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The Muhannad Effect: Media Panic, Melodrama, and the Arab Female Gaze

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ABSTRACT

*In the summer of 2008, the Saudi-owned, pan-Arab satellite television network Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) aired a failed Turkish soap opera, *Gümüüş*, as the Arabized *Noor*, creating an overnight sensation and a media panic. Arab news media attributed a wave of domestic violence and divorce to the series' handsome lead actor, and his character's romantic deportment. This article combines content analysis of *Noor*, examination of online discourses surrounding the series, and interviews with its producers. It explores women's use of new media forms—satellite television and the Internet—to articulate desire and discontent, and the media panic these expressions induced among social and religious conservatives. Opposition to *Noor*—and to the idolization of its male lead—invokes older notions of women's potent sexual desire as a threat to the social order, and justifies their containment and control. The series' ambiguity, like that of Turkey itself, invokes binaries of East and West, Islam and secularism, tradition and modernity enabling a range of commentary on the state of Arab society in general, and sexual relations in particular. The *Noor* phenomenon created a forum where conflicting notions of Middle Eastern identity, sexual agency and gender relations vie for dominance. [Keywords: Media panic, female gaze, pan-Arab satellite television, media convergence, Internet]*

any one who says mohannad is not handsome is a crazy person cause he the most handsome man i've ever seen in the whole of my life.

—Mahaum, blog commenter.¹

Introduction

The rise of satellite television has transformed the Arabic language mediascape, expanding and fragmenting national audiences. With the presence of 500 free-to-air Arabic language stations, specialized programming, and channel surfing, transnational media sensations drawing substantial viewership are rare events. Widely popular programs are generally locally-produced expressions of Arabness, such as the

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PRODUCER, ADIB KHAIR



A scene from *Noor*.

folkloric Syrian miniseries *The Neighborhood Gate* (*Bab al-Hara*), and pan-Arab talent competitions *Super Star* and *Star Academy*. But in the summer of 2008, an unlikely contender, a 154-episode Turkish soap opera dubbed into colloquial Syrian Arabic, gripped the Arab world.² *Noor* was broadcast three times a day on the private, Saudi-owned, Dubai-based Middle East Broadcast Centre's MBC4, a

youth-oriented station that typically airs English-language programs. Millions were tuning in to watch the series, and raving about it. Hundreds of news items and blog posts about *Noor* flooded the Arab—and international—media. Street vendors and markets hawked pirated tie-in products such as posters, t-shirts, and pillows. An official, deluxe set of *Noor* DVDs, packaged in a red velvet box embossed with gold, retailed for \$275 at the Virgin Megastore in Beirut.³ Arab tourists flocked to Istanbul for tours of *Noor* locations. The program's stars were feted and mobbed in Arab capitals. A fan culture that the media dubbed “Noormania” emerged, along with claims of soap opera-induced moral degradation and cultural dissolution. Female viewers' attraction to Kivanç Tatlıtuğ, the series' handsome lead actor, generated particular unease. In short, *Noor* unleashed a full-scale media panic, with reports of domestic violence, divorce, and suicide.⁴

This essay links the media panic over Noormania to the social discomfort provoked by women's erotic spectatorship. It traces the birth of a new genre—the Arabized Turkish series—and the ensuing social anxieties expressed in various media. It examines *Noor* and the media discourses surrounding it in the context of Arab cultural production, drawing on multi-year fieldwork among media creators in Syria, home to the leading Arab television drama industry. *Noor* created a space for expressing contentious notions of sexual agency and gender relations. In watching the series and responding to it on the Internet, women used *Noor* to articulate desires that social and religious conservatives found unsettling. The lead actor's gender and racial ambiguity, like the Arab world's image of Turkey, invoked binaries of East and West, Islam and secularism, tradition and modernity, patriarchy and feminism, enabling a range of commentary on the state of Arab society in general, and sexual relations in particular. The Turkish import's marked contrast to local Arab drama productions brings into relief the contours of the controversy.

The Story

Noor is the tale of the wealthy Şadoğlu family, residents of a spectacular Istanbul mansion overlooking the Bosphorus. Aging patriarch Fikri heads his household and business with benevolent despotism. One branch of his entrepreneurial conglomerate is a high-end clothing manufacturing concern run by Fikri's children, grandchildren, and their spouses.⁵ Its corporate headquarters and the family's riverside estate form the twin loci of action and intrigue; of love and betrayal—the universal mainstays of melodrama. Heroine Noor, played with gravitas by actress Songül Öden, is a needlework instructor from a poor provincial family under Fikri's patronage. Fikri betroths her to his grandson Muhannad (the former model and basketball player Tatlıtuğ) after the latter's pregnant fiancée Nihal dies in a car accident (or so viewers are led to believe).

Noor's integration into the Şadoğlu clan and corporation involves a host of humiliations, from rebukes over her tastes and manners to Muhannad's desertion on their wedding day. Fikri's daughter-in-law, Sharifa, herself from Noor's town of Afyon, opposes his choice of a country girl for her only son Muhannad, and drips with barely suppressed hostility. She schemes to break up the couple in the first half of the series, and then to reconcile them in the second. Encouraged by siblings

and cousins, Muhannad himself initially resists the arranged marriage. As his sister Dana argues, “What age are we living in? This is not the sort of thing someone can force someone else to do!”; best friend Anwar adds “This isn’t marriage, it’s suicide!” Muhannad reluctantly obeys his grandfather and accepts the marriage, but treats Noor coldly. Their estrangement frustrates viewers during the first dozen episodes, but Noor eventually melts Muhannad’s heart, and much of the series traces the couple’s growing love. Their bond grows strong enough to withstand—although not without tribulation—numerous rivals for Muhannad’s attentions, most notably the reappearance of Muhannad’s former fiancée Nihal with young son in tow. Through persistence and principle, Noor wins the family’s affections as a member—and also earns their respect as the company’s successful clothing designer.

Gender relations form *Noor*’s core concern, with drug running, gambling, kidnapping, and corporate espionage making brief appearances. Occasional gun fights and car chases punctuate the action, but romantic and sexual relationships drive the narrative—two controversy-sparking subplots involve sexual transgression. In early episodes, unmarried artist Dana commutes between Istanbul and New York, where she lives alone with a young daughter whose existence she conceals from the Şadoğlus. Muhannad learns of his niece Amal, and conspires to bring her to Turkey. He and Noor hide the little girl with Muhannad’s best friend Anwar, but Fikri discovers their ruse, and has his great-grandchild kidnapped and brought to the Bosphorus mansion. After a search of Istanbul’s sordid corners, Dana returns home to find Amal sitting on her great-grandfather’s lap. At first Dana refuses to divulge the identity of her daughter’s father, but he is eventually revealed as Anwar, who had been Dana’s lover before her New York sojourn.

Also problematic for conservatives was Muhannad’s cousin Bana, a whippet-slender career woman with cropped hair and cutting-edge fashion sense, who believes one must “eat, sleep and breathe work” in order to succeed. Her attentions stray from the family business towards gossip journalist Kamil, who pursues her with cryptic messages embedded in bizarre gifts. A brittle relationship ensues, but Bana becomes pregnant and pulls away, unwilling to hobble her career with the demands of motherhood. Her secret abortion is discovered only when she collapses in pain after rushing back to the office.

The Response

Noor dominated social life in much of the Arab world during the summer of 2008. Media reports estimated that 3 to 5 million viewers watched the program each evening, and 85 million tuned into the final episode.⁶ I discovered *Noor* on the first day of a July 2008 field trip to Damascus, when an artist friend complained, as she did a hilarious—and I was to discover, accurate—impression of Sharifa’s puffy-lipped sneer, “Now that we have good relations with Turkey, they are sending us all their backwardness (*takhalluf*).” *Noor* came up frequently in my discussions with Syrian’s television drama creators, who deplored what they saw as the superficiality of the series in comparison to their own work, but acknowledged—grudgingly—the boost it had given their industry.⁷ Most television industry figures dismissed the artistic value of the program, yet conceded that it “compensated with beautiful scenery, luxury locations, and emotional appeal, especially for women who were drawn to the way Muhannad loved Noor,” as screenwriter Eman Saied put it.

Noormania attracted an enormous amount of news media attention. Drawing on timeworn stereotypes of Arab patriarchal oppression, Western news sources trumpeted the serial’s subversiveness (Ambah 2008, Barthe 2008, Black 2008, Gubash 2008, Halpern 2008, Khalaf 2008, Laub and Nammari 2008, Makhoul-Yatim 2008, Rahhal 2008, Worth 2008). Some Arab journalists joined them in celebration (al-Hallaq 2008, Ghasib 2008, Yazbak 2008, Yazidi 2008), while others warned of *Noor*-induced cultural degradation (al-Buhayri 2008, Diab 2008, ‘Abdi 2010, Sarqin 2008).⁸ Comment pages of the pan-Arab media websites teemed with fears of moral depravation. News reports blamed Noormania for a variety of social ills, from traffic gridlocks (as viewers rushed home to tune into the series) to medical malpractice (as nurses were distracted by an episode airing during a woman’s labor). Jordanian Minister of Culture Nancy Bakir faced what she called “a public smear campaign” after attending a reception for Tatlituğ at the Turkish Embassy and allegedly asking to be photographed with the star (Abu Rahhal 2008, Hammond 2009). Governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council states attempted to ban the public display of *Noor* memorabilia. Young men responded to the craze by sporting the idol’s designer stubble.

While *Noor*’s positive depiction of women elicited criticism, audiences reactions to the male protagonist sparked the deepest anxiety. The Arab news media attributed a wave of marital unrest to 25-year-old lead actor

Kivanç Tatlıtuğ and his character Muhannad.⁹ An English-language article on *Arabiyya.net* (the interactive website of MBC's all-news satellite television station), also posted on the Islamic website *Umma.com*, condenses the most sensational stories:

The hit Turkish soap “Noor” has sparked a rash of divorces in countries across the Middle East as women compare their real-life husbands to the TV heart throb, according to press reports. The trouble centers around the lead male character called Muhannad—played by Turkish actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ—whose good looks and charms have left many Arab women weak at the knees. Fed up with his wife's obsession with Muhannad and constant complaints that he should be as romantic as the TV hunk, a Saudi husband from Dammam divorced his wife and threw her out of the marital home, Saudi newspaper *Al-Yawm* reported. A Jordanian daily said a husband divorced his wife after she uploaded Muhannad's picture on her cell phone. And a Syrian website reported that there were four divorces in Aleppo because of the steamy soap. In one case, a husband divorced his wife after they had a heated argument about the actor while watching the series. According to a neighbor, the wife reportedly told her husband: “I want to sleep with Muhannad for only one night and die afterwards.” In another case, a husband divorced his wife after she hung a picture of Muhannad on their bedroom wall.¹⁰

As viewers and commentators confused fact with fiction, Tatlıtuğ's beauty and his character's tenderness merged. The actor's own name scarcely appears in Internet sources; he is most often referred to as “Muhannad,” and sometimes “Muhannad the Turk.” In a phenomenon I call the “Muhannad effect,” conservatives voiced alarm over Arab women's celebration of Muhannad/Tatlıtuğ's physique, their comparison of the screen idol to their own partners, and their finding the latter wanting. Most comments pointed to the novel appeal of a fine-boned, blue-eyed, fair-haired heartthrob, a male counterpart to the bottle-blond Levantine beauties crowding the pan-Arab satellite airways. Feminized photographs of the actor circulating the Internet—shot in soft-focus, mouth slightly open, chest bare and fly unzipped—helped cultivate his sex symbol status. Cartoons joining these images on the web feature dark-skinned, grotesquely large-featured men seeking plastic surgery to resemble the

Turkish idol, or running after him with clubs. The Arab men wear traditional robes, flowing *thawb*-s or *jallabiya*-s; whereas Muhannad/Tatlituğ wears his usual tight t-shirt, his blond tresses billowing. The association of Arabness with he-manliness is clearly, if—perhaps ironically—exaggerated in these auto-orientalizing images, whose renderings of Arabs recall those of Jews in Europe’s early 20th century anti-Semitic cartoons.

The soap opera enjoyed a spectacular Internet presence. As of July 2010, English keywords “Turkish series Noor” generated 2,730,000 Google hits, while its Arabic equivalent generated roughly 5,410,000. “Noor and Muhannad” produced 2,630,000 hits in English and 13,600,000 in Arabic.¹¹ A *Noor* Facebook page lists 118,774 fans.¹² Viewers chimed in on the comments pages of news articles and blogs. In a post entitled “All Roads Lead to...Muhannad and Noor,” United Arab Emirati blogger Osama’s sarcastic advice points to the scale of online Noormanian:

Dear blogger, do you suffer from a lack of visitors to your blog, and little interaction with your subject matter?

Do you want your blog listed on the Alexa site¹³, and to become one of its top ten?

Do you wish to increase your blog’s page rank from 1/10 to 10/10 in a short time?

Have you tried all the SEO [search engine optimization] extras and added your blog to all the search engines, to no avail?

Well then, Osama’s blog has a recipe that will raise the number of visits to your blog by hundreds, even thousands. Read the following:

Noor and Muhannad

With the results of this magic formula, you will need to hire a special server to host a new company to deal with the enormous pressure from all the visitors.¹⁴

In the *Noor* phenomenon, satellite television and the Internet converged, offering viewers and critics avenues to express a range of positions and emotions. Such anonymous Internet voices pose a methodological challenge for anthropologists, as we cannot contextualize them as we do traditional fieldwork informants (Boellstorff 2008:61-62). A commonly adopted strategy follows Internet users into the “real” world, limiting

analysis to particular blogging, chatting, or gaming groups. But such approaches would fail to capture the breadth and scale of Noormania. Taking the Internet seriously means considering usages beyond those by social groups resembling conventional objects of anthropological inquiry. For *Noor* commentators, particularly women, anonymity of expression is very much the point, providing safe space for controversial opinions, criticisms, and desires.¹⁵ Comments on *Noor* do not create the kinds of online communities that academic studies of the Internet often focus on; instead, they express longings and fears. They are intrinsically free floating and unmoored. Many blogs simply post photos from the series, or links to episodes available online. Some dedicate love poems to the pair. Reams of commentary effuse over Muhannad/Tatlituğ, professing adoration and a desire for contact with the idol. Some remarks contrast Songül Öden's "ordinary" good looks with Tatlituğ's exceptional beauty. Like many fans, blog commenter Zarzoor addresses her remarks directly to Tatlituğ: "u are the sexiast guy but that girl dont suit u coz ur hotter."¹⁶ Iraqi male blogger Gilgamish (Haidar al-Badri) concedes that while Noor "has Eastern features" and only a "small amount of beauty," Muhannad is "the embodiment of the white knight: handsome and beautiful."¹⁷ Yet Kuwaiti male blogger Frankom is surprised that so many young women are in love with the Turkish star, given that "there are so many soap opera heroes more handsome than Muhannad."¹⁸

Although pictures of and tributes to Muhannad/Tatlituğ abound on the web, and women were purportedly downloading and using them to challenge their men, analysts instead emphasized diegetic aspects of the program's appeal. Explanations of the series' popularity commonly involved the character Muhannad's romancing of Noor. Journalists, media experts, and viewers argued that such romance—purportedly missing from Arab marriages—appealed to female viewers (Worth 2008). Reports in both the Arabic language and Western news media argued that *Noor* went where Arab television drama never dared in depicting independent career women, equitable marital relationships, extramarital sex, drinking, and abortion—phenomena often associated with modernization, westernization, and, more recently, globalization. For some commentators, *Noor* reflected an incomplete modernity: "Such series reflect how the lives of Arab people are torn between modern life and their traditions," argued Lebanese media sociologist Melhem Shaul. "Somehow these shows help ease the anguish that grips us."¹⁹ Similarly, Lebanese American University communications

professor Ramez Maluf held that series like *Noor* were “exposing people who are culturally isolated to modernity at a pace that is faster than they would like” (as quoted in Worth 2008).

As a Turkish product, *Noor* became enmeshed in a clash of civilizations debate (Buccianti 2010). Arab Islamists and cultural conservatives often accuse Western powers and secular Arab elites of posing a “cultural invasion” (*al-ghazw al-thaqafi*) designed to undermine Muslim societies, rendering them vulnerable to neocolonialism in the form of global capitalism (al-Qaradawi 2000:196-198, Amin 2001, Kassab 2006:330). Turkey, with its efforts to join the European Union, its history of official secularism, and its modernization project to cleanse the Turkish language and culture of “backward” Arab influences, is easily implicated in theories of Western cultural imperialism (Bengio and Özcan 2001:55-56). Social and religious conservatives inveighed against the series’ alleged attack on Arab traditions and values. Satellite news network al-Jazeera’s *al-Ittijah al-Mu’akis* (*The Opposite Direction*), a notoriously contentious talk show typically focusing on straightforwardly political issues, stoked the fires in an episode entitled “Dubbed Foreign Series.”²⁰ The program, which features guests with clashing viewpoints, captured the tenor of public debate over *Noor*. In keeping with the confrontational format, host Faisal al-Qasim prefaced the discussion with a series of questions reflecting opposing sides of the issue. He first linked the series to Arab fears of Western cultural imperialism, then suggested that the backlash against the series was overstated:

Aren’t we Arabs the only nation in the world that pays the invaders to overrun it militarily and culturally? Only yesterday we funded the American campaign against Iraq, and now we are giving our media to whoever wants to use it to invade us, be it in media or in culture, to destroy our culture, traditions, ethics and religion...But on the other hand, didn’t Mexican series invade the Arab region before the Turkish, then disappear without a trace? Isn’t it true that Turkish series are culturally close to us? How long will we continue to practice these pharaonic [censorship] practices against the Arab human being?

Guest Rafiq Nasrallah, director of Lebanon’s International Center for Media and Studies, and a politician associated with the country’s main Shi’ite party, Hezbollah, maintained that Arab audiences—uncultured and impressionable, and suffering from an array of economic, social, and

political ills—are unable to handle programs like *Noor* without absorbing their secular values. He took particular issue with the character of Muhannad who, he argued, was now “bigger than any Arab leader”:

Nasrallah: Now you can see the Muhannad look in Beirut and some of the Gulf capitals. He’s become part of...

Al-Qasim: So what’s the problem? The guy is handsome!

Nasrallah: Yes, he’s said to be handsome, I’ll give you that. But I don’t take scoundrels (*sa’alik*) and turn them into heroic symbols. We have Arab heroes, we are capable. I know Syrian drama; Syrian artists started this phenomenon and did it [dubbed Turkish series] twice. But they should go and look for our own, real heroes, and try to produce series about them.

The episode’s counterpoint guest was Syrian actress Lara Abu As’ad, creative consultant to the dubbing and Arab voice of *Noor*. Abu As’ad found Nasrallah’s objections to the series condescending, and his notion that it posed an attack on Arab culture delusional. Arab audiences, she maintained, are mature enough to handle *Noor* without negative effects:

It’s my personal opinion that the Arab media treats viewers in an arrogant manner, and sees things from an ivory tower...I have every confidence in the Arab audience, and I see their reactions and receive e-mails. The Arab viewer sees this simply as a romantic love story. They are watching this entertaining, escapist drama because they need diversion. They see beautiful scenery, faces, and clothes, and a love story that did not happen and will not happen in reality. This is what they see.

Nasrallah countered that *Noor*’s superficiality gave secularism a bad name, and as such served the Saudi ruling elites’ agenda. He presumably refers to the kingdom’s puritanical version of Sunni Islam, one that rejects Nasrallah’s Shi’ite branch of the religion, and to its opposing Hezbollah.

Yet Saudi officials voiced some of the most stringent criticisms of *Noor* and its producers. When the series first aired, the kingdom’s grand mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al al-Shaykh, prohibited Muslims from watching *Noor*, which he argued was “replete with wickedness, evil, moral collapse and a

war on virtues.” (Hammond 2009). In a clear reference to the series, Sheikh Saleh al-Lohaidan, leader of Saudi Arabia’s Supreme Juridical Council, threatened the owners of pan-Arab satellite stations with the death penalty if they failed to pull “immodest” programs off the air during the upcoming Ramadan 2008 season. Nevertheless, the series remained on air, viewers continued to watch it in purportedly record numbers, and an industry dubbing Turkish serials into Arabic was launched.

The Gaze

With his fair hair, eyes, and complexion, delicate features and lithe physique, Muhannad/Tatlituğ is arguably the Arab world’s most feminine heartthrob. Commentators marvel that an image so remote from Arab conventions of male attractiveness, and a far cry from the burly he-men of Arab popular cinema (Armbrust 2002a, 2006), could have so captured the imagination of Arab women. As Egyptian blogger Shirien puts it:

Most women who watch the show watch it because of this strikingly handsome guy, “Mohannad.” Most will also tell you they never liked the blond hair look because they all wanted the tall dark and handsome guy. Well, to them the only exception to that rule is “Mr. Mohannad.”²¹

The star’s androgyny upsets a contemporary association of Arabness with strongly-marked masculinity (Aghacy 2009), that is perhaps continuous with the Arab nationalist ideal of muscle-bound maleness (Jacob 2005, Dolbee 2010) and an Ottoman preference for burliness (Ze’evi 2006:30-31).²² A frequently blogged quote from a Saudi female fan sums up the contrast: “our men are rugged and unyielding” (al-Sweel 2008). Reports of Tatlituğ’s homosexuality reflect not merely a suspicion but a wish, as another cartoon circulating the Internet suggests: men in Gulf Arab dress congratulate each other upon hearing the news that “Muhannad” (Tatlituğ) is gay, while veiled women wail. Here Muhannad/Tatlituğ recalls Hollywood’s androgynous idols, such as Rudolph Valentino and Tom Cruise, whose sexual orientation provoked similar suspicions (Hansen 1986, Rall 1993).

In *Noor*, and in many of the publicity photographs circulating on the Internet, camera work and costume frame Muhannad/Tatlituğ as an

object to be admired and desired. Frequently shot in lingering close-up, clad in form-fitting t-shirts and jeans, with tattooed arms rippling, the idol appears designed for women's viewing pleasure, a reversal of Laura Mulvey's (1989) concept of the male gaze. Echoing John Berger's dictum, "Men *act* and women *appear*" (1972:47, emphasis in original), and drawing on Jacques Lacan's (1988) concept of the gaze, Mulvey (1989) argues that classic Hollywood films depict male characters as subjects seeking mastery, and female characters as objects to be seen. Commercial Egyptian cinema—the largest Arabic language film industry—follows this convention (Shafik 2007:165-172).²³ Screenplay, direction, wardrobe, makeup, and lighting all induce the spectator—imagined as male—to identify with the men portrayed and desire the women. Mulvey's influential formulation has been criticized for its reductionism, assumption of a universal psyche, and lack of empirical grounding (Manlove 2007). Yet the concept of a gendered gaze, if pushed beyond its psychoanalytic underpinnings, is worth revisiting in the case of Noormania and the anxieties it provoked. Following Elizabeth Traube, I propose an analysis that avoids "polarizing the psychic and the social dimensions of cultural production, so as to confront instead the project of their integration" (Traube 1992:12).

While gaze theory dominated visual media studies in the 1980s and retains a certain currency, very little has been written about women looking at men.²⁴ Many scholars examine women viewers, but feminist analyses most often treat female spectatorship as a subversive repositioning of the male gaze, theorizing how women look at themselves and each other (Gamman and Marshment 1988, Dotterer and Bowers 1992, Stacey 1994). Art historians point to instances of women controlling frames of vision through patronage, even in patriarchal Muslim societies (Ruggles 2000). Yet women's heterosexual gazing is curiously unrecognized. Some dismiss eroticized males as exceptional reversals proving, and reinforcing, the patriarchal rule (Doane 1997:180). Literature linking television melodrama to women's emergent "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) also makes little of heterosexual female gazing. Studies of television melodrama examine depictions of women, the gendering of storylines, and the ways female viewers engage with characters (Hobson 1982, Modleski 1982, Ang 1985, Byers 1991, Geraghty 1991, Frentz 1992). Anthropologists show how televisual portrayals of women serve as allegories of the nation in China (Rofel 1994) and India (Mankekar

1993, 1999), and how melodramatic narrative structures engender individualist subjectivities among women in Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2005) and new understandings of social mobility in Korea (Abelmann 2003). Yet, women's response to eroticized male images like Muhannad/Tatlituğ remains underexplored.

For the Arab world, this gap in the literature is unsurprising, as objectification of men's bodies for women's pleasure is unusual. Arab television puts a premium on women's attractiveness, while men's physical appearance is typically unmarked. Syrian TV dramas, and my ethnographic fieldwork among their creators, confirm that facial beauty and slender physique are much more important for actresses than they are for actors. The heroines of Arab drama conform to local—and increasingly global—standards of beauty, while the heroes are generally unprepossessing. Arab visual media has its share of leading men, notably Farid Shawqi, 'Abdel Halim Hafez, and Ahmad Zaki, but these tend to be fully developed personas with elaborated public images (Armbrust 2002a, 2006; Stone 2011). The appeal of Arab popular music stars such as Kazim al-Sahir and Raghib 'Alama is similarly linked to their artistic production. In contrast, Tatlituğ is more a silent pin-up, unable to speak Arabic and rarely interviewed. Journalists and Internet commentators regularly conflate him with Muhannad, scarcely mentioning his real name. Arab audiences hear not Tatlituğ's own voice but that of well-known Syrian actor Maxim Khalil, through lips never quite in sync. This present absence allows for a rich level of creative imagining. Tatlituğ's image serves as a blank slate onto which fans and critics project their myriad fantasies and fears.

Noor's celebration of the male body is not entirely novel in the Middle East. Notions of physical beauty and sexuality were once more fluid: premodern Arabic, Persian, and Turkish visual art and literature abound with references to beardless youths (*amrad*) and sexual love between men, none of which were linked to a construct of homosexuality (El-Rouayheb 2007, Massad 2007, Ze'evi 2006). These works extolled male love objects for presumed male audiences, while what women wanted was rarely considered (Najmabadi 2005:42, 93).²⁵ Concepts of beauty remained largely ungendered until the mid-19th century, when a European-influenced modernity marked homosexual practices as unnatural and linked romantic love to marriage (Najmabadi 2005, Massad 2007, Ze'evi 2006). Modernizers perceived non-heterosexual forms of

desire as impediments to progress, as vestiges of a decadent past. In Iran, home to the Muslim Middle East's most elaborate pictorial tradition, depictions of amrad disappeared and beauty became feminized (Najmabadi 2005:26). Artwork depicting the Qur'anic story of Yusuf and Zulaykha (Joseph and Zulaikha) appears an exception: feasting Egyptian townswomen, distracted by Yusuf's exceptional countenance, slice their hands instead of their fruit. But as Najmabadi argues, these women serve as a proxy, a masquerade. As increasing heteronormativity stigmatized overt homoeroticism, this portrayal of female lust "invites a (male) viewer to desire a young beautiful man" (2005:42). Muhannad/Tatlituğ marks the return of the eroticized male, of the beautiful youth, ostensibly for a female subject. This reversal is key to the series' appeal, and its controversy.

In Arab societies the act of looking is itself fertile and fraught. In the ages of Islamic empire, control of the gaze was linked to political power, and inscribed in architectural forms that allowed rulers to observe while themselves remaining obscured (Ruggles 1997, 2000). Notions of sacred and profane love blur in the act of looking. Medieval and Ottoman Sufis practiced gazing (*nazar*) at amrad, in whom they believed to catch a glimpse of the divine (Rowson 1995:24 as cited in Najmabadi 2005:17, Ze'evi 2006:82-83). However, looking can damn as well as uplift. A saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad likens the gaze to Satan's arrow, and warns against proximity to beardless youths (Ze'evi 2006:91). A look can curse. Premodern Arabs believed the human gaze capable of rendering its object vulnerable to a range of metaphysical forces, including a version of what is known in southern Europe as the "evil eye," but is in Arabic simply "the eye" (*al-'ayn*) (Mitchell 1988:86). Underexplored by contemporary ethnographers, evil eye beliefs endure among, for instance, Cairene craftsmen, who conceal their relative wealth from jealous gazers whose attacks are believed to cause calamity (Elyachar 2005:137-166).

Lingering notions of the eye's potency, overlaid with Islamic revivalism and its concern with modesty, complicate erotic gazing.²⁶ In her study of Egyptian cinema, Viola Shafik notes that the term '*arwa*, derived from the Arabic root connoting the loss of an eye, refers to that which should be concealed. '*Arwa* includes the genitalia of both sexes, but extends to women's entire bodies and voices (2007:169). Islamists attempt to "cleanse" cinema and television by veiling women or pulling them off

the screen entirely, thereby precluding their objectification (Abu-Lughod 1995, 1998; Kubala 2007; van Nieuwkerk 2007, 2008). The Noormania panic inverts this dictum, countering that women should not look at men.²⁷ Cultural and religious conservatives find the notion of female scopophilia deeply disturbing. Opposition to *Noor*—and distress over the idolization of its male lead—recalls Fatima Mernissi’s (1987) controversial yet compelling argument that the imagined potency of female sexual desire poses a threat to the Muslim social order, a potential chaos (*fitna*), that justifies women’s containment and control.

The Panic

Mediated anxieties over erotic female gazing lie at the heart of the *Noor* controversy. Noormania provoked a media panic where, as Kirstin Drotner (1999) argues, alarm surfaces over a new form’s potential influence on supposedly impressionable and potentially rebellious users. As moral panics in which “the media is both instigator and purveyor of the discussion” (1999:596), media panics reflect wider social unease, particularly among powerful groups who fear loss of control over a broadening public sphere. In rapidly urbanizing late 18th century Europe, intellectuals deemed working class youth particularly susceptible to the supposed ill effects of popular literature. They first launched campaigns to censor “vulgar” publications, and later produced edifying alternatives. Similar patterns emerged in response to film, television, and video games in the 20th century, as media panics became institutionalized. Interest groups, political parties, and professional societies gained legitimacy as makers of expert opinion and defined the contours of public debate; as a result, young people were silenced (Drotner 1999:603). In the age of interactive media, as the Noormania panic illustrates, objects of concern—in this case, women with satellite television and Internet access—may have a voice (McRobbie 1994).²⁸

Media panics have precedent in the Arab world, with women often the crux of concern. In early 20th century Damascus, for instance, secularists and Islamists waged a battle over women’s cinema-going that was nothing short of a war for the new Syrian nation (Thompson 2001, 2009). The *Noor* controversy represents the climax of conservative and nativist anxieties that have been brewing since the rise of pan-Arab satellite television in the 1990s. Paradoxically, Saudi Arabia is home to both the

primary financiers and broadcasters—and the most vociferous critics—of a hybrid, transnational, and highly eroticized industry. The kingdom's expressions of Islam are among the most puritanical. Yet Saudi media moguls finance and air television programs teeming with women, scantily clad and gyrating suggestively in music videos, glamorously buffed and coiffed as news anchors and game show hosts, or sensuously emotive in serial melodramas.²⁹ While these images prompt occasional criticism, religious opponents appear to have made a cold peace with Arab women on television. In a trajectory much like that traced by Drotner (1999) in Europe, Saudi Islamist attitudes towards TV have shifted emphasis from condemnation to engagement, devising sophisticated critiques, and supporting alternative, pious programming (Kraidy 2009, In press). *Noor*, which offered no firsts in its topics or themes, reinvigorated conservative opposition to television not by depicting women, but with its images of men.

The Noormania media panic is, I argue, a product of the Muhannad effect, the twin threat and allure of a screen idol's sexual and racial ambiguity. Muhannad/Tatlıtuğ's distance from Arab conventions of male attractiveness reflects his country's association with sexual and gender alterity. Turkey has an enduring tradition of gender-bending performers, from the Ottoman *zenne* and *köçek*, dances by men dressed as women (Öktem 2008), to contemporary popular music stars like the flamboyantly homosexual Zeki Müren and the beautiful transsexual Bülent Ersoy, both well-known to Arab audiences. As Martin Stokes observes, Müren and Ersoy are mainstream figures rarely criticized for deviance (2003:311-312). After his death in 1996, Müren emerged as a figure of national civility and virtue (Stokes 2010:69). Here Turkish public culture contrasts sharply with its Arab counterpart, in which a language of honor and shame disciplines and stigmatizes transgressive performers (van Nieuwkerk 2003, 2008). Turkey's reputation among Arabs for freewheeling sexuality is reinforced with *Noor*'s alleged liberality and embodied in Muhannad/Tatlıtuğ's gender ambiguity. If Middle Eastern modernists once considered gender ambiguity a decadent Oriental holdover that must be erased in the cause of progress, Arab conservatives now link it to a morally bankrupt West whose influence should be contained.

Tatlıtuğ is neither properly a "man," nor solidly "Middle Eastern." A Nordic-looking Turk, Tatlıtuğ embodies an East/West hybridity unsettling to cultural purists, much like Valentino's swarthy ethnicity did in 1920s

America (Hansen 1986:23-24). Lebanese blogger Lorena notes the star's physical rarity:

I won't lie—he is good looking, but not your typical Turkish man. I've been to Istanbul and don't recall seeing a single blond Turkish man—let alone with blue eyes...Most Turkish men resemble the stereotypical Lebanese man—dark hair, strong features and lots of hair. Lots. Kivanç Tatlıtuğ is making Turkish men look really good.³⁰

The almost taken-for-granted equation of blue-eyed fairness and body hairlessness with good looks irritates bloggers like Iskandar Haddad, for whom women's attraction to the Turkish idol reflects a colonial inferiority complex.³¹ For such commentators, Muhannad/Tatlıtuğ's unusual appearance embodies his country's inauthenticity, its rejection of the Middle East in favor of a Europe of which it can never fully be part. For many Arabs, Turkey also evokes a long memory of Ottoman oppression (Haarmann 1988, Jung 2005). Turkey frequently appears both alluring and suspect—a Muslim-majority country on the frontier of Europe, a NATO member and European Union aspirant, a former colonizer and mediator with Israel. Many Arab intellectuals see the Kemalist Westernization project—with its aggressive secularism, latinization of the Turkish alphabet, and efforts to cleanse Turkish culture of Arab influences—as a rejection of Turkey's Muslim and Middle Eastern heritage (Jung 2005:3-4). They typically view contemporary Turkey as an agent of Western—and particularly American—interests. Istanbul-based Jordanian journalist Yousef Alsharif (2008) articulates this position in a tellingly entitled article, “Are There Any Muslims in Turkey?” Many Arabs, he notes, “see Turkey as part of the West. Some position it between East and West; under no circumstances is it seen as part of the oriental, Islamic world” (2008). Through cultural exports like *Noor*, Turkey represents freedom from cultural and religious constraints:

The secret of the series' success is undoubtedly down to viewers' longing for more freedom, and it is laicism which guarantees Turkish Muslims this freedom, particularly in terms of relations between men and women. (Alsharif 2008)

It is just such individualized freedom, and the specter of Western cultural imperialism and moral degradation shadowing it, that alarms

conservatives like al-Jazeera pundit Rafiq Nasrallah. Muhannad/Tatlituğ, the Turk, threatens to smuggle in a sexually ambiguous Western secularism like a beautiful Trojan horse.

The Story Behind the Story

The reworking of an unpopular Turkish soap opera into a pan-Arab television sensation illuminates the gender politics of Arab mass culture. Like its eponymous heroine, *Noor* sprang from humble origins. MBC producer Fadi Ismail discovered the failed 2005 series *Gümüüş* (*Silver*) at a trade show in Istanbul, and brought it to the attention of Adib Khair, the American-educated head of Sama Art Productions in Damascus, one of Syria's most innovative drama production companies. The two decided the work was simultaneously close enough to Arab culture and different enough from everyday life to engage Arab audiences, so they dubbed it into colloquial Syrian as an experiment. Reminiscent of Ulf Hannerz's (1996:5) reference to the pleasure of "home plus" in tourism, Khair argued that *Noor* resembles a modern Arab drama, but is "25 percent better." When watching locally-produced television, "people should be inspired, not embarrassed," he told me, in our discussion about *Noor*'s popularity. "Even the character of a beggar ought to be drawn in such a way as to allow a beggar watching to hold up his head."³² But neither he nor Ismail expected the huge success the series enjoyed.

While much of Noormania is, I argue, a response to the Muhannad effect, the gendered aspect of the series' dialogue also warrants mention.³³ Part of *Noor*'s appeal, and of the disdain it provoked among Islamists and secular intellectuals alike, relates to its linguistic register. The Arabic language is broadly diglossic, marked not by a strict divide between classical and spoken variants, but by a range of registers varying in formality.³⁴ With its long yet finite structure, and emphasis on romance and elite family politics, *Noor* closely resembles the Latin American telenovela, a number of which have been dubbed into literary or Modern Standard Arabic and shown on pan-Arab television. Reserved for written texts, broadcast news, speeches, and translated plays, this formal language is almost never used in everyday conversation, and lends a theatrical remove to the Mexican and Brazilian programs. *Noor*, in contrast, was rendered into very informal—although never vulgar—Syrian dialect. It differs from Syrian-produced television drama in its quotidian idiom, one that many Arab literary artists reject.

Even though the rendering of foreign dramas into standard Arabic is a long-standing practice, intellectuals blamed *Noor* for fostering a “culture of dubbing” that “makes a mockery” of any work it transforms (Mustafa 2010).

In contrast to *Noor*, Syrian miniseries are often written by professional literati—journalists, poets, novelists, and playwrights—to fund their more “serious” endeavors. These dramas, popular throughout the Arab world, frequently employ thinly veiled autobiographical characters as mouthpieces for political positions and philosophical observations. The effect produced is a literarily inflected dialect. Like other Syrian intellectuals, screenwriters remain ambivalent about writing in colloquial language. As Adib Khair noted in an interview, screenwriters “don’t want to go on record as using heavily colloquial language, as this may hurt their literary reputations.”³⁵ Damascus is known as the birthplace and “beating heart of Arab nationalism” (*qalb al-‘uruba al-nabid*), and many Syrians cling to notions of Arab unity, perceiving dialects as divisive. Further, there has been no “call for the colloquial” as in early 20th century Egypt. Standard Arabic is associated with the public realm, and by extension, with men (Haeri 1997). Finally, Syrian literati often associate use of the dialect with women writers, dismissing it as stylistic weakness (Salamandra 2004:127-128). *Noor* had no local author, but rather a translator whose initial rendering from the Turkish was smoothed over by a team of consultants, then further modulated by the dubbing actors. The result is dialogue closer to everyday Syrian than that of most Syrian television dramas.

Syrian producer Khair also attributes *Noor*’s success to its light entertainment value. “It’s not that the story line is so strong, but quite the opposite,” he argues. “There’s a lack of big issues, no social or political criticism, and looks more like an American soap opera.” Khair likened *Noor* to *Desperate Housewives*, noting “it’s just as silly as you expect it to be.” The series’ characters, Khair contends, are merely characters, and audiences take them that way. “They don’t represent ideas or positions, the way characters in Syrian series often do.” Khair believes *Noor* struck a nerve with “people who do not want to be crowded with issues,” as viewers are, he argues, in Syrian-produced miniseries, or *musalsal-s* (literally series). These social realist dramas have in recent years dealt with such weighty issues as Islamic revivalism, terrorism, colonialism, Palestine/Israel, Christian-Muslim relations, urban poverty, AIDS, mental illness, drug addiction, rape, and child sexual abuse (Salamandra 2008, 2011a).

Syrian television drama is—aside from occasional sensations like *Noor*—arguably the dominant popular cultural form in the Arab world. This is especially true during Ramadan, the key broadcast season that has given the musalsal its 30-episode form. The fasting month, with its shortened work hours and family gatherings, has become a time of television drama watching; viewership swells, showcase productions air, and advertising rates soar (Kraidy and Khalil 2009:99-100). Referred to simply as “drama,” these programs are often strongly didactic, and reflect the viewpoints of their largely secular and socially progressive creators. In a context where overt social, political, and religious critique is stifled, they have become a locus of serious discussion and debate.

The rise of Syria’s social realist drama industry is linked to—and evokes experiences of—the country’s recent economic liberalization-without-democratization (Salamandra 2011b). When political parties were banned in the 1960s, activists became writers and journalists, but ongoing censorship of the press and growing employment opportunities in commercial drama have now rendered them TV creators. Their products often explore the consequences of neoliberalism. They broach sensitive, sometimes sensational topics as far as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—largely Saudi and Emirati—satellite stations will allow, operating with and against the Syrian state and Gulf censor’s ever-shifting, blurry red lines.³⁶ Syrian dramas exploring “our problems,” as Arab viewers often put it, tackle poverty, corruption, and even terrorism in critical ways. Yet producers and consumers maintain that since the rise of pan-Arab satellite television in the mid-1990s, GCC market domination has stripped television drama of progressive and subversive elements. In our discussion of transformations in the industry, eminent screenwriter Najib Nusair lamented what he sees as the demise of pre-satellite era freedoms:

Syrian musalsal-s are sterilized, sterilized! I remember seeing a series called *The Palace Quarter* (*Harat al-Qasr*) in the ‘70s, a Syrian series, and there was no religious censorship in those days. In the ‘70s and before, society was moving towards secularism, and this series *The Palace Quarter*, directed by ‘Ala’ al-Din Kawkash, was based on the idea of a woman becoming pregnant outside of marriage, and the murder that followed. Because of social relations, you found women wearing short skirts, open necklines, characters drinking alcohol. But now, given this dependency on Gulf or Saudi

financing, after the emergence of satellite stations, all of this became forbidden. Even if you have a boy, or a university student, coming home from Aleppo to Damascus, his mother cannot kiss him. Even his mother! It is forbidden to film a closed room with a man and woman inside.³⁷

Yet showcase productions of recent years suggest that Syrian drama creators manage to slip controversial material past censorship restrictions (Salamandra 2008, 2011a, 2011b). They regularly treat all the supposedly taboo issues invoked in the panic over *Noor*—unveiled working women are the norm, alcohol is often drunk, and illicit sex commonly implied.³⁸ For instance, director Laith Hajjo's *Behind Bars (Khalf al-Qudban)* featured negative depictions of Islamic piety and scenes of high-class prostitution, rape, and masturbation. Aired on the Abu Dhabi channel Infinity during Ramadan 2005, the series barely caused a ruffle.³⁹ Independent, powerful female characters appear regularly, such as the protagonist of Hatim Ali's 2005 *Unable to Cry ('Asiy al-Dam'a)*, who leaves her dashing but domineering husband when he tries to curb her burgeoning law career. The Emirati station Sama Dubai broadcast this series with little backlash.

Most commentators and critics took *Noor's* subversion for granted, while both Arab and Western media emphasized the program's daring.⁴⁰ However, my analysis of the program's content reveals much more ambiguity than the news reports—many written by those who appear not to have seen the series—would suggest. Despite complaints from clerics, Islamists, and cultural conservatives, *Noor* presents conventional depictions of class, family, and gender relations.

Class conflict, for instance, rarely disturbs the Şadoğlus' mutually supportive patron-client relationships. A place for everyone and everyone in their place is the series' overriding ethos. Modest, dignified country girl Noor is the series' moral backbone. She may not have known what fork to use in early episodes, but she knows how to treat people, and always behaves ethically. Frequently filmed with needle and thread in hand, she stitches the Şadoğlus together just as she embroiders clothing, her wholesomeness serving as foil to Sharifa's pretensions. Noor grounds her wealthy, sometimes frivolous in-laws, whose privilege is never questioned, and whose noblesse oblige involves affection for servants and acts of charity.

In place of the rampant individualism that Arab conservatives associate with westernization, *Noor* affirms a Middle Eastern version of "family

values.” Domineering and sometimes terrifying, Fikri strives to inculcate responsibility, reminding his children and grandchildren that the interests of the Şadoğlu clan supersede those of its individual members. The career-driven are pressured to marry and prioritize family. Accepting an industry award in the name of all the Şadoğlus, Fikri declares, “when the family is united, the company is united, the nation is united, and the Umma⁴¹ is united and strong.”

Transgenerational ties and parenting are paramount. Portrayed as the glue that holds relationships together, children frequently reconcile warring family factions. Adults cuddle and play with them, and complexly drawn child characters like Amal are often the center of attention. As Muhannad’s uncle, Salah al-Din, puts it, “the biggest love in the world is the love of children.” The riverside estate brims with children in *Noor*’s happy final episode.

The serial is also less straightforwardly pro-Western than news reports suggest. Characters treat America as a center of high culture, where Dana builds her artistic career, and as a leader in scientific advancement, restoring Nihal’s ability to walk after her car accident. Yet, it is also a source of moral corruption: Muhannad’s father, Ahmed, escapes to the US with his lover before returning to Sharifa, his family, and—implicitly—his senses. The scruffy painter who accompanies Amal from New York fleeces Muhannad and flees at the first opportunity, signaling the wanton selfishness and literal dirtiness of the Westernized émigré.

While *Noor* has been critiqued for its portrayal of sexually taboo subjects, there is little evidence that its creators implicitly endorse nontraditional relationships or mores. Sexual transgression is depicted, but never celebrated. A transvestite prostitute appears briefly, but is clearly marked as a criminal. Muhannad’s premarital sex is “punished” with his fiancée’s apparently fatal accident, and “fixed” with an arranged marriage to Noor. Bana rues her abortion and weds her lover Kamil. Dana marries Amal’s father, Anwar, after Fikri threatens her with a pistol for besmirching the Şadoğlu reputation. Fikri also squelches grandson Fajir’s engagement to a fashion model whose public display of flesh he finds unseemly.

Muhannad’s subversion of traditional male authority is inconsistent. The character’s evolution from youthful insouciance to adult responsibility occurs through interactions with the women in his life, whose movement and behavior he frequently tries to restrain. Female modesty, essential capital for the social and economic standing of a prominent family like

the Şadoğlus, is largely shaped through male control in Middle Eastern contexts.⁴² In her analysis of Arab brother/sister relationships and the reproduction of patriarchy, Suad Joseph (1994) argues that male maturity involves not independence from but responsibility for female kin, and that a complex of equal parts affection and discipline is learned through sibling interaction. *Noor*'s budding patriarch alternates affection with reprimand, growing into his guardianship so effectively that Dana remarks: "Sometimes I look at Muhannad and see my grandfather." Muhannad becomes enraged when his mother, long abandoned by her husband, begins a relationship with the family lawyer—who, "on top of everything else, is younger than she!" Muhannad supports Noor's career ambitions only within the family fold, sabotaging her independent ventures. His much-touted romantic gestures towards his wife often follow estrangements caused by his flirtations with other women. As Walter Armbrust (2006) has argued, Egyptian Farid Shawqi, an earlier-generation Arab leading man, also combined egalitarian and domineering propensities in his relationships with women, both onscreen and off. Yet Muhannad's classically patriarchal tendencies barely surface in public discourse about the series.

What is unusual about *Noor* is a subversive permissiveness towards its characters' ultimate happiness. The series punishes transgressions, but, unlike Syrian dramas, allows most transgressors (male and female) to prevail in the end. Arab drama series rarely end on such an upbeat note. But a happy ending does not account for viewers' rapt attention to the series throughout the trials and tribulations of episodes 1 through 153. I propose that the Muhannad effect, rather than the show's novel or daring topicality, is the key to understanding Noormania. The most subversive element of the series was underplayed in the media backlash: the display of a Muslim—yet Turkish and foreign-looking—male body for Arab female consumption. Reports describing women's provocative use of Muhannad/Tatlitüğ's image support this interpretation.

Conclusion

Three years after the first broadcast of *Noor*, Noormania and the surrounding uproar have abated—as media panics often do—but not disappeared. The censorious responses to *Noor* not only failed to pull the series off the pan-Arab satellite airways, they also spurred the growth of a Damascus-based industry dubbing Turkish programs into Syrian Arabic. While these

new soap operas threaten to undercut Arabic-language drama production, no other Turkish series has attracted such a vast audience, or elicited such a media frenzy, on the scale of *Noor*. A slightly matured Kivanç Tatlıtuğ reappeared in 2010's *Forbidden Love* (*al-'Ishq al-Mamnu'*), playing a character renamed Muhannad because, as producer Adib Khair put it, "MBC wanted to keep the reference." Any series starring Tatlıtuğ "is a must to have, and a must to see," he noted, adding that audiences find the star's acting much improved.⁴³ An anonymous Arabic-language blogger concurs that the actor proved himself "not just a pretty face or a fashion model passing unnoticed on the small screen, but a skilled actor relying not only on his appearance, but also on the spontaneous and dramatic quality of his acting."⁴⁴ Yet female fans' adoring Internet outpourings slowed to a trickle, and Syrian viewers complained about Tatlıtuğ's slight weight gain. Hanan Qarqash (2010), writing in the US based Arabic e-zine *Watan*, argues that Tatlıtuğ's good looks failed to spare the new series and its adulterous love affair from the disapproval of Algerian women.

Changing political contexts transform readings of *Noor* and its significance. A narrative of Turkish-Arab engagement has largely replaced celebrations of sexual liberation and accusations of neocolonial cultural degradation. News articles on the "Turkish model," a supposedly exemplary blend of liberalization and Islam, mention the popularity of *Noor*'s Turkish model. Journalist and think tank reports herald a positive shift in Arab perceptions of Turkey, citing *Noor*—alongside increased trade, relaxed visa restrictions, Turkey's mediation with Israel, and its Eastern-oriented governing party—as a cause of the rapprochement (al-Rashid 2009; Bilbassy-Charters 2010; Ergin 2010; Khalid 2010; Kimmelman 2010; Küçükcan 2010; Middle East Institute 2010; Shadid 2011a, 2011b). While 2010 and 2011 brought the "Arab Spring"—revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and pro-democracy uprisings in much of the Arab world—Muhannad was far from forgotten. In October 2011, rumors of Tatlıtuğ's murder swept the Internet, until a satellite TV station rang the Egyptian Embassy in Ankara, on air, to squelch them.⁴⁵

Noor and the Arabic-dubbed Turkish soap opera genre it spurred complicate the propensity to ignore secular cultural phenomena. Noormania offers a telling counterpoint to the trends dominating recent studies of Arab popular culture. Anthropologists have focused much attention on Islamic revivalism and its resonance in Arab commercial media, with discussions of Islamically appropriate and religiously "purposeful" (*al-fann*

al-hadif) cinema and television (Kubala 2005; Abu-Lughod 1995, 1998, 2005; van Nieuwkerk 2007, 2008), television preachers (Kubala 2007, Winegar 2008, Moll 2010), and treatments of Islamism in fictional cinema and TV drama (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1997, 2005, 2006; Armbrust 2002b; Salamandra 2008). Islamic tendencies are clearly influencing Arab media. Yet Noormanía represents a countervailing force, suggesting the ambivalence of public sphere Islamization, the contingency of its appeal, and the potential for its subversion.

In Noormanía, Muhannad/Tatlituğ's *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 1989:19) and women's amorous gazing formed a sexualized nexus of early 21st century Arab anxieties. *Noor* became a locus of tension over changing gender roles and relations, at a time when women's increasing public presence, along with globalization and its supposed secularizing and Westernizing tendencies, elicits conservative and Islamist concern. The androgynous Muhannad/Tatlituğ embodies Turkey's ambiguity, Muslim yet officially secular, Asian and European. His gender alterity, a quality early nationalists linked to Oriental backwardness, now evokes an occidental neocolonial decadence. The blond Turkish idol's appeal among women, who often symbolize the Arab world and its vulnerability, provoked a mix of Islamist, anticolonial, and Arab nationalist sentiment.

Unusually for a soap opera, *Noor* did not merely reflect and reconfigure debates ongoing in the public sphere (Castelló et al. 2009:475); it engendered a vibrant discourse about the male body and female longing. This is crucial in Arab societies, where censorship restricts discussion of sensitive issues like sexuality in non-fictional media. The convergence of media forms—satellite television and the Internet—and the rise of a new media genre—the Arabized Turkish series—enables articulation of desire and discontent. These developments have altered what women say they want, and how men respond. Women are looking, and discussing men's looks, effectively inverting the male gaze. The once common place assertion that "looks don't matter for men" (Salamandra 2004:54) may never again be assumed. The case of Noormanía and its backlash speaks to the potency and transformative potential of women's erotic spectatorship. ■

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Endnotes

¹Accessed from <http://akelhawa.com/noor-or-gumus-the-turkish-drama-invade-arab-television> on June 15, 2010.

²I refer here not to a cultural whole, but to a pan-Arab satellite mediascape (as termed by Appadurai 1990) that spans a geographic region from Morocco to Iraq, and includes significant immigrant communities globally.

³By contrast, copies of most Syrian television dramas are available only on inexpensive, pirated CDs and DVDs.

⁴Moral panic theory has been criticized for its ahistoricity, its assumption of formulaic stages, its functionalist concern with norms and consensus, and its inattention to audience responses (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, Critcher 2008). I argue that its derivative, the media panic concept, accurately conveys the scale and tenor of the *Noor* phenomenon. Following Critcher, I use it as a starting point, rather than a model, for analysis.

⁵This plotline appears drawn from the CBS soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which has been aired on Turkish and pan-Arab satellite stations. I am grateful to Donatella Della Ratta for pointing this out to me.

⁶These figures, commissioned by MBC itself, should not be taken literally. There are no accurate viewership numbers available for the Arab world, where the authoritarian structure of regimes discourages research. In addition, there is little market pressure for numbers, as few pan-Arab satellite stations rely on advertising revenues; most operate on state subsidies or private patronage. Nevertheless, the media reaction and my own anecdotal ethnographic evidence from the UAE and Syria in July and August of 2008 attest to the series' extraordinary popularity.

⁷These interviews form part of my ethnographic book project on Syrian television drama production.

⁸References drawn from the major pan-Arab sources: *al-Sharq al-Aswat*, *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, and *al-Hayat*. A similar range of positions was represented in many national newspapers.

⁹Wary of using the name of Islam's prophet in an experimental venture, Syrian producers changed the *Gümüş* character Mehmet (the Turkish version of Muhammad) to the richly suggestive Muhannad, Arabic for "sword."

¹⁰*AlArabiya*. 2008. "Turkish Soap Star Sparks Divorces in Arab World." *AlArabiya.net*, June 29. Accessed from <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/06/29/52291.html> on Oct 1, 2008.

¹¹As of July 12, 2010. These figures exclude various alternate spellings, such as "Nour" and "Mohanad."

¹²As of July 5, 2010.

¹³An online information site that ranks websites according to number of hits.

¹⁴Accessed from <http://osama.ae/671/noorwemohannad/> on Nov 1, 2009. Translated from Arabic.

¹⁵See Weyman 2007.

¹⁶Accessed from <http://akelhawa.com/noor-or-gumus-the-turkish-drama-invade-arab-television> on June 15, 2010.

¹⁷Accessed from <http://gilgamish2008.elaphblog.com/posts.aspx?U=1121&A=6848> on June 15, 2010. Translated from Arabic.

¹⁸Accessed from <http://www.frankom.com/?s=%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF> on Oct 2, 2008.

¹⁹"Turkish Soap Opera Takes Arab World By Storm," *Al Arabiya Net*. Accessed from <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/08/25/55419.html> on Nov 1, 2008.

²⁰Aired August 5, 2008.

²¹Accessed from <http://egyptiangumbo.com/nour-turkish-drama-or-turkish-museeba-108.htm> on Nov 1, 2008.

²²During my fieldwork discussions in Damascus in the early 1990s, Syrians associated male attractiveness with dark complexion and physical bulk.

²³As Shafik puts it, "Egyptian film has done a great deal to support unilateral male gazing" (2007:170).

²⁴Notable exceptions include Hansen 1986, Moore 1988, and Rall 1993.

²⁵Perhaps due to a dearth of source material, female desire is largely absent from the social history of sexuality in the Middle East (Boudhiba 2004, El-Rouayheb 2005, Najmabadi 2005, Ze'evi 2006). Najmabadi (2005: xii) admits complicity in this neglect: her study of gender and sexuality in 19th century Iran scarcely mentions female desire.

²⁶Negar Mottahedeh (2008) argues that the innovative techniques and conventions of Iranian cinema, developed in response to visual censorship and exemplified by the work of Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Bayza'i, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, interrupt the erotic gaze, and suggest a feminist negative aesthetics that undermines conventional modes of representation.

²⁷While women are to be protected from the gaze, they are often the ones charged with gaze avoidance. Laura Pearl Kaya (2009:260) notes that older Jordanian women advise their younger counterparts not to return men's glances.

²⁸There are an estimated 34.4 million Internet users in the Arab world, where a majority of households also have satellite television access (Abbassi/Arab Advisors Group 2010). Yet these numbers do not accurately convey actual usage, given the prevalence of Internet cafés, sharing, and pirating.

²⁹In addition, satellite networks regularly broadcast subtitled versions of American, European, and Latin American drama and comedy series.

³⁰Accessed from <http://lorenasepiphany.com/2010/10/11/every-lebanese-housewives-dream> on Jan 29, 2011.

³¹Accessed from http://www.aqoul.com/archives/2008/07/turkish_soap_op.php on Oct 2, 2008.

³²Interview with the author on October 9, 2008.

³³See Buccianti 2010 for a somewhat different discussion of *Noor's* dubbing.

³⁴See Armbrust 1996:37-62, 2002c for nuanced analyses of linguistic registers in Egyptian popular culture.

³⁵Interview with the author on October 9, 2008.

³⁶Scripts produced in Syria for foreign outlets must be approved by Syrian state censors.

³⁷Interview with the author on July 19, 2006.

³⁸However, it must be noted that alcohol is normalized in *Noor*. The Şadoğlus drink wine at the family dinner table; Syrian drama characters who drink are typically negatively marked.

³⁹Marlin Dick (2006) notes that the only opposition to the series came from activists objecting the series' depiction of a woman's NGO as a cover for prostitution.

⁴⁰One exception, *Al-Sharq al-Aswat* columnist Sawsan al-Abtah (2008), noted the family-centric quality of the *Noor* narrative.

⁴¹The Muslim community of believers.

⁴²It is important to note that women also actively cultivate family honor through modest comportment. See Abu-Lughod 1986.

⁴³Interview with the author on February 16, 2011.

⁴⁴Accessed from <http://www.rewity.com/vb/t149965.html> on May 15, 2011.

⁴⁵As this article went to press in November 2011, official Syrian-Turkish relations strained over the Bashar al-Asad regime's violent suppression of anti-regime protests. As thousands of refugees flooded its southern border, Turkey imposed sanctions on its neighbor and hosted Syrian opposition groups. "Syrian Drama Forsakes Love of Muhammad?," an article in the left leaning Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, pondered the future of Turkey's recently burnished image on Arab television, even as many dubbed Turkish series continued to air (Kan'an 2011).

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