# Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U. S. Culture in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2017), xv+268 pp., ISBN: 978-0-231-17400-8

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What if all of a sudden Alfred Hitchcock appeared on the screen wearing a traditional Moroccan cloak (*djellaba*)? What if the Disney hero Shrek started to sing a very popular Moroccan folk song (*rai*) or to express himself using a local Iranian dialect? What if Paul Bowles were recognized globally as an authentic Moroccan writer?

In his fascinating new book *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East*, Brian T. Edwards explores the multiple and often curious paths that American icons and cultural products travel when they circulate from the U.S. to North Africa and the Middle East. In the new context, they also take on surprising shapes and gather an unusual set of meanings.

A professor of English, comparative literary studies and American studies, and founding director of the Middle East and North African Studies Program at Northwestern University, Edwards employs in his work a variety of materials (personal memories and photographs, excerpts from his field journals, graphic novels, cyberpunk fiction, video clips, commercial and art films, TV series, but also academic conversations and informal exchanges with local people), which he collected in more than ten years of fieldwork between Casablanca, Cairo and Tehran.

*After the American Century* has indeed not only the merit of decentering U.S. culture and American literary studies by embracing a viewpoint that represents the Other *par excellence*, but has also the advantage of considering three regional/global metropolises that are very different from each other. According to Edwards, rather than merely appropriating and replicating U.S. culture, individuals in Casablanca, Cairo, and Tehran produce very creative and most of the time unexpected responses to U.S. culture that "disorient" the American reader, viewer, and/or traveler. To quote the author: "These three cities not only bridge a huge region but stand for three different ways of responding to American culture and its forms, as different as these societies and their local histories are from one another. They orient in different directions and have different colonial and postcolonial histories that affect the directions in which cultural products travel in and out of them" (29).

In addition to its clear and rigorous style, there are many qualities that make this book a compelling and indispensable reading for anyone interested in studying U.S. culture from a transnational perspective or in deepening their knowledge of the MENA region. With considerable expertise, the author touches on a wide array of contentious topics such as the so-called "Arab Spring" and the often misleading translation made by U.S. mainstream media for the American public, the attitude of the Moroccan society in matters of identity, gender and sexuality, the

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relationship between individual creativity and state censorship in Iran, but also the influence of Hollywood and U.S. politics on the American film industry.

In this regard, Edwards convincingly demonstrates, for instance, that the film *Argo* (2013), directed by Ben Affleck, is in fact a very local film in the negative sense of the term, namely a narrow-minded, provincial movie employing familiar, easily translatable formulas to explain the 1979 Iranian revolution to an American/global audience. On the contrary, *A Separation* (2011) by the Iranian film director Asghar Farhadi raises a multitude of issues and provides the viewer with a plurality of meanings, thus offering a much more acute, because nuanced, reading of the complexity of the contemporary Iranian situation and indirectly also of its global implications.

The audacious thesis that makes Edwards's book particularly intriguing is the idea that the digital twenty-first century represents a watershed in U.S. history, marking the end of U.S. cultural domination in North Africa and the Middle East. The author further contends that it is precisely in those decentered places and new political environments that it is possible to find valuable cultural means to understand the complexity of the contemporary age. The examples provided by the author clearly show that the circulation of U.S. cultural products often "ends" in unexpected local contexts and that North African and Middle Eastern users produce very original deployments and readaptations of U.S. culture, thereby confirming the variety, creativity, and dynamism that characterize the MENA region. According to the author, this area would be a first-rate receptacle of U.S. culture, yet its manifold responses are often highly unpredictable. As he notes: "Fueled by digital piracy, translation websites, and the Internet porous boundaries, cultural products move quicky into locations their producers rarely imagined and are picked up by multiple new publics" (89).

In *After the American Century,* Edwards extends the boundaries of postcolonial studies, moving beyond its typical binarism, and showing for instance that global culture rather than being safely positioned in a hegemonic center may in fact travel outside it and reach some terminal ends, where it undergoes a radical transformation. This representation of local, indigenous places as new nodal points and as laboratories for exceptionally innovative and independent cultural products is one of the most interesting aspects of Edwards's work, since it shows that circulation in the globalized, digital age is not merely a "two-way street, *aller-retour*" and that "[t]here are many endpoints from which cultural forms do not return" (40). For example, the comic books by Magdy El Ahmed or the cyberpunk novel by Alaidy Shafee – two young artists based in Cairo – clearly deviate from the U.S. cultural products that were among their main sources of inspiration. These artists do not only refuse to adhere and respond to the expectations of U.S./global audiences but even "jump publics," that is to say, they openly refuse to take them seriously into consideration.

Edwards convincingly demonstrates throughout his book that Farhadi's movies, the Disney videos dubbed in farsi and the cyberpunk novels of a new generation of Egyptian authors, but also the revolution in Tahrir square itself, do not aspire to go back, nor desire to get some kind of recognition from a global public that most of the time, partly or completely ignores the context in which they

developed. As the author poignantly asserts: "Though many have assumed that globalization in the cultural realm brings endless circulation, these new products are end points, perhaps even dead ends, and they do not return easily. But neither do they particularly want to, and that is what makes them perhaps crucial to understand in grasping what the world after the American century looks like" (xv). It is precisely in their capacity to be so self-reliant and fierce and in their ability to dodge a global audience pretentiously convinced that it can do without them, that their irreverent strength becomes manifest.

The very personal and to a certain extent very local way through which the Moroccan gay writer Abdellah Taïa appropriates and deploys Hitchcock's masterpiece *Rear Window* in twenty-first century Casablanca is another exemplary case. As the writer explains in an interview included in the book, he turned to this American classic movie of the 1950s and used it retrospectively as a source of inspiration to illustrate his very personal role as a *voyeur* writer, one who observes closely and bears witness to the unique ways in which Moroccan society understands and practices (homo)sexuality.

While U.S. and global audiences continue to buy and consume cultural products that tend to reproduce stereotypical versions of an "Orient" cast as opposite to an innocent and democratic West, very original and creative works that synthesize, alter, and dis-orient U.S. cultural models are continuously being produced in the streets of Cairo, Casablanca, and Tehran by new generations of artists. As Edwards demonstrates, however, these works hardly circulate back to the U.S., and on the rare occasions when they do so, they receive scant attention from audiences and critics who are unable to catch the innovative power of their narratives.

The widespread desire for "native informants" and for simple, univocal representations of the MENA region would explain, according to Edwards, the great success of Tv series such as *The Tyrant* (2014-) and *Homeland* (2011-), of a graphic novel like *Habibi* (2011) by Craig Thompson, and of neo-Orientalist novels such as *The Yellow Birds* (2013) by Kevin Powers and *A Hologram for the King* (2012) by Dave Eggars – both finalists of the National Book Award, which all tend to reproduce prevailing and debilitating neo-Orientalist stereotypes.

As the author makes clear, despite the uncontestable lure of these familiar representations, readers should rather plunge into the multilayered archive of local, resisting, and ultimately disorienting adaptations of U.S. culture by Middle Eastern and North African users, if they hope to find useful means to make some sense of the complexity of the present. It is indeed only by listening carefully to the unpredictability, the fragmentary nature, and to the dissonance through which the local expresses itself that we may be able to formulate a more subtle and perhaps also less catastrophic judgement of our time.