

The Advent of Mainstream

What we have learnt from the history of commercial recording in Egypt is that when a cultural industry requires an important initial investment, as it is the case with music, an major company with important financial means will try to cater for the largest possible section of the public. Smaller investors might want to address a niche market and a much more limited audience that is in search of a specific product (i.e. musical genre), provided the production costs are reduced. There is no comparison between the fees that are paid to a major recording artist and the expenses engaged for a lavish music video on the one hand, and an alternative recording on the other hand for instance. Before the advent of the internet and because of the high cost of the commercial recording of music, the main goal of industry has been the *standardization* of musical genres, of musical tastes, of musical audiences. Music in 19th century Egypt was defined by region, by class, by gender, by venues, by occasions and situations (wedding, public performance, religious occasion, etc). The goal of the industry, from the 1920s onward, has been to produce a type of music that would appeal to the largest possible public, across boundaries of gender, class, habitat, situations, and therefore reduce the number of different genres recorded and soled by the industry, in order to cater for a general public instead of different sectors. This necessary standardization resulted in the creation of what is usually labeled “mainstream”. The concept of mainstream cannot be separated from the advent of mass media, for mass media (i.e. ways to distribution of entertainment and information to the masses) is the vector used to disseminate the products tailored by the industry (disks, radio, cinema, television, satellite television).

The mainstream can be considered from a global point of view or from a regional point of view. Global mainstream music of 2015 (Beyonce) is not the same as mainstream Arab music (Asala, Sherin, Amr Diab, etc), which might not appeal to the global public. The Arab audience is invited to consume both “global mainstream music” (of the kind broadcasted on MTV, from Beyonce to Lady Gaga, etc), local mainstream music and regional mainstream music.

The most interesting change that can be witnessed since the last two decades is indeed the advent of a “regional” mainstream standard in the Arab world, that slowly erases differences between national genres. Of course, one obvious difficulty in Arabic is a linguistic one : whereas western pop singers conventionally use a rather standardized accent that is closest to American English when singing pop, whether they are actually Americans or Australians or British, the Arab singers are faced with the necessity of adopting one of the “central” dialects (Egyptian/Lebanese), or an understandable mix that doesn’t correspond to a definite dialect although it might take some local elements of it, or choose standard Arabic, which at any case is never an innocent or practical choice because of the sociolinguistic peculiarities of Arabic: standard Arabic means high-end, and is deemed not compatible with light entertainment and dance music by most speakers of Arabic. So standardization and mainstreaming of music means, on the linguistic level, “egyptianization” or “lebanization” or koinization and leveling of linguistic differences between dialects to ensure lyrics are properly understood throughout the region. Of course, the Egyptianization solution has nothing to do with the supposed musicality of Egyptian Arabic as opposed to other dialects, or its alleged “lightness” : these are not actual facts but actual feelings, that are a consequence and not a cause of the success of the Egyptian music industry since the beginning of the 20th century.

Abstract of Frederic Martel's chapter on Rotana in his book "Mainstream".

At the 58th floor of the Kingdom Tower in Riyadh, Prince Waleed bin Talal visits every Saturday at 2pm the head office of Rotana Music. The Chairman, as they call him, is greeted by ladies at the front desk who wear tight pants, high heels and no hijāb, although we are in KSA. The prince is one of king Abd al-Aziz 37 grand-sons. He is also the grand-son of the Lebanese Prime minister Riyadh al-Solh, the first prime minister after Independence in 1943 until his assassination in 1951. The chairman owns 91% of *Rotana Video and Audiovisual Company*. He is one of the richest men on the planet. He owns shares in News Corp, Apple, Walt Disney, eBay, as well as in influent panarabic newspapers such as al-Ḥayāt. He is a highly atypical financial tycoon, a member of the elite and at the same time he represents the liberal face of the Saudi Kingdom, a progressive icon, protected by the late king Abdullah. It is said that he lost approx. 20 billion dollars during the 2008 financial crisis.

Al-Waleed visits Rotana every Saturday when he is not busy abroad, to chair the board of his media group, Rotana. His decisions are final and undiscussed.

Rotana was founded in 1987. The Kingdom Holding Company, owned by him at 95%, is the mother-company. But Rotana is the Prince's own money, and the result of his keen interest in the media.

The Australian-American media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has invested in Rotana, and al-Waleed bin Talal in his turn has invested in Murdoch's corporation, MediaCorp. The Sony corporation of America has also signed a deal with Rotana to broadcast Sony, Columbia, MGM and Sony music records through Rotana channels in the Arab world.

The Rotana group has 6 divisions : the head office and the finance division is located in Riyadh, but other activities are dispatched in other capitals : the cinema branch is located in Cairo, TV and Radio broadcast from the Gulf and particularly Dubai, the internet division has offices from Morocco to the Middle East. The group conceives of itself as a vast empire, spreading all over the Arab world, as if to conquer it.

Rotana owns movie studios in Cairo and announces it owns 50% of the catalogue of Arab films.

At the time the book was written (2010) Rotana claimed it owned 90% of mainstream music commercialized in the Arab world, from Morocco to Irak. Shadi Sanbar, the Kingdom Holding CFO (chief financial officer) declared to Martel "We have a monopoly in music".

Rotana specialized in parallel sectors that contributed to this monopole : millions of dollars were invested in ultramodern websites and making their TV channels available on the web. Sanbar has a clear vision of the future and thinks information, records, movies will soon be available only in digital format. He calls it "telecotainment", the mix of telecom and entertainment. There will be no more records, he argues, no CDs, newspapers, books, only screens hooked on the internet. For us, he adds, this is not a threat, it is an opportunity and we have the means to seize it. We own the rights for all out entertainment and media contents on all platforms for all countries. Yusuf Mugharbil, the new media manager at Rotana, a Saudi who studied at the University of Colorado and a former employee of the US media telecom giant AT&T presents himself as "the man of the Arab culture of the future".

Rotana owns more than 20 different satellite channels, mostly films and video clips, including an "oldies" channel (mainstream of the 50s>80s). Programs are partly adaptations and arabizations of successful western (US) mainstream shows. The main goal is

broadcasting in the Arab world, but at the time of the interview, Shadi Sanbar didn't exclude the possibility of developing towards other markets. Our goal, he adds, is to defend Arab values, our interest is panarabic. The prince believes in demography, a key factor in the entertainment business (i.e. betting on the younger generations). Young people consume entertainment, more than news, and this is what Rotana offers. We have the future for us".

There is however a strange detail : Saudi capitals are everywhere in Arab medias, but medias are absent in KSA. The most important media groups : Rotana, MBC, Orbit, ART, have their head offices in Riyadh, or the capitals come from KSA, but no channel actually broadcasts from there. Rotana is a Saudi group specialized in cinema, music and tv production, although there are no cinemas and no concerts in KSA. The Kingdom does not allow inside what it broadcasts outside. But Al-Waleed bin Talal represents the liberal face of the Kingdom.

The Rotana Café in Damascus (2010) is set in the *Four Seasons* hotel, one of the most fancy hotels in the Syria. The hotel itself is a property of the prince. Rotana Café includes a CD and DVD shop, that looks very much like Virgin Megastores, a coffee shop and restaurant whereone can watch Rotana music videos. All the Rotana stars are invited here : Amr Diyāb, Angham, Sherin, George Wassuf, Latifa, Asala, Elissa, etc. All of them are panarabian stars, and most of them recorded their albums in Lebanon.

note

> the "album" concept is a survival of the appearance of the 33rpm record (= LP record), introduced in the US by Columbia records in 1948. In 1952, 78rpms were only half of the sales in records, the new standard (needing new equipment) had almost replaced the old one. 45 rpm record, needing the same equipment as 33, was introduced in 1949 by the competition, Victor, but only succeeded in replacing the 78 as the media for the single song record. For a LP, up to 26mn per side, i.e. 52 minutes for a whole record.

> needless to say, the introduction of the long play was much needed by the aesthetics of the Arab song in the 50s and 60s and allowed for the success of the "long song" format by Umm Kulthūm and her followers and imitators (Warda, Nagat, Fayza Ahmad, etc) in the 1960 and 1970s.

> the "album" format however is a collection of songs, usually 8-12, released in one time.

The cassette format (introduced by the Dutch company Philips in 1963) and which would record sound for a much longer time was actually used as an alternative for the LP record? It was hugely popular in the Middle East from the 1970s until early 2000, for it was cheaper to produce for local companies and factories, and required a cheaper equipment to be played with than the record player (phonograph).

Beirut was chosen by Rotana to be the head office of its music division. The A&R [artists and Repertoire] manager Tony Samaan is a talent scout. He tells Martel : "We are a mainstream group. We aim at popularity and success. Rotana wants to be a giant of Arab entertainment, everywhere in the world, and whatever the price is. The economic model is important, but not as much as the political goal" [no specification of that goal]. Beirut, he adds, has become the capital of Arabic music

> Please note that Cairo lost its reputation as capital of Arab music.

All Arab medias have offices here, and for music productions, studios, video shootings, we are the leaders in the region. Semaan adds : since the whole world imagines the Arab countries as filled with veiled women and men wearing a keffieh, we produce videos with sexy and scantily clad girls, as on MTV.

The Rotana family has approx. 130 Arabic music stars: add to the to the preceding list Hayfa Wehbe, Diana Haddad, Ahlam, Kazem el Saher, Marwan Khoury, Najwa Karam, Nawal al Zoghby, Rami 'Ayyash, Saber Reba'i, Tamer Hosni...

The economic model followed is simple : each artists perceives a flat fee per album, but seldom a percentage on sales. The media group then broadcasts this pre-bought music on all its platforms : CD, DVD, videos, TV programs, internet, derived programs, booked shows, coffee mugs, programs broadcasted on TV in which those stars perform and participate, and even coffee mugs. Rotana also manages artists and organizes concerts, following a "360° strategy".

Vocalists come from the whole Arab world, but not from behind it. To be signed, an artist needs to have a heavy panarabic potential, he must be likeable in all countries.

In order to ensure this crossover strategy, singers are requested to use the central dialects, notably Egyptian.

Rotana has not managed to win its global bet, i.e. to make this Arabic mainstream music part of the global mainstream, but had been extremely successful in its core target : in 2010 and in the MENA zone, Rotana stars represented approx 85% of the music sold. The Maghriban market has been very receptive, and the company makes sure to hire Maghriban artists (Layla Ghofran, Amal Bouchoucha, Zikra, etc).

But selling albums in the age of the mp3 file and piracy is not a major objective for Rotana. CD are now a mere promotional object. Television and online video are the real priorities.

> Note the importance of the notion of music to be seen vs. music to be heard.

Videos last for 3:30mn, not the old 30-40 minute songs of the Egyptian kinds

> Mistake in the article, Semaan is attributing to Rotana a change that has occurred in the mid 80s with the disappearance of the "long song" model.

Of course, the success of such videos is not only linked to their fast editing and short length, it is also a consequence of the beauty of the female and male models used in them, that appeal to the whole mixed audience. The American giant MTV is much less watched than Arab video channels in the region. There is also a remarkable liberty of tone in the topics that are alluded to in the shows produced in Lebanon, provided this freedom of talk concerns matters of personal life or habits or morals, but not political subjects.

The multimedia panarabic strategy of the Rotana group seems flawless and impressively successful. However, some actors in the music business express their doubts about it. Naji Baz, the producer of the Arabic version of Star Academy, questions the enterprise's viability: Rotana, he says, is not a company like others. It's al-Waleed Bin Talal's pet. The business model is of no interest to him, he is only interested in a political and identity goal.

Others point out the megalomaniac behavior of the prince, and his lavish presents to stars he invites in luxury hotels and offers sports car to, that they sell away as soon as the party is over.

Pascal Gaillot, the head of EMI-Middle-East [that is to say before EMI was sold off to Universal] protests : Rotana killed the Arabic music market by breaking prices. Its dishonest

competition. The Prince's goal is not economic, it is to make Arabic music known all over the world. He is pleasing himself with Rotana, while we are trying to do business here!

Other have harsher critics : Rotana only broadcasts on its channels artists who signed with the group ; artists are bound by irregular contracts that are extremely harsh in terms of copyrights ; the artistic quality of the music broadcasted is too low, too standardized, always the same rhythms, always the same lyrics, always the same storyboard in the videos.

Others contend that the Prince's goal is to participate in the modernization of the Arab world through his programs — but can entertainment modernize a culture ?

Panarabic media groups like Rotana or MBC already dominate the entertainment business in the Middle-East, at the expense of Global actors, unlike what was the case at the very beginning of the century. But can they push their luck further and confront the Americans and the Europeans on non-Arab markets ?

The case of Rotana and the regional giants in the Arab world triggers questions that are both philosophical and market-oriented questions. In order to become “mainstream”, those groups have privileged pure entertainment, the star-system, music-to-watch as opposed to music-to-hear, at the expense of authors and of originality. They have also abandoned, at least partly, values, aesthetic principles and identity values. The idea was that, in order to become global, you need to cease being national, being local. But is presenting a product tailored to be global the only working way to achieve success on a global scale?