False Promises: America and Iraq in Arab Music Videos

Marwan M. Kraidy
American University of Beirut
mk152@aub.edu.lb

Drawn from an ongoing book project focusing on the polemics surrounding Arab music videos, this paper explores the US-Iraq relationship through a close reading of the Iraqi singer’s Shadha Hassoun’s music video of Wa’d ‘Arqoub, or ‘Arqoub’s Promise. Taking its title from an old Iraqi legend about a man who never fulfilled promises he made, the video features a convoluted love affair between an Iraqi woman and a US soldier, against the backdrop of an Iraq torn asunder by war and occupation.

Revisiting the music video cannon of the 1980s in American cultural studies, I argue that music videos are best understood as instruments of visibility in a media hyper-saturated environment. Because music videos cost relatively little and can be replayed endlessly, they can deliver a message—cultural, commercial, political, ideological or religious—in a short, attractive, and punchy form.

Finally, the paper uses the dissemination and circulation of Wa’d ‘Arqoub across media platforms—from satellite television to YouTube to Facebook—and the controversy the video generated in Iraq and pan-Arab public discourse, to argue that the public sphere is better understood through the prism of “circulation” in which affect and style play decisive roles, rather than through the notion of “dialogue” executed through rational deliberation.