

The Contentious Politics of Music Videos: The U.S. and Arab Culture Wars in Comparative Perspective

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This paper discusses the U.S. and Arab culture wars from a comparative perspective. Drawn from an ongoing book project on the contentious politics of Arab music videos, the paper draws intriguing comparisons between the U.S. polemics over music videos in the 1980s and the Arab controversies over the same genre in the 2000s. So far my analysis has revealed striking socio-political, economic and institutional equivalences. In both contexts, the music video polemics occurred after several decades of a rising conservative movement that articulated a discourse of social and cultural values. In the U.S. and the Arab world, music videos emerged at a time when the cultural media industries were undergoing fundamental shifts that redefined public taste and consumer culture, from a system dominated by network television to the post-network era dominated by cable television in the U.S., and from state-owned television channels with national audiences to commercially driven satellite channels targeting viewers transnationally in the Arab world. In both contexts, the rise of music videos triggered moral panics that pitted cultural conservatives against a commercial cultural industry. Nonetheless, the two controversies took different form and focuses on different tropes; one major difference resides in the U.S. polemic focus on youth, while the pan-Arab controversy focused on women. Against that backdrop, the paper focuses on selected U.S. and Arab music videos comparatively to foreground articulations between performativity, politics and aesthetics in the music video genre.