

Feeling Dubbing Six Short Stories on Arabic Voice Acting

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Magical Ruin

It felt like a sacred pilgrimage when I first arrived at the ruin of what was once Studio Baalbeck in a suburb of Beirut. This magical place that had changed the course of my life was now abandoned and lying in ruins, overgrown with weeds and vegetation, barbed wire encircling its easily trespassed fences. I was lucky there was still an Arabic sign outside to indicate its physical existence. It left me speechless to imagine all the strange and wondrous activities that were taking place in those exposed dilapidated rooms some decades ago. It was a time when the belief in the imaginative life of the pan-Arab child was at its peak, and contributing to our collective cultural experience was viewed as a serious undertaking worth everyone's while.

Studio Baalbeck was famous for having recorded countless albums of many an Arab legendary diva, also it was said to be the largest music and television production studio in the Middle-East at the time (1962–1994). However, there is another history of performance here that is much less trodden, less recounted, and perhaps never given the luxury of the spotlight, though it is deeply etched into our infantile collective memory. A history forever relegated to the realm of urban myth, hearsay, or obscure online blog commentary. It is the history of Voice.

Two-Dimensional Ululations

In the 1980s, a group of Lebanese producers and actors took it upon themselves to translate foreign cartoons into Arabic for children across the Arab world. Since animation was such a technical and costly undertaking, no such industry existed locally, and dubbing a pre-existing cartoon seemed like the next best thing to feed to a generation of kids hungry for Arabic popular culture. With financial investment coming in from Kuwait, the Lebanese producers carefully hand-picked animated television series that they assumed wouldn't be too outlandish or foreign in content for Arab audiences.

For some reason that I have not quite deciphered yet, most of these cartoons were Japanese in origin. So in reality, the content was so alien and otherworldly to the Arab child's eye despite the producers' best intentions. Mysterious Kanji script, unfamiliar names, strange traditional clothing, weird cuisine, mountainous landscapes, and inexplicable rituals were all part of this alien concoction called *Kartōn Yabaneē* (*Japanese Cartoon*). In fact, many children were unaware that these films were actually Japanese, which gave them an added fantastic cryptic edge. They were dramatic and grandiose, and emanated from a faraway mysterious two-dimensional universe that we could never physically reach.

Cartoonish Wars

As a seven year-old living through the Gulf War (1990–1991), the things we could do as kids while in hiding at home or in bomb-proof basements were limited. School was off permanently and we weren't allowed to leave the house, so naturally we were bored out of our minds and, being children, we obviously didn't fully grasp the dangers we were living through. Our parents did their best to distract us from the war raging outside by providing practical and mental toys to pass the long idle hours spent indoors. Most of the time was directed towards painting and drawing, playing video games and watching cartoons through the electricity cuts. Escapism was the order of the day. The Arabic-dubbed Japanese cartoons were especially poignant, as we watched them over and over again on the VCR, slowly destroying them with each repeat viewing. The visuals, the characters, the story the setting: everything was so colourful and more beautiful than dreary war-torn Kuwait.

My favourite one was about a crazed noodle-eating Ninja named Kabamaru that was forced to relocate to Tokyo after his oppressive grandfather died in their rural family Dōjō. He would join a school in the city as a 'regular' high school student, only to cause a ruckus because of his absolute inability to adapt to modern life.

I mirrored myself in his tanned skin, thick black hair, and enormously playful but primitive character. His superhuman Ninja abilities made it seem like the world was infinitely malleable, and his masculine Arabic voice

was powerful and triumphant. For us, this was a necessary dose of hyper fantasy that helped in getting over the helplessness of war.

It was thus both coincidental and ironic that I later found out that these cartoons were dubbed in Beirut during the early 1980s, arguably the worst years of the 15-year civil war in Lebanon. In 1982 Israel invaded Beirut, and Studio Baalbeck was reported to have been bombed. All activities there subsequently stopped. According to several online fan-blogs, the dubbing of many of these cartoons was clearly rushed as a result. Dubbing voices were exchanged or multiplied according to who could actually get to the studio or not on any given day. Different characters often had the same voice, or temporarily changed their voices mid-episode. As young viewers, we noticed the changes, but they became somehow part and parcel of the whole mysterious experience surrounding their composition in the first place.

Though now I begin to wonder how intense the strain was on the actors living through such dire circumstances while focusing their time on the job of dubbing. It must have heightened their emotional input into this seemingly invisible activity. Perhaps they imagined their recorded voices as the last traces of themselves left in this world, foreseeing that they may or may not be alive tomorrow. Would this explain why the vocal performances and expressions were so intense? So convincing?

The explosive need to be excessively creative reflected my own experience of war. The close shadow of death is a muse.



Feeling Dubbing

*This is a topic about the legends of old dubbing.
I ask of all the members to describe the feeling aroused by their favorite
dubbing actor or actress, and which are the scenes in which the intensity of
voice cannot be portrayed in words.*

*As for my personal opinion on feeling dubbing,
I mean when the voice is so fantastic it outshines the image,
even when we hear the voice without the images
we can feel real emotion whether the scene is happy or sad.*

Excerpt from [Kaizuland](#) blog on Arabic dubbing

As many a fan would attest, the emotional power of the Arabic voice acting hidden behind the recycled Japanese animations was astounding. Not only did the actors perform their anthropomorphic duty towards the characters themselves, but they somehow outdid them, bestowing additional life to the entire scenario. The level of theatricality and playfulness they injected into the sequences directly energized our tender psyches, elevating the voice above the image, where it almost felt as if the image was no longer a necessary part of the equation. We were witnesses to a new theater of voice, where acting was liberated from vision. It was magical, surreal, and very passionate.

The melodramatic nature of the Arabic language also helped in this effect, especially since the lexicon used was classical Arabic (*fus-ha*). Since Arabic is a diglossia, classical Arabic is never used in day to day situations. The reason behind its use here is most likely educational, or imbued with a utopic vision of pan-Arabia, in that the script could be understood by any Arab child who decides to tune in. Unlike contemporary dubbing which focuses on dialects to forge a sense of informal intimacy, the combination of the high-brow *fus-ha* with the absurd animated scenes just exaggerated perceptions of otherworldliness.

In our young minds, classical Arabic became the defacto language of cartoons. '*Al-Quraydes Al-Maqley*', (fried shrimp) I would repeat after Kabamaru when he eyed a sumptuous bento box. We memorized and repeated these lines again and again, as if learning the code to a secret language – the language of robots, ninjas and princesses.

In the end the drawings, the characters, the story were all a work of fiction, but the voices were real. The voice is a trace of the human body, an ephemeral projection of vocal chords into space. Recording it allows that ephemeral moment to be re-echoed over and over again, in countless spaces and minds and memories.

Generating vigor in momentary oral performance can have the same power as the permanence of visual representation, but in this configuration it remains anonymous and invisible. In the back of my mind, I began fantasizing about putting names to these voices. I wanted to someday *meet* the voices. 'One day,' I thought to myself, 'I will find the voice of Kabamaru, and thank him. His voice really guided me and shaped who I was to become.'

Standing By The Tooth of the Elephant



When I began living in Beirut in 2011, I sensed as if the geographic triangle of my life – Kuwait, Japan, Lebanon – was now somehow complete. What seemed like a random collection of places would suddenly hold an intrinsic relationship, as if fate forced them together, crystallized by my own life and body.

In truth, ushered by this obsession with Arabic-dubbed Japanese cartoons, I had moved to Tokyo in 1999 at the age of sixteen and lived and studied there for ten years. With time, I became convinced that if it wasn't for the Arabic voice actors, then the cartoons may have not been that convincing, and my life might have turned out differently. In fact I had watched the series in their original Japanese format and they didn't even come near to the dramatic intensity that the Arabic version had expressed. It was a bittersweet disposition, especially since I had an extreme love-hate relationship with modern life in Japan itself. I was always left wondering whether it was really the right decision to go there or not, whether my childish obsession with this two-dimensional *fus-ha* speaking world was mainly concealing a serious desire to escape. To escape from repression, patriarchy and boredom.

I stood frozen there in front of Studio Baalbeck in the suburb of *Sin El Fil* (literally: *The Tooth of the Elephant*). Strange thoughts flooded my mind. I felt the need to recite a poem. In Arabic literature there is a form of prose called 'Standing By the Ruins' in which a melancholic eulogy is dedicated to the ruins that lost loved ones once occupied. I imagine my poem would read like this:

*There are abandoned rooms
In the tooth of the elephant,
Where voices once proudly spoken
Still ring in my ears.*



أين ولييم؟

Where is William?

I entered an old phone booth in Beirut with a number scribbled on a small piece of paper. A friend of a friend who was an actor in the 1980s told me this was the contact of the voice of Kabamaru, and wrote it down for me hastily. He said he hadn't been in touch for years, and that he didn't want anything to do with him. Apparently Kabamaru's life was not as glamorous as I'd like to have imagined: he was now a penniless and wandering drug addict.

Kabamaru's real name was William. I listened to the phone ring and ring, but there was no answer. The next day I tried again. And the next day. There was no answer. Where was William?

I had heard from other acquaintances that many actors from this generation were currently living in miserable conditions, some even completely outcast from anything to do with acting or theater altogether. It made me sad to think that the group of people that had once given us so many colorful dreams – and perhaps risked their lives while doing so – were now living in squalor. They were never honored or revered for their vocal

contributions to society; their oral passions never praised or awarded.

This tragic circumstance made me hesitate in my search for William. If I do meet him finally, my glittering dreams might come crashing down. I became content with not finding him, as if I was searching for an apparition. I tried to forget what I had heard about his difficult life. He was a ghost now, never to reveal himself to me in the flesh.

The voice of Kabamaru crying in front of a noodle bowl somehow sufficed. It echoed a reality in which artists exist like transient beings, or angels forever living inside our memory.

TAGS

Middle East

Cultural production

Literature

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Monira Al Qadiri is a Kuwaiti visual artist and film maker born in Senegal and educated in Japan. In 2010, she received a Ph.D. in inter-media art from Tokyo University of the Arts, where her research was focused on the aesthetics of sadness in the Middle-East region stemming from poetry, music, art and religious practices. Her practice explores the relationship between narcissism and masculinity, and is recently expanding towards more socio-political subjects. Al Qadiri has taken part in exhibitions and film screenings in Tokyo, Kuwait, Beirut, Dubai, Berlin, New York and Moscow among others. She is also part of the artist collective GCC.

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