

The Video as a Canonization Channel for Contemporary Arabic Fiction*

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Abstract

With the media transition from the paper to the digital, Arab writers' interaction on the social media and book-related videos have become a central strategy of promotion. Besides book trailers produced by the publishers and the readers, the international literary prizes produce their own videos. One of the most important examples is the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) which releases videos with English subtitles for the shortlisted authors every year. Moreover, some writers and journalists have started TV programs or YouTube channels recommending books and interviewing their fellow authors. Engaging with literary history, politics of translation, and media studies, this paper discusses the contribution of videos to the contemporary Arabic novel's canonization: how do the videos make the canon and its mechanisms visible? Which image of the intellectual do they shape globally and locally? Which linguistic varieties do they adopt?

This paper compares two kinds of videos to encompass the global and local scale, with their respective canonizing institutions and mechanisms. On the one hand, it examines how IPAF videos (2012-2019) promote a very recent canon of novels on the global scale through the representation of space, language, and the Arab intellectual. On the other hand, it looks at two book-related TV programs by the Egyptian writers Bilāl Faḍl and ʿUmar Ṭāhir, selecting three episodes (FAḌL 2011, FAḌL 2018, and ṬĀHIR 2018) featuring or devoted to Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq (1962-2018), a successful author of science-fiction and thrillers. Debating non-canonical writings, these TV programs contribute to redefine the national canon focusing on the reading practices and literary criticism.

Keywords: canon building, contemporary Arabic literature, literary prizes, IPAF, TV programs, Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq

Introduction

The circulation of modern and contemporary Arabic literature has increased since the beginning of the 21st century thanks to the digital technologies and a wider Internet access. Besides e-books, some texts are digitized by official institutions,¹ while others are illegally

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¹ For digitization, see e.g. Arabic Collections Online (ACO) / *al-Majmūʿāt al-ʿarabiyya ʿalā l-intirnit* with

downloaded as they used to be illegally printed. It is now easier to purchase Arabic books outside the Arab countries and get access to book reviews in many languages. This media transition from the paper to the digital (COPE & PHILLIPS 2006) also involves the field of promotion. However, while digitization concerns the digital copy of an analogue original, book-related videos are born digital (BACKE 2015: 15).

Arab writers, who are often active on the social media, feature in book trailers, book launches, and interviews posted on their own or their publisher's accounts. Besides official book trailers, this kind of videos is released by readers and amateur media producers, stimulating a participatory attitude among the audience. Such a participation is also found in other forms of book-related digital content: the specialized social network Goodreads is popular also with the Arab audience; some Facebook pages in Arabic are devoted to reading suggestions; and there are Arab online book clubs (FÄYİZ 2019: 103-108 and ELSAYED 2010). In his study of popular literary genres, Jacquemond measures the current trends in the Egyptian book market with 4share downloads and Goodreads ratings (JACQUEMOND 2013 and 2016).

Another big change in the contemporary Arabic literary field is the multiplication of international literary prizes (LYNX QUALEY 2017). The *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature*, awarded by the American University in Cairo since 1996, grants the winning novel an English translation (MEHREZ 2010: 41-57). Other regional prizes awarded during the book fairs contribute to placing Arab writers into the global book market. To increase their international impact, they resort to digital communication, such as websites in Arabic and English, social media accounts, and live streaming of the awarding ceremonies. Arguably the most important prize among them, the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* (IPAF, *al-Jā'iza al-ʿālamīyya li-l-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya*) releases a video with English subtitles for each of the shortlisted authors every year. This paper examines forty-eight IPAF videos (2012-2019) to understand their communicative strategies in visually supporting the prize's selection of a canon of contemporary Arabic novels, a canon that is still under construction. How does the video communicate the novels' inclusion in this canon in terms of themes and style? Which are the linguistic strategies (Modern Standard Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, English) adopted by this medium? Which image of the intellectual does it shape with respect to global trends and national literatures?

While literary prizes and their videos operate on a global scale, TV programs about literature often have a national focus. This is the case of *Waṣafū lī al-ṣabr* (They showed me what patience is) by the Egyptian writer and journalist ʿUmar ṬĀHIR (2018), a series of conversations with intellectuals about several aspects of the national literary system. The episode about popularity with the audience features Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962-2018), who is appreciated by several generations of readers thanks to his book series for teenagers and later for his thriller *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia, 2008). Unlike Ṭāhir's recent program, *ʿAṣīr al-kutub* (lit., the "juice" of the books, i.e., Essential readings) by the Egyptian Bilāl Faḍl reviews literature and non-fiction written both in Arabic and English. This is partly due to material constraints since the program, originally aired by an Egyptian channel (Dreams

Arabic language content from the library collections of NYU and partner institutions, and DAR Digital Asset Repository provided by Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

TV, 2010-2011), is produced by a pan-Arab network (Al-Araby TV, 2015-2019) and the host lives in the United States. The episode with Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq (FADL 2011) belongs to the first phase and thus is relevant for the canonization of Egyptian popular literary genres. Another episode was dedicated to the author after his untimely death (FADL 2018). While IPAF videos visualize a canon under construction within world literature, these three episodes (TĀHIR 2018, FADL 2011 and 2018) exemplify the canonizing mechanisms in a field which has not been canonized yet in the Egyptian context but is established on the global scale.

1. Visual canonizing mechanisms

Literary criticism, popularity with the audience, reading practices, and translation are key factors in canonization. This has been discussed in recent studies about the canonization of the Arabic novel at the beginning of the 20th century (CASINI, PANICONI and SORBERA 2012, SELIM 2004 and 2003). In fact, it was canonized as the main narrative form within the hegemonic liberal nationalist discourse, responding to the needs of reformist intellectuals and the taste of the emerging middle-class audience: the novel's formal and thematic structures were suitable to define cultural identity and access to modernity. Keeping in mind the socio-political context, these studies shed light on the material and cultural factors, such as the printing technology, translation, education, and disregarded popular genres. In doing so, they contribute to rewriting the history of modern Arabic literature, since "literary-history [*sic!*] and its products themselves have a history" (ALLEN 2007: 248).

In line with Allen's suggestion to explore the Arabic novel outside the Egyptian-Levantine focus, FERNÁNDEZ PARRILLA (2009) illustrates the canonization of the Moroccan novel, highlighting the interplay of literary magazines, anthologies, and University programs, as well as the strength of the national(ist) canon even in the post-colonial era. Two examples of continuity are the prestige of written reviews and the debate shaping the national imagery. While Fernández Parrilla insists on the power of written criticism, it is also true that cinema and TV contribute to canonizing some novels for their impact on the audience (COLLA 2008).

Cinematic and television adaptations are related to the concept of media capitalism, which could be extended also to the videos examined in this paper. Referring to the shaping of Egyptian nationalism in the 19th-20th century through the mass media, especially in Colloquial Arabic, Fahmy states that

the term media capitalism is more appropriate for examining the cultural processes taking place; it is wide enough to incorporate all forms of mass media, including print, performance, recording, and broadcast media, and allows everyone, regardless of class, education, or literacy level, to aurally or visually participate in the nationalist project. (FAHMY 2011: 15)

Looking beyond the examined historical period, FAHMY (2011: 96) mentions later advancements in communication technologies and media changes, such as the Internet and satellite media.

Keeping in mind these long-lasting trends, this paper looks at canon as the product of forces in the literary system. In this respect, BACKE illustrates the German pragmatist approach to the canon as elaborated by WINKO (2002); this approach takes into consideration recent and current canonization practices and, without disregarding the political dimension of the canon, tries to understand the mechanisms of canon formation to make changes in its composition:

In other words, Winko describes a process in which countless individual (micro-level) actions—which may have altogether different goals—will result, in conjunction, in the (macro-level) phenomenon of canon formation. This micro level comprises a great diversity of actions: an author's choice of literary allusions, a reader's choice of one novel over another, an anthologist's inclusion or exclusion of an author, a critic's comparison of several contemporary books, a professor's selection of works for a course syllabus, a student's selection of courses, a journalist's commemorative survey of an author. They all involve value judgement of literary texts, albeit made by individuals in a variety of roles and groups withing the "system of literature" (*Literatur System*; *ibid.* [WINKO 2002]: 13).

"[The invisible hand concept] is not contradicted by the fact that there are institutions which are 'caretakers' of canons. Canons are not created solely from contingent actions, but are fostered and maintained through calculated measures" (*ibid.* [WINKO 2002]: 11). By "institutions" Winko means publishing houses, universities, and journalistic media, which she conceives of as groups of agents in the "system of literature." (BACKE 2015:11-12)

Adopting this approach, Backe discusses the impact of the digital media (such as hypertexts, video games, pop songs, and music videos) in defining both the canon and literature as a whole.² Unlike these digital products, book-related videos examined in this contribution are not under a process of canonization, yet they contribute to the promotion and ongoing canon formation of the Arabic novel. The next section presents IPAF as one of the institutions that are caretakers of the canon and IPAF videos as giving voice to the Arab authors to present their individual contribution and exert their agency as mediators.

2. IPAF videos

2.1 The prize

Launched in Abu Dhabi in 2007, funded by the Emirates Foundation from 2007 till 2011 and since then by the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* (IPAF) is an annual prize for the best novel written in Arabic. Following specific rules of entry, publishing houses can submit up to four novels published in the previous three years. A panel of judges, including a non-Arab expert of Arabic literature, chooses sixteen longlisted novels, then six shortlisted novels and finally the winner. Each shortlisted author receives \$10,000 US, while the winning author further receives \$50,000

2 For studies of digital media and Arabic literature, see EL-ARISS 2019 and PEPE 2019.

US and the support to get translated into English. As is stated on its website, IPAF asserts its ability to place the Arabic novel into a world marketplace:

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) is the most prestigious and important literary prize in the Arab world.

Its aim is to reward excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing and to encourage the readership of high quality Arabic literature internationally through the translation and publication of winning and shortlisted novels in other major languages.

In addition to the Prize itself, IPAF supports other literary initiatives. In 2009 IPAF launched its inaugural Nadwa (writers' workshop) for emerging writers of fiction in Arabic.

The Prize is run with the support, as its mentor, of the Booker Prize Foundation in London and funded by Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi (DCT).

Although the Prize is often referred to as the 'Arabic Booker', this is not instigated nor endorsed at all by IPAF or the Booker Prize Foundation which are two completely separate, independent organisations. IPAF is not in any way connected with the Man Booker Prize. (IPAF website)

Arguing that good Arabic literature should be read worldwide, IPAF assumes the task of selecting and promoting it. In her study about the interplay of the canon and cultural production, Sela-Sheffy makes a distinction between

two different implications encapsulated in the very same notion of the canon, namely, between the idea of high *status*, on the one hand, and that of a *guideline for cultural production*, on the other. [...]

The distinction between high status and generativity is clearly manifested through collecting institutions: whereas literary periodicals or art galleries tend to act as trendsetters (or at least aspire to act this way) in the field of actual cultural production; anthologies, libraries or museums are more often responsible for sanctioning their collections and suspending them from the cultural market. (SELA-SHEFFY 2002: 147-148)

In this sense, IPAF can be considered a trendsetter, an institution setting a guideline for cultural production. It has an impact on the translation from Arabic, since publishers rely on this list of titles for their choice. It also legitimizes some emerging literary trends (thrillers, dystopic, historical and detective novels), which are gaining a growing interest in area studies and world literature studies.

As a trendsetter, IPAF contributes to canonizing the contemporary Arabic novel on a global scale. The selected novels experience a new circulation, reception, and canonization among primarily English-speaking reading publics, but also across the MENA region, as noted by MCMANUS (2016: 236) in her study of IPAF as a node producing a contingent in-

tersection between the national and world literary fields.³ In relation to the canon, McManus's concept of the node is similar to WINKO's concept of the invisible hand:

Prizes are nodes that bring together diverse actors concerned with literature, including journalists, publishers, writers, and critics; they make overt the imbrication of literature in economies of exchange and reproduction; and they assert, by selecting and celebrating texts, commonalities between genres and texts. Cultural fields and audiences are invoked, as consumers and critics participate in the consecration of the work that 'best' represents a community or standards. (MCMANUS 2016: 218)

Despite some inevitable critiques that nevertheless confirm the prize's status as an arbiter of literary value,⁴ no winner has so far rejected an IPAF award, unlike it has happened with other national and regional prizes. McManus explains that the widespread acceptance of IPAF's authority to negotiate the Arabic novel's entrance into a wider canon is due to its deterritorialization, from the local to the global dimension, skipping the national one, both in terms of transparency and marketing (MCMANUS 2016: 221-225). This deterritorialization is granted by the prize's partnership with the Booker Prize Foundation that has been awarding the Man Booker Prize since 1968, contributing to the canonization of the post-colonial Anglophone novel. Issues such as translation and the marketability of deterritorialized places and intellectuals are discussed in the analysis of the videos.

2.2 The videos

Once the selection is done, it is communicated through the digital media, such as IPAF website and videos. The website provides the novel's synopsis, the author's biography, and some interviews: mentioning other novels by the same writers and other prizes he/she has received confirms his/her positive critical recognition, while the interviews reinforce his/her performative role as intellectual. Similarly, the videos present both the selected novel and the writer to increase identification.

Since 2012, IPAF has released a video for each shortlisted author on VIMEO. The corpus analyzed here consists of forty-eight videos starring six shortlisted writers per eight editions (2012-2019). They are listed at the end of this paper by year in order of appearance; the writers' names and the novels' titles in English are taken from the IPAF website. The director of all videos is Khéridine Mabrouk-Shaaman, while the executive producer is Dora Mabrouk; all of them have English subtitles, with the translator's name (Rania Alqass Collings) appearing since the 2014 edition.⁵ Each video is about three minutes long (the short-

³ I would like to thank Anna Ziajka STANTON (Pennsylvania State University) for suggesting me this paper. – For the study of prizes from a sociological perspective, see BROUILLETTE 2007 and ENGLISH 2005.

⁴ Among these critiques, MCMANUS mentions favoring easily readable novels over experimental ones, male over female writers, and I would add Levantine over North African authors. For the geographical distribution of the longlisted authors, it is possible to look at the statistics released by Stephan GUTH (University of Oslo) at <https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/people/aca/middle-east-studies/tenured/guthst/ipaf_oversikt.pdf>: as of Feb. 2020, on the longlists there were (country code, number of longlisted works): ALG 13, EG 35, ERI 1, IRQ 22, JOR 10 (incl. some PAL), KU 6, LEB 28, LIB 4, MOR 16, PAL 12, SAU 11, SUD 7, SYR 20, TUN 5, UAE 1, YEM 3.

⁵ The 2012 video does not mention any translator, while the 2013 video mentions Amira Abd El-Khalek for the film transcription.

est is 2:33, the longest is 3:39). What is particularly relevant in terms of book promotion is that comments below the videos are disabled.⁶

In each video the author answers some questions (which are not recorded) about the novel and the craft of writing and reads one or two quotations, all of which is accompanied by cinematic elements (plot, music, setting). The next paragraphs examine the representation of the space, image of the intellectual, and type of language to connect the visual book-promotion with some long-lasting issues in canonizing the literary production.

2.3 Local setting or deterritorialization?

The setting of most videos, especially in the first editions, includes iconic places for the representation of cultural life: the writers sit in a café, walk in the streets, and talk in a bookstore or their office. Over the following editions, instead, the setting recreates more closely the novel's plot. For instance, Aḥmad al-Madīnī's novel *Mamarr al-ṣafṣāf* / *Willow Alley* follows the building of a new neighborhood, with tensions between old and new residents, including stray dogs; the video (2015.4) shows the construction sites near the sea starring both the writer and a dog.⁷ Similarly, the video of *Hāris al-mawtā* / *Guard of the Dead* by Jūrj Yaraq (2016.2) is set in an obituary, while *Nūmīdiyā* / *Numedia* by Tāriq Bakārī (2016.1) is set in a berber village in the mountains. The clip of *Fī ghurfat al-'ankabūt* / *In the Spider's Room* by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Nabī (2017.1) reproduces the novel's feeling of being imprisoned in a suffocating room, while freedom is found in writing and the city, bursting with nightlife and yet conveying a sense of loneliness.

Cafés give a positive dynamic image of the contemporary Arab culture in these videos. While the monuments and narrow alleys recall the urban and cultural heritage, the café suggests openness through the paintings hanging on the walls and modern Oriental-style furniture recalling the local craftwork. If the writer lives abroad, the café still evokes the Arab culture through the Turkish coffee and calligraphy decorating the walls. A hint of the Western city where the video is recorded is given through the street signs and placards on the public transport.

While the city as a whole is a source of inspiration, the street in particular expresses a sense of belonging and suggests that the intellectual lives alongside the ordinary people. Indeed, the street with its commercial alleys, skyscrapers, lights, and traffic opens a window on everyday life in the Arab countries for the viewer. It is a key element especially in videos about novels dealing with the 2011 uprisings (see below, 2.4. Which image for Arab writers?). Moreover, the street is the only protagonist of the video of 'Āṭif Abū Sayf's *Ḥayāh mu'allāqa* / *A Suspended Life* (2015.5), which does not include any interview but only quotations from the novel accompanied by footage on the streets in Palestine, showing children and posters of martyrs (which are central in the book's plot). As reported in the

⁶ The same videos are posted on IPAF Facebook page with the possibility of leaving a comment, yet this rarely happens.

⁷ VIVIANI (2019) employs the IPAF shortlist as a criterion to select some contemporary Moroccan novels analyzed in her paper. Her thematic and stylistic analysis remarks how fiction expresses some recent changes in the Moroccan society and literary canon. Space representation is a key feature in the selected novels, which allows to tackle housing policies, imprisonment, and the Amazigh issue.

video credits, this footage is taken from *Gaza-strophe*, a film by Samir Abdallah & Khérédine Mabrouk (2011).

The setting of some videos highlights the power of literature to document history and engage with memory. For example, Sinān Anṭūn (2013.2) visiting the Mesopotamian wing of an archeological museum relates contemporary Iraqi history to the author's own displacement and exile in his novels. Similarly, Najwā Bin Shatwān (2017.5) walks along some Roman ruins, since she currently lives in Italy and her novel mentions Italian colonialism in Libya. To visually express the link between history and literature, Ilyās Khūrī (2017.3) enters the building of the Institute of Palestine Studies and Rabī al-Madhūn (2016.6) visits a photo exhibition about Palestine, while additional footage in black and white records the 1948 *Nakba*. Similarly, Sa'd Muḥammad Raḥīm's talk (2017.4) includes a few documentary clips about the fall of Saddam Hussein (Ṣaddām Ḥusayn).

2.4 Which image for Arab writers?

IPAF videos present Arab authors as a key factor in the novels' success. They interact with the plot and almost act with their own characters. This visual strategy has increased since the 2016 edition and is reinforced by the black and white clips in the 2018 edition. An interesting case is that of the Kuwaiti author Ismā'īl Fahd Ismā'īl interacting with the actress of the play based on his own novel *al-Sabīliyyāt* (2017.2; the play *Al-Sabiliat* is mentioned in the video credits).

The authors focus more on the novels' plots and themes, rather than style. Nevertheless, they discuss the meaning of writing, its interplay with society, and their sources of inspiration. Referring to these sources, the writers mention their own readings and remark the reader's role in giving a meaning to literature. In this respect, the Lebanese Rabī Jābir, author of *Drūz Bilghrād / The Druze of Belgrade*, describes himself as a strong reader of world literature:

I write in Arabic / However, I see myself as more of a reader than a writer / Regardless of the fact that I have written 17 or 18 novels / You may write one novel in your life and this might be sufficient / For me reading, similarly to writing, is almost my only way to make sure that I exist / and for me to feel psychologically balanced / [pause; other setting] / We live amongst 7 billion other lives / However, how many of those lives really influence us / Influence our character, the way we look at the world, and our feelings / Like the influence of Anna Karenina or Ursula Buendia / Or Lord Jim or Lady Macbeth. (2012.5: 12:12-13:08, English subtitles)⁸

Besides world literature, their sources of inspiration include modern Arabic literature (Aḥmad Shawqī, Najīb Maḥfūz, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Kātib Yāsīn), poetry (ranging from al-Mutanabbī to Maḥmūd Darwīsh),⁹ non-fictional writings (dictionaries, manuscripts, travel writing), popular songs, and storytelling.

⁸ In this and the subsequent quotations from the videos, I cite the official English subtitles; any variation from the subtitles and the description of non-verbal elements of the video is indicated in square brackets.

⁹ Darwīsh is mentioned by Sinān ANṬŪN (2013.2), who has translated his poetry from Arabic into English.

Despite the great variety of topics, all writers discuss the interplay between the task of writing, the representation of Arab societies, and their own life trajectory. Common trends are exile and migration, identity and memory, violence and crime. The first editions focus more on the exilic condition of many authors,¹⁰ certainly due to a biographic data, but also to a representational strategy, which is less developed in the following editions. For instance, In‘ām Kachajī (2014.4) challenges the idea of exile by saying that homeland never abandons her and her characters, since a song or a picture are enough to reinforce the feeling of belonging. Furthermore, al-Ḥabīb al-Sālimī (2012.4) claims that he would not be able to write fiction in French and mentions some masters who wrote in Arabic even if they lived abroad, such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, Suhayl Idrīs, and al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ.

While exile has its own visual representation, Gulf novels are canonized as part of an emerging literature produced by young writers. In 2013 the Kuwaiti Sa‘ūd al-San‘ūsī (2013.1) was the winner and the Saudi Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān (2013.3) was shortlisted. They are both emerging writers and, unlike their more experienced counterparts, they are portrayed in a traditional way: they are in an enclosed setting (bookstore or office), wear traditional clothes and are surrounded by symbols of Gulf culture, such as an Arabic coffee maker, dates, and a rosary. They say they have made a journey in their own society or abroad to write their novels; this quest for knowledge is visually rendered through them going outside, experiencing the life bustle and changing their clothes, at least in al-San‘ūsī’s case. The latter establishes a parallelism between himself and his character through a quotation:

I am not able to introduce myself / as I am a blend of a persona from the multiple books I have read over the years / [pause; book title; other setting; book quotation] My name is J O S E / it is written like this / We pronounce it in Filipino as in English: “Hose” / and in Arabic and Spanish it becomes “Khoze” / and in Portuguese—though using the same letters—it is pronounced “Jose” / On the other hand, here, in Kuwait / I have no connection with any of these names as here I am known as / Issa. (2013.1: 00:20 – 01:00, English subtitles)

This kind of naïve representation changes when Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān wins IPAF in 2017 with a fictional biography of the great sufi thinker Ibn ‘Arabī. In this clip (2017.6), ‘Alwān is a mature writer living abroad who rediscovers his cultural legacy and tries to fill a gap in history writing. Like his novel’s protagonist, his journey makes him wiser and he expresses himself through quotations and maxims.¹¹

Completing this overview of the thematic nodes in relation to the writers’ role, it is worth mentioning that some videos engage with the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia

¹⁰ Exile and migration are tackled in several novels by writers living in Arab and non-Arab countries alike.

¹¹ Among Gulf writers who won the IPAF are the Saudi ‘Abduh Khāl (2010) and Rajā’ ‘Ālim (co-winner in 2011), but no videos were released for those editions. The visual representation of al-San‘ūsī and Ḥasan ‘Alwān, which differs from that of the more established Kuwaiti writer Ismā‘īl Fahd Ismā‘īl, suggests a canonization based on the biological paradigm young countries/young literature/young characters. It would be interesting to examine the videos of writers who have been shortlisted more than once to see whether there is an evolution in their representation and ask them about the interaction with the producers.

and partly with the war in Syria. The first technique for visualizing these topics consists of inserting references to these events in the background: the paintings in the video about the Tunisian novelist Ḥusayn al-Wād (2013.6), TV footage of the demonstrations in the video starring the Egyptian Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā (2013.5), who covered the protests and their aftermath as a journalist, and two writings on the wall in the video featuring the Egyptian Aḥmad Murād (2014.1).¹² The second technique consists of the writer himself wondering about the ability of fiction to explore this recent socio-political change. For example, the Tunisian Shukrī al-Mabkhūt (2015.2) presents his novel *al-Ṭalyānī / The Italian* as the history of his own generation, which demanded rights and freedom under the presidency of Bourguiba (Būrqība) and Ben Ali (Bin ʿAlī). The video is set at university, linking the novel's engagement with the writer's profession as an academic; then the university protests of the past take to the streets of today's Tunisia and al-Mabkhūt cuts across the police holding a book in his hands. A similar narrative is developed in the video of *ʿUṭārid / Mercury* by the Egyptian Muḥammad Rabī (2016.3): he wonders about the possibility of writing the revolution, then talks about his novel in a setting similar to the fictional one, while revolutionary slogans can be heard when he opens the window or reads alone in the street.

2.5 Which language does the Arabic novel speak?

Despite the authors' accents, IPAF videos confirm the paradigm of MSA (Modern Standard Arabic) being the most suitable variety for literature and public speech. This overshadows the rich linguistic variation in the selected novels and contemporary Arabic fiction in general. Nevertheless, these videos may be a stimulating pedagogical tool in courses of Arabic language and literature for the lexical acquisition, variety of accents, and local settings. Furthermore, highlighting the connection between educational institutions and literary canonization, it is worth mentioning that al-Sanʿūsī's novel *Sāq al-bāmbū (The Bamboo Stalk)*—awarded in 2013—has been adapted into an abridged edition for students of Arabic (FAMILIAR and ASSAF 2016).¹³

Out of forty-eight videos, only five authors speak in a formal register of their regional colloquial Arabic, recognizable by the pronunciation and morphological elements (especially verbs and relative pronouns), while the vocabulary and syntax are close to MSA. In the Egyptian context, this is exemplified by ʿIzz al-Dīn Shukrī Fushayr (2012.6) talking mainly in ECA (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic) and tending towards MSA only at the end of the video, and by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Nabī (2017.1), who interrupts his talk in ECA with a long quote in MSA. In the Levantine context, it is Khālīd Khalīfa (2014.2), Dīma Wannūs (2018.1), and Hudā Barakāt (2019.2) who employ LCA (Levantine Colloquial Arabic). Maghrebi writers speak formally, with little inflection in their pronunciation and no contamination from other languages spoken in this region. Only Ḥusayn al-Wād uses a French expression and then reformulates it in Arabic:

¹² These writings are “*irḥal*” (go away! leave!), an imperative form addressed to the regime, and the English acronym “acab”.

¹³ Laila Familiar, the editor of this version, had previously edited the abridged version of one of Hudā Barakāt's novels (FAMILIAR and BARAKAT 2013).

Fi l-wāqī' lā yūjad wazīr bi-l-dhāt, innamā huwa, kayfa naqūl bi-l-'arabiyya, ya'nī,
c'est le statut de ministre, le statut hādḥā mukawwan mushtaq min 'iddat shakhṣiyyāt

In fact, he is not a minister as such / he is more like, / how do you say... / "*Le statut de ministre*" / [This *statut* is composed] of multiple personalities (2013.6: 11:15-11:27, my transcription of the original Arabic and English subtitles).

Another interesting point for the representation of linguistic variation are the quotations, certainly relevant for the book's presentation and also a mechanism for canonizing the literary language. For example, Ibrāhīm 'Isā speaks in MSA with Egyptian accent, then he reads a passage in MSA and a passage in ECA. The latter is probably due to the writer quoting by heart or quoting a dialogue:¹⁴

The character, Sheikh Hatim Shinawi, presents a summary to *Our Master...* / "When you create a religious programme / and prepare a religious lecture / you attempt to satisfy your audience, / the sponsors, / the producers, / the advertisers, / and the director... / and after all that, if you are able to please God / then all is good." (2013.5: 14:42-15:08, English subtitles)

3. Egyptian TV programs

3.1 'An al-kitāba wa-ahlihā.. A literary community

While IPAF videos give international visibility to the selected Arabic novels, cultural TV programs have a national or pan-Arab audience in mind. Moreover, they have less time constraints since they develop over several episodes or seasons and require a stronger interaction between the interviewer and the host. Therefore, studying a different type of book-related videos may reveal other mechanisms in the canon formation.

The TV programs examined here are hosted by 'Umar Ṭāhir and Bilāl Faḍl, two Egyptian journalists, scriptwriters, and authors of fiction and non-fiction who develop in all these fields their interest for Egyptian culture embodied both by famous personalities and collective fruition. Originally aired by an Egyptian channel (Dreams TV 2010-2011), '*Aṣṣūr al-kutub* by Faḍl is produced by the pan-Arab network Al Araby TV (2015-2019), which makes the episodes available on its website and a Youtube page counting 51.200 followers. '*Waṣafū lī al-ṣabr* by Ṭāhir consists of nine episodes, approximately 45 minutes long, aired every Friday at 8 p.m. from March till May 2018 on the Egyptian TeN TV and now available on Youtube. To further exemplify Ṭāhir's popularity with the audience and his choice of iconic figures, in February 2020 he conducted an interview with the music star Muḥammad Munīr, known as The King, available on Youtube with English subtitles and sponsored by Redbull.

Looking at these TV hosts from the angle of their position in the literary field, both of them became famous with the rise of satiric writing in Egypt in the 2000s; after consolidating their success, as Jacquemond notes, they have been moving away from satiric writing

¹⁴ Other authors quoting a dialogue in Colloquial Arabic are Rab'ī al-Madhūn (2016.6) and Muḥammad Rab'ī (2016.3); the latter reads a passage in MSA including political slogans chanted in ECA.

and have been acting as “cultural mediators in a way typical of Egyptian intellectuals, that is, digging on the country’s modern political or cultural history and offering their readers more or less original insights on events and personalities that marked the history of modern Egypt, often with a lesson to draw for the present day” (JACQUEMOND 2016: 361).

To examine how they act as cultural mediators on the screen, this section examines three episodes about Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962-2018) and his popularity with the audience, an issue concerning the two hosts as well. Unlike other video interviews of Tawfīq, the three selected episodes belong to TV programs devoted exclusively to the discussion of books and literature. Coming from a scientific professional background, Tawfīq is considered the most successful contemporary Arab writer of science-fiction (*al-khayāl al-‘ilmī*), detective stories (*al-adab al-būlisī al-jasūsī*) and horror stories (*adab al-ru‘b*). His book series have been popular since the 1990s, especially among young readers, the same audience that acclaimed his novel *Yūtūbiyā* (2008) especially for its fictional representation of the grim social atmosphere they lived in. Tawfīq’s canonization as the father of young-adult fiction is reinforced by the tribute received after his untimely death and a Netflix series based on his *Mā warā’a l-ṭabī’a* (Paranormal, lit. metaphysics) announced lately.

Since science-fiction is still considered a popular genre in Arabic literature (BARBARO 2013, CAMPBELL 2018), if not paraliterature, these TV episodes are suitable to look at some mechanisms in a yet non-canonized field. As Sela-Sheffy explains:

The question is what canonizers do, and how they do it. As various studies have shown, the work of canonization includes the construction of a particular *theory* and a *history* of the field [...] as well as establishing certain rituals, such as celebrating events or pilgrimage, and so on. All these sustain the formation of solid stocks of models and their consecration as indispensable assets of the relevant fields.

In each particular case, however, the canonizers’ strategies oscillate between two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand they consolidate and sanction an existing repertoire (sometimes marking a phase of socio-cultural stagnation); on the other hand, they prefigure a new repertoire and sanction it from the outset (usually indicating a deliberate ambition at revolutionizing a given field) (SELA-SHEFFY 2002: 153).

The participation of writers, journalists, and publishers in these TV shows is an attempt to give visibility to their literary community: by discussing reading practices and crafting a history of popular literature through its masterpieces, they reinforce a community of writers and readers across multiple generations. As BACKE (2015: 2) remarks, “these masterpieces are not only exemplary in their artistic quality but are in complex ways also representative of more general values connected to or even forming a group identity”.

3.2 A canon of popular literature

The intellectual community is at the core of Ṭāhir’s program, with nine episodes about the craft of writing and the Egyptian literary system. Many visual elements contribute to define a national canon which is close to the people and strongly related to the past, almost nostalgic: the program’s title refers to a song performed by Umm Kulthūm and the theme song

features black and white pictures of famous Egyptian writers such as Najīb Maḥfūz, Amal Dunqul, Ṣalāḥ Jāḥīn, and Aḥmad Fu'ād Nijm. To increase the familiarity with the audience, the TV host walks in the streets wearing casual clothes and wondering about literature in a calm voice, while he observes everyday life in the historical neighborhoods. The program's reviews appreciate these strategies because they break the schemes of cultural programs and give a chance to look behind the scenes; the interaction with the guests sounds like a dialogue rather than a Q&A and is considered "entertaining and useful" (YÜSUF 2018). In contrast, Faḍl chooses a more conventional setting, sitting at a desk in front of his guest. At the end of the episode, there is a clip by the Egyptian poet and critic Sha'bān Yūsuf, recorded in another traditionally furnished setting, a sort of literary salon. These apparently distant choices reinforce the canonical image of the intellectual who learns both from the books and the streets, as if he was the linking chain between the audience and the more experienced guests.

In this community of Egyptian intellectuals, both TV hosts choose Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq as an expert of popularity with the audience. This is explicit in ṬĀHIR (2018), since each episode features a representative of a certain aspect of the book market: Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm gives a private lesson about writing, Ibrāhīm 'Isā explores the role of the reader, Karam Yūsuf talks about her experience as a publisher. The informal conversation, which shows a certain feeling between the two writers, takes place in a modern bookstore. FADL (2011), instead, invites Tawfīq for his understanding of the youth, after the Tunisian revolution and before the start of the Egyptian uprising; the conversation soon moves from the social issues to his collections of articles and his experience as a successful writer. The atmosphere is less intimate, but Faḍl's admiration is clear. Both TV hosts treat their guest as a master, a trendsetter in his field, but at the same time make him accessible to the audience through the use of ECA and questions about his personal experience.

As regards the mechanisms of canonization, Ṭāhir's questions aim at defining some concepts related to popularity, such as *shuhra* (popularity), *najāḥ* (success) and *nufūmiyya* (stardom, fame). Tawfīq resorts to common sense when talking about the writer's ambition, the weight of popularity, and the risk of a sudden fall. Some interesting remarks come from his own experience in the book market: his popularity was gradual and exploded after his tenth book; he admits that he followed the market's requests at the beginning of his career, being inspired by socio-realist short stories, but then focused on his passion for detective and horror stories. The most interesting part is when he mentions other popular writers and reading practices. For example, bestsellers are mentioned in both interviews. In this respect, Tawfīq says that popularity does not mean success and bestsellers do not mean quality, but 'Alā' al-Aswānī (b. 1957) combined both and was able to change the reading habits of the young people, who finally enjoyed reading and were not ashamed of carrying a book. This illustrates his inclusive definition of literature and the key role attributed to the readership. Tawfīq also discusses the success of one of his *protégés*, Aḥmad Murād (b. 1978), then makes a list of his favorite readings, and mentions non-famous writers known for famous books and vice-versa. It is also remarked that at the beginning of his career he had adapted (*tabṣīṭ*) thrillers and other bestsellers from English into Arabic.

Being more recent, Ṭāhir's episode also discusses the literary prizes such as IPAF and *Jā'izat Sharqa*, that was awarded to Tawfīq; it also tackles popularity through the social

media and book signing. Faḍl, instead, gives more attention to the review of his guest's recent publications. He defines them as satirical writings that talk about politics and society in a direct entertaining way; he ascribes this quality to Tawfīq and to this popular literary genre that he also practices.

The last episode (FAḌL 2018) was released some weeks after Tawfīq's death.¹⁵ Like written obituaries (HAMĀM 2018), it reconstructs his career mentioning his book series and recent novels, published after the successful *Yūtūbiyā*. It highlights his influence on young readers and writers, leading to the label of "godfather" (*ʿarrāb*), a definition that the author often dismissed. Faḍl recommends this writer for his ability to depict what his generation actually lived and suggests passing this legacy to the younger generation for its combination of entertainment and education. The latter remark sounds like the mantra of the Egyptian literary canon.

4. Conclusions

In the age of the shift from the paper to the digital, the literary system renews its mechanisms for canonizing the Arabic novel. Some traditional institutions like written reviews, university programs, anthologies, and cinema maintain a central role. Others, like translations and literary prizes, operate on the global dimension of the book market. Finally, the interplay between readers and writers is stronger and both groups can have an active role in promotion through the digital content. The video is a channel of promotion not merely for sales rates, but also to shape a certain image of the intellectual community and Arabic literature.

IPAF videos and the three TV episodes examined in this paper are different in many ways: in their length, language, setting, and role of the interviewer. The choice of the language clearly marks their target. IPAF videos are mainly in MSA with English subtitles, while the TV episodes featuring or devoted to Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq are in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic. The former probably respond to the ideological stance of the prize, which wants to promote good quality Arabic literature, thus presented in the most eloquent linguistic variety. Their targets are academics, international publishers, and Arab publishers. The latter aim at promoting a type of literature that is close to the audience, but at the same time able to negotiate its status within the national arena. Their targets are Egyptian readers and intellectuals.

Despite these differences, both types of videos portray Arabic literature as vital, multifaceted, and combining good quality with readability. In this respect, they both contribute to recently canonized or yet not-canonized fields. IPAF videos promote a canon of very recent novels established by a literary prize and circulated through translation. The focus is on the writers' ability to talk about their complex societies, with common themes like exile, memory, and violence as well as local culture across the Arab world. The au-

¹⁵ ṬĀHIR 2018 and FAḌL 2018 contribute to the tribute paid to Tawfīq after his death, since they are respectively his last appearance on the screen and a tribute soon after his death. ṬĀHIR 2018 is the most viewed episode in the series with 112.576 views as against an average of 10.000 views for the other episodes (Youtube, TeN TV, *Waṣafū lī al-ṣabr*).

thors, surrounded by both modern artifacts and symbols of the cultural heritage, are contemporary intellectuals who use effective communicative tools. Innovations in style and genre are not presented as deviations from the canon, rather they are appreciated through the captivating staging of the plot; these innovations mark some literary trends emerging from the comparative nature of these video series. To sum up, IPAF videos are business cards for the Arab authors and their publishers as well as snapshots of the modern urban Arab societies.

The TV shows by Bilāl Faḍl and ‘Umar Ṭāhir contribute to canonizing popular genres like science-fiction, horror stories, and thrillers. For this purpose, they choose the most representative Egyptian writer in this field and debate with him the recipe to combine good quality and popularity. At a first glance, Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq is presented as an exception: his success was the result of his dedication to knowledge and the favorable circumstances of meeting the taste of a whole generation of readers. What happens when this generation is superseded by others? At a second glance, Tawfīq and his audience embody the changes in the Egyptian book market, such as overcoming the dichotomy between high/low literature with different genres achieving popularity and (at least partial) critical recognition. This image is constructed by inserting this emerging writing into the traditional canon: Ṭāhir establishes his canon with his choice of guests and presents himself as an intellectual coming from the street; Faḍl, instead, gains credibility as an eager reader who welcomes his guests in his own office. In doing so, they both negotiate their standing as writers and critics.

Further studies may address the international and regional literary prizes from other perspectives as well as the visual strategies of other book-related TV shows hosted by writers (such as Yāsīn ‘Adnān in Morocco and Dīma Wannūs on pan-Arab networks) cutting across the local and international dimension.

On a final note, the videos examined here embody the deterritorialization theorized by McManus, going directly from the local to the global dimension, eschewing the national one. This kind of promotion and canonization does not rely on the national institutions, but rather on translation into other languages and media channels. What unites the writers, despite their national backgrounds and critical recognition, is the urban environment and their ability to talk about their society for the local and global audience. This visual anthologization of contemporary Arabic fiction might also affect the teaching of literary history, paying even more attention to what surrounds the text and to aural sources besides written ones.

List of IPAF videos

2012

- 1) Bashīr Muftī, *Dumyat al-nār* / Bachir Mefti, *Toy of Fire*
- 2) Nāṣir ‘Irāq, *al-‘Āṭil* / Nasser Iraq, *The Unemployed*
- 3) Jabbūr al-Duwayhī, *Sharīd al-manāzil* / Jabbour Douaih, *The Vagrant*
- 4) al-Ḥabīb al-Sālimī, *Nisā’ al-Basātīn* / Habib Selmi, *The Women of al-Basatin*
- 5) Rabī’ Jābir, *Drūz Bilghrād* / Rabee Jaber, *The Druze of Belgrade*
- 6) ‘Izz al-Dīn Shukrī Fushayr, *‘Ināq ‘inda Jisr Brūklīn* / Ezzedine Choukri Fishere, *Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge*

2013

- 1) Sa‘ūd al-San‘ūsī, *Sāq al-bāmbū* / Saud Alsanousi, *The Bamboo Stalk*
- 2) Sinān Anṭūn, *Yā Maryam* / Sinan Antoon, *Hail Mary*
- 3) Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān, *al-Qundus* / Mohammed Hasan Alwan, *The Beaver*
- 4) Janā al-Ḥasan, *Anā, hiya wa-l-ukhrayāt* / Jana Elhassan, *Me, She and the Other Women*
- 5) Ibrāhīm ‘Īsā, *Mawlānā* / Ibrahim Issa, *Our Master*
- 6) Ḥusayn al-Wād, *Sa‘ādatuhu al-sayyid al-wazīr* / Hussein al-Wad, *His Excellency the Minister*

2014

- 1) Aḥmad Murād, *al-Fīl al-azraq* / Ahmed Mourad, *The Blue Elephant*
- 2) Khālīd Khalīfa, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābikh hādhihi l-madīna* / Khaled Khalifa, *No Knives in this City's Kitchens*
- 3) ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Lahbībī, *Taghrībat al-‘Abdī al-mashhūr bi-walad al-Ḥamriyya* / Abdelrahim Lahbib, *The Journeys of ‘Abdi, known as Son of Hamriya*
- 4) In‘ām Kachajī, *Ṭashshārī* / Inaam Kachachi, *Tashari*
- 5) Yūsuf Fāḍil, *Ṭā’ir azraq nadir yuḥalliq ma’ī* / Youssef Fadel, *A Rare Blue Bird that Flies with Me*
- 6) Aḥmad Sa‘dāwī, *Frānkinshṭāyn fī Baghdād* / Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

2015

- 1) Ḥammūr Ziyāda, *Shawq al-darwīsh* / Hammour Ziada, *The Longing of the Dervish*
- 2) Shukrī al-Mabkhūt, *al-Ṭalyānī* / Shukri Mabkhout, *The Italian*
- 3) Līnā Huyān al-Ḥasan, *Almās wa-nisā’* / Lina Huyan Elhassan, *Diamonds and Women*
- 4) Aḥmad al-Madīnī, *Mamarr al-ṣafṣāf* / Ahmed al-Madeeni, *Willow Alley*
- 5) ‘Āṭif Abū Sayf, *Ḥayāh mu‘allaqa* / Atef Abu Saif, *A Suspended Life*
- 6) Janā al-Ḥasan, *Ṭābiq 99* / Jana Elhassan, *Floor 99*

2016

- 1) Tāriq Bakārī, *Nūmīdiyyā* / Tareq Bakari, *Numedia*
- 2) Jūrj Yaraq, *Ḥāris al-mawtā* / George Yaraq, *Guard of the Dead*
- 3) Muḥammad Rabī, *Uḡārid* / Mohamed Rabie, *Mercury*
- 4) Maḥmūd Shukayr, *Madīḥ li-nisā' al-ā'ila* / Mahmoud Shukair, *Praise for the Women of the Family*
- 5) Shahlā al-ʿUjaylī, *Samā' qarība min baytinā* / Shahla Ujayli, *A Sky Close to Our House*
- 6) Rabī al-Madhūn, *Maṣā'ir: Kūnshirtū al-Hūlūkawst wa-l-nakba* / Rabai al-Madhoun, *Destinies: Concerto of the Holocaust and the Nakba*

2017

- 1) Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Nabī, *Fī ghurfat al-ʿankabūt* / Mohammed Abdel Nabi, *In the Spider's Room*
- 2) Ismāʿīl Fahd Ismāʿīl, *al-Sabīliyyāt* / Ismail Fahd Ismail, *Al-Sabiliat*
- 3) Ilyās Khūrī, *Awlād al-ghītū: Ismī Adam* / Elias Khoury, *Children of the Ghetto: My name is Adam*
- 4) Saʿd Muḥammad Raḥīm, *Maqtal bāʿi al-kutub* / Saad Mohammed Raheem, *The Bookseller's Murder*
- 5) Najwā Bin Shatwān, *Zarāyib al-ʿabīd* / Najwa Binshatwan, *The Slave Pens*
- 6) Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAlwān, *Mawt ṣaghīr* / Mohammed Hasan Alwan, *A Small Death*

2018

- 1) Dīma Wannūs, *al-Khāʾifūn* / Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones*
- 2) ʿAzīz Muḥammad, *al-Ḥāla al-ḥarija li-l-madʿūw "Ka"* / Aziz Mohammed, *The Critical Case of "K"*
- 3) Shahd al-Rāwī, *Sāʿat Baghdad* / Shahad Al Rawi, *The Baghdad Clock*
- 4) Amīr Tāj al-Sirr, *Zuhūr taʿkuluhā al-nār* / Amir Tag Elsir, *Flowers in Flames*
- 5) Ibrāhīm Naṣr Allāh, *Ḥarb al-kalb al-thāniyya* / Ibrahim Nasrallah, *The Second War of the Dog*
- 6) Walīd al-Shurafā, *Wārith al-shawāhid* / Walid Shurafa, *Heir of the Tombstones*

2019

- 1) Kafā al-Zuʿbī, *Shams bayḍā' bārīda* / Kafa Al-Zou'bi, *Cold White Sun*
- 2) Hudā Barakāt, *Barīd al-layl* / Hoda Barakat, *The Night Mail*
- 3) Shahlā al-ʿUjaylī, *Ṣayf maʿa l-ʿaduww* / Shahla Ujayli, *Summer With the Enemy*
- 4) Inʿām Kachajī, *al-Nabīdha* / Inaam Kachachi, *The Outcast*
- 5) Muḥammad al-Maʿzūz, *Bi-ayy dhanb raḥalat?* / Mohammed al-Maazuz, *What Sin Caused Her to Die?*
- 6) ʿĀdil ʿIṣmat, *al-Waṣāyā* / Adel Esmat, *The Commandments*

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