that there has been scarcely any scholarly attention to this field in the Arab world (see, Van de Peer, 2017, for another recent work), is a substantial lacuna that Omar Sayfo's **Arab Animation: Images of Identity** aims to remedy.
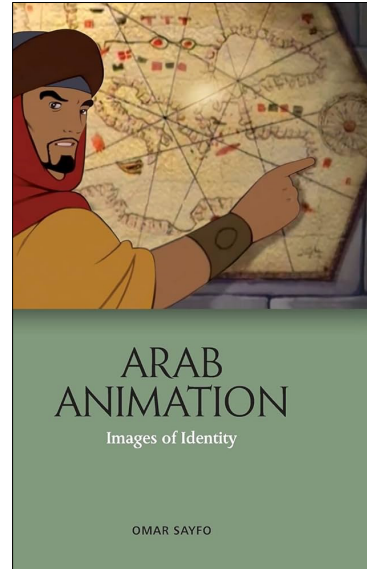
The book is an ambitious project aiming to take stock of the broad swathes of Arab-authored animation productions—defined as such in the introduction based on their "producers, directors, concept artists, or animators" (p. 5)—across the various countries of the region and since its early modern development in 1930's Egypt. Located at the intersection of scholarship on transnational media flows and cultural studies, *Arab Animation* seeks to uncover how notions of identity are articulated in such productions by combining archival work, textual analysis, and interviews with producers and animators. The structure of the book thematizes the question of identity by organizing its chapters around the multiple and overlapping identities of the region—whether national, regional and pan-Arab, or Islamic—while privileging a state-by-state recounting and analysis within the different chapters.

The introductory chapter places the work within the broader fields of cultural studies and (Arab) transnational media flows and sets out to delineate its own scope. Chapter 2 takes a historical approach in exploring how animations developed in several Arab countries as part of their nation- and state-building projects. The section on Egypt, for example (pp. 24–44), traces the roots of the animation industry to the private efforts of Frenkel Brothers in 1930's Cairo that culminated in the development of *Mish Mish Effendi* (p. 26), the so-called Egyptian Mickey Mouse. *Mish Mish Effendi*, with his European suit, Ottoman fez, and diverse supporting cast, reflected the hybrid and complex composition of the Egyptian state and society at the time—a monarchy of Ottoman origins, under British colonial hegemony, ruling over an ethnically and religiously diverse society with a majority of Arabs and Muslims. Sayfo then traces the evolution of the

industry over several eras, stretching to the present, as it tries to adapt to changing political ideologies and realities—as with the advent of Nasserism in the 1950s, liberalization in the 1980s, and the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. Other sections similarly trace the evolution of the animation industry in the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, and Palestine as part of this chapter with a focus on how they were articulated with the construction and elaboration of specific national projects, identities, and experiences.

Chapter 3 complicates that analysis by looking specifically at how the Western genre of *animation sitcoms* was hybridized in Arab animation productions to allow for a more critical engagement with national identities and with the political and social realities that underlie them. Through examples from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, among others, Sayfo argues that the lighter format of sitcoms is instrumentalized to offer a modicum of social and political critique—if never outrightly antagonistic—and to represent the heterogeneity of local cultures (as opposed to the homogenizing logics found in chapter 2).

In contrast, chapters 4 and 5 focus on how Arab animations articulate transnational notions of identity—namely, regional or pan-Arab identification, or Islamic identity. In the former, Sayfo's argument is informed by an analysis of cases from Baathist Iraq, Baathist Syria, and animations produced in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The three sections explore different conceptions and imaginaries of Arabness that are deeply connected to the political projects of each of these actors. Sayfo's analysis shows how such transnational conceptions (particularly in the Syrian and GCC cases) are mediated through the negotiation of local aesthetics, environments, forms, and dialects (or their absence) within narratives that express a shared Arab past, culture, and identity. Chapter 5, on the other hand, explores productions that thematize and center the notion of an Islamic identity. Here also, different modes of negotiating Islamic identity are explored through Saudi and Egyptian productions, as well as an analysis of *The 99* (p. 209), a transnational U.S.–Kuwaiti adaptation of a Muslim superhero comic. The cases not only highlight different Islamic currents and struggles over the legitimate and canonical representation of Islam but also the negotiation of ethnic, linguistic, and national identities within broader Islamic narratives and imaginaries of Islamic modernity.

The final empirical chapter addresses the (short-lived) outpouring of oppositional political animation inspired by the protest movements of the Arab Spring in 2011. Focusing on Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, Sayfo tracks the initial euphoria and creative energy of the Arab uprisings and its channeling into countless animated sketches, series, and cartoons—of varying production formats and quality—that ridiculed different Arab leaders and regimes and expressed political solidarity with popular reform and protest movements. The chapter also shows, however, the processes through which these different projects soon fizzle out or become coopted by political or economic power as part of the broader authoritarian retrenchment in the Arab world.

Finally, the short epilogue at the end reflects on the heterogeneity of Arab animations while looking ahead at its potential for reaching beyond the region and "globalizing Arab and Islamic identities for a transnational audience" (p. 251).

The main weaknesses in the book stem from its overriding ambition—that is to provide a comprehensive narrative of the histories and evolution of Arab animation industries and how Arab identities are articulated through them. This often leaves the analysis of the texts rather thin and overly descriptive. Questions around the construction of and contestation over the meanings, symbols, and politicocultural salience of different identities and modes of representation—and how these are articulated in a unique medium such as animation—are often simplified into the appearance (or not) of some stereotypical cultural tropes of Middle Eastern environments or cityscapes, tones, accents, and dialects, among others. Indeed, the book does not build up to an overarching or substantive argument around animation as a medium, nor around animation in the Arab world and its relation to broader cultural processes and fields.

The readability of the book is also ill served by the imbalance between different chapters—chapter 2 takes up as much as a third of the book—and the state-by-state, production-by-production narration, where the reader is at times confronted with an endless catalogue of names, shows, and synopses without a clear overarching argument to help situate them.

The other side of this analytical weakness, however, is the genuinely impressive wealth and extent of data collected and presented in this monograph. As a map of animation production in the region, *Arab Animation* is a formidable primer on (historical as well as contemporary) producers, trends, and creative networks that underlie the industry in most Arab countries. It is also, without doubt, the most comprehensive archive to date of animation shows in the region—from small-scale productions to blockbusters and across different genres and styles. In this sense, it is a welcome (and necessary) complement to scholarship on an underexplored space of cultural production in the Arab world and a scarcely understood region in literature on animation and popular culture.

References

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