

La rivista di Arablit

semestrale di letteratura e cultura araba moderna e contemporanea

Anno XV, numero 30, dicembre 2025



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A POETIC REVIVAL: MULTIMODAL AND INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB POP CULTURE

ILENIA LICITRA*

Popular culture encompasses a wide range of artistic and literary works that are characterised by their widespread societal appeal and engagement with contemporary cultural and social trends. It includes various forms of media which are consumed by a large segment of the population. These cultural products often reflect and influence the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and practices within a society at a given time. In recent years, the Arab world has experienced a revived interest in its classical literary heritage, especially through the lens of contemporary artistic and media practices. Alongside this cultural reawakening, traditional expressive forms are being recontextualised to engage contemporary audiences. One particularly striking aspect of this revival is the integration of classical Arabic poetry into modern communicative frameworks, often employing multimodal strategies that bridge diverse semiotic resources and media. The present paper explores how several contemporary Arab pop culture products – namely, a graphic novel anthology, a film, and a talent show – employ multimodal techniques to establish these intertextual dialogues. By examining the revival of traditional poetry within these specific contexts, the study aims to show how the fusion of old and new not only preserves but also redefines cultural heritage, engaging a new generation in the ongoing dialogue between the past and the present.

Multimodality and Intermediality in Contemporary Literature and Pop Culture: A Theoretical Framework

Pop culture encompasses a diverse array of artistic and literary works that are defined by their broad societal appeal and engagement with contemporary cultural and societal trends¹. In the last decades, these works have in-

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¹ In this essay, the concept of pop culture will be understood as incorporating both the everyday practices that shape the lived experience of a community, and the mediated forms of cultural expression through which meaning is produced and circulated. It thus refers to a domain in which ordinary social practices and mass-distributed cultural texts intersect, articulating and reflecting contemporary collective life. For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see J. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (8th ed.), Routledge, London-New York 2018, pp. 1-16.

creasingly embraced multimodality² and intermediality³, integrating multiple semiotic modes – such as written language, image, speech, music, and gesture – across diverse media platforms, in order to create complex and immersive experiences. This paper explores several products of contemporary Arabic pop culture⁴, in order to observe different communication strategies employed in organizing multimodal and multimedia content across different media, forms and genres. Focusing on the role of literary references, and precisely on the incorporation of classical and pre-modern Arabic poetry, I will analyse the interplay between verbal and visual languages, sound and gestures (when present), and spatial organization, exploring how they interact and shape one another.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary literature and pop culture, the concept of multimodality has emerged as a central framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through the convergence of different modes of communication⁵. As Bateman observed, multimodality entails the coordinated use of multiple semiotic modes, moving beyond de-

² M. Siefkes, *How Semiotic Modes Work Together in Multimodal Texts: Defining and Representing Intermodal Relations*, in “10plus1 – Living Linguistics”, 1 (2015), pp. 113-131; G. Kress, *Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Routledge, London-New York 2010, pp. 54-78.

³ L. Elleström, *The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations*, in Id. (ed.), *Beyond Media Borders: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*, vol. 1, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2020, pp. 5, 27-39; W.J.T. Mitchell, *There are no visual media*, in “Journal of Visual Culture”, 4 (2005), pp. 257-266.

⁴ In recent decades, the pop culture of Arab countries has become the focus of extensive scholarly investigation, examining its forms, media dynamics, social dimensions, and mechanisms of diffusion and appropriation. A broad and detailed panorama of contemporary Arab popular culture – from cinema to television, from music to popular religion – has been provided by Andrew Hammond (*Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics, and the Media*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2007), who explores how these phenomena contribute to the redefinition of modern Arab identity. For analyses adopting postcolonial, gender, and power perspectives on film, music, graphic novels, digital media, and consumerist phenomena, a valuable reference is Walid El Hamamsy; Mounira Soliman (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, Routledge, New York 2013. More recently, a systematic investigation of popular cultural productions in the Arabian Peninsula, addressing regional centrality, modes of production and consumption, state dynamics, and the potential for cultural hybridisation, has been undertaken in the monographic issue: F. Lagrange; C. Chaveneau; L. Assaf (eds.), *Pop Culture in the Arabian Peninsula: Societal Expressions, Commercial Issues and State Co-optations*, in “Arabian Humanities”, 18 (2023).

⁵ G. Kress; T. Van Leeuwen, *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*, Arnold Publishers, London 2001, pp. 9-11.

pendence on any single system of representation or medium⁶. According to Jovanovic, this phenomenon is not only reshaping narrative techniques but also challenging traditional boundaries between various cultural forms, including literature, film, graphic novels, video games, and social media platforms⁷.

Rooted in semiotics, multimodality embraces the notion that meaning emerges from the complex interplay of different modes. In literature, this can be seen in works that combine text with visual elements, such as typography, images, and interactive features. Indeed, the growing prevalence of multimodal practices challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic expression, encouraging both creators and audiences to engage with more dynamic, participatory, and hybrid forms of communication. As digital technologies continue to reshape how people experience and interact with stories, the role of multimodality in contemporary literature and pop culture is expected to expand, offering rich avenues for exploring how meaning, identity, and culture are conveyed in the digital era.

For instance, contemporary literary works may blend prose with visual storytelling, creating hybrid narratives that demand new modes of interpretation. Such a fusion of modalities reflects broader cultural shifts, where information is increasingly consumed in multiple formats simultaneously. A prominent example of multimodality in prose literature is the graphic novel, where the interplay between visual and verbal storytelling has redefined the boundaries of traditional narration and literary forms. Similarly, in contemporary cultural production, the influence of digital media and the internet has enabled new forms of interactive engagement, such as the emergence of fan-based content that reinterprets original works through memes, fan fiction, or multimedia remixes.

In poetry, this multimodal nature is even more pronounced. The interaction of multiple synchronous modalities proves particularly effective, as poetic texts are inherently multilayered forms of expression that weave together various semiotic devices to convey complex meanings and evoke profound emotional responses. Indeed, the rhythmic patterns and syntactical structures of a poem establish its musicality and flow, guiding the reader through its thematic landscape. At the same time, prosodic elements, such as intonation and stress, further enhance the auditory experience, adding depth and nuance to the textual content. Moreover, symbolic meanings embedded within the language invite readers to explore multiple interpretations, while

⁶ J. Bateman, *Text and image: A critical introduction to the visual/verbal divide*, Routledge, London-New York 2014, pp. 5-7; G. Kress, *Multimodality. A social semiotic approach*, cit., pp. 5-8.

⁷ D. Jovanovic, *Multimodal dialogue on social media*, in "Social Semiotics", 28, 5, (2018), pp. 683-699. On this topic see also G. Kress; T. Van Leeuwen, *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*, Routledge, Oxon-New York 2021³.

intertextual references create a dialogue with other literary works, enriching the poem's significance⁸. This confluence of elements exemplifies the multimodal nature of poetry, where the interplay of sound, structure, and meaning constructs a rich semantic tapestry that engages readers on cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic levels.

As Schirmmacher pointed out, this convergence of modes has allowed poetry to blend seamlessly with visual, auditory, and digital elements, creating hybrid works that transcend the traditional boundaries of both oral and written forms⁹. As a result, contemporary poetic experiences easily engage diverse audiences across multiple platforms, from social media to graphic novels, movies, and television shows. In graphic novels, poetry often works alongside visual storytelling to enhance narrative depth and emotional resonance, blurring the lines between literature and art. Similarly, films and TV shows have embraced poetry as a means of conveying deeper emotional and thematic layers, with directors and screenwriters incorporating poetic dialogue or voiceovers to enrich their storytelling.

With regard to the dissemination of poetry in contemporary popular culture, virtual communities also play a fundamental role. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become essential spaces where poets combine spoken word with music, visuals, and performance to create multimedia experiences that amplify the reach and impact of their work. Furthermore, multimedia poetry festivals¹⁰ have expanded the boundaries of the genre, inviting audiences to actively participate in both the creation and interpretation of poetry.

Further forms of experimentation are offered by transmedia storytelling initiatives, which enable poetry to move beyond traditional media by unfold-

⁸ R. Ceserani, *Il testo poetico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2005, pp. 83-97.

⁹ B. Schirmmacher, *The Digital Transformation of Literature: Intermediality and Poetic Experience in the Digital Artwork Evolution (2014)*, in A. López-Varela Azcárate (ed.), "Literature as an Art Form - Evolving Literary Landscape", IntechOpen 2025, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1009213> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

¹⁰ These festivals celebrate the convergence of poetry with digital platforms, fostering innovative forms of communication and transcending traditional boundaries of poetic expression, often through immersive multisensory experiences. For example, the *Poetry Film Festival* (UK) focuses on videopoetry (<https://www.movingpoems.com/poetry-film-festivals/>, last accessed 29 May 2025), while *Poetry in Motion* makes poetry more accessible by combining readings with music and multimedia projections in unconventional settings (<https://poetrysociety.org/poetry-in-motion>, last accessed 29 May 2025). Another notable example is the *International Video Poetry Festival* in Athens, which creates an open public space for contemporary visual poetry and a platform for experimentation with modern technologies (<https://filmfreeway.com/InternationalVideoPoetryFestivalAthens>, last accessed 29 May 2025).

ing across multiple platforms and creating more layered forms of engagement. A notable example is *Poetry Everywhere*, a project by the Poetry Foundation (based in Chicago), which places poems in public spaces such as bus or underground stations, and encourages readers to interact with complementary digital or social media content that provide additional layers of meaning¹¹. Poetry apps such as *Poetizer*, *RhymeZone*, and *Verses*, among others, similarly enhance interaction by allowing users to explore poetic content in a non-linear fashion, and transform the reading process into a more immersive journey through soundscapes, visuals, and other multimedia components¹².

An increasingly prominent field for such experimentation is video game storytelling, where poetry is woven into world-building and character development. Players may encounter poems in in-game texts, as spoken lines, or embedded in environmental details. In *Spiritfarer* (2020), for instance, the poem *Ode to an Axe* contributes to the emotional arc of a central character, deepening players' connection to his journey¹³. Likewise, *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013) creates a more immersive experience, where point-and-click interactions enable players to uncover fragments of poetry through exploration, seamlessly integrating poetic elements into the narrative and environment¹⁴.

Research on contemporary literary production in the Arab world has so far paid limited attention to the interaction between Arabic poetry and social networks, reflecting the relative novelty of the phenomenon. Social media have, however, democratised literary creation, allowing anyone with internet access to produce and share poetry or prose¹⁵. This has expanded readership, enabling users to engage with, circulate, and repurpose literary content, often employing a simpler and more visually oriented language than that of traditional poetry.

Arabic poetry has also adapted to the digital environment, with platforms such as YouTube playing a central role in the dissemination of literary works. As De Blasio recently pointed out, a variety of websites facilitate the sharing of Arabic literature on both international and local levels¹⁶: for in-

¹¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/71579/poetry-everywhere> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

¹² For a general overview on this topic, see <https://www.lauradehartyoung.com/post/helpful-poetry-apps-every-poet-should-know-about> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

¹³ <https://xboxplay.games/spiritfarer/-how-to-find-axe-lost-poetry-10133> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

¹⁴ A. Mitchell, *Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero*, in "Well Played", 3, 2 (2014), pp. 161-178.

¹⁵ T. Pepe, *When Writers Activate Readers. How the Autofictional Blog Transforms Arabic Literature*, in "Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies", 15 (2015), pp. 73-91.

¹⁶ E. De Blasio, *Poetry in the era of social networks: The case of Farah Šammā*, in "Annali di Ca' Foscari – Serie Orientale", 57 (2021), pp. 91-118.

stance, the Tumblr community *Political Arabic Poetry*¹⁷ showcases socially and politically engaged poetry, highlighting contemporary Arabic works that are critical, activist, and socially responsive; *Poetrysoup*¹⁸ connects a global community of poets, fostering the sharing and appreciation of poetry across diverse cultures and languages; and *Ġihat al-Šiʿr*¹⁹ is dedicated to modern Arabic poetry and its evolving forms, highlighting innovative approaches and contemporary trends within the Arab literary landscape. Alongside these platforms, YouTube channels are increasingly providing a space for oral artistic expression, where poets present their work through live or recorded performances that combine recitation, intonation, and sometimes visual or musical elements. These performances, which include forms such as Slam Poetry and Spoken Word, transform the act of reading into a performative and interactive experience²⁰. Analysing these digital interactions highlights how texts are transformed through diverse semiotic codes and media platforms, reflecting a new dynamic in the production and reception of Arabic poetry.

These multimodal approaches not only challenge traditional conceptions of poetry but also open new avenues for creative expression, fostering a dynamic and participatory relationship between poets and their audiences. Analysing these digital interactions highlights how poetry adapts to new media, using diverse semiotic codes and platforms, and reveals a dynamic evolution in both the production and reception of Arabic poetry. Indeed, through these cross-media engagements, contemporary poetry reflects the interconnected nature of the digital age, where words, images, and sounds combine to create rich, immersive narratives that speak to a wide range of cultural and emotional experiences.

Qualitative Media Analysis: Semiotic and Intertextual Approaches to the Selection of Sources

The methodology adopted in the present study is grounded in qualitative media analysis, focusing on the interpretative exploration of meanings, patterns, and discursive processes. At the core of this approach lies the understanding of cultural products not as passive reflections of reality, but as actively constructed and shaped by specific media logics – temporal, spatial, and stylistic conventions that influence how content is produced and interpreted²¹.

This analytical perspective allows for the identification of recurring thematic and narrative patterns that, in turn, reveal the ideological and cultural lo-

¹⁷ <https://www.tumblr.com/polarabicpoetry> (last accessed 29 November 2025).

¹⁸ <https://www.poetrysoup.com/> (last accessed 29 November 2025).

¹⁹ <http://www.jehat.com/ar/Pages/master-arabic.html> (last accessed 29 November 2025).

²⁰ E. De Blasio, *Poetry in the era of social networks*, cit.

²¹ D.L. Altheide, *Tracking discourse and qualitative document analysis*, in “Poetics”, 27 (2000), p. 291.

gics embedded within media representations. Such an interpretative yet empirically grounded method facilitates the identification of recurrent motifs and communicative strategies, while recognising the fluidity and context-dependence of meaning-making. Consequently, the selection of units of analysis²² has been guided not only by their capacity to underlying discursive dynamics, but also by a set of clearly defined criteria aimed at capturing the breadth of contemporary mediations of classical Arabic poetry. The inclusion of a graphic novel anthology, a feature film, and a televised talent show reflects a deliberate effort to encompass distinct media ecologies, namely print and visual culture, cinematic narrative, and mass-broadcast performance. Taken together, these cases provide complementary vantage points for examining how traditional poetic forms are reinterpreted across diverse modes of production, circulation, and reception.

This diversity of genres affords a strategic vantage point from which to examine three complementary dimensions of contemporary cultural re-mediations of poetry. The selection of a graphic novel anthology, a feature film, and a televised talent show reflects a deliberate effort to encompass distinct media ecologies²³ – print and visual culture, cinematic narrative, and mass-broadcast performance. Crucially, each medium entails its own production, circulation, and reception processes, which in turn engage distinct audiences: the graphic anthology emerges from an editorial and artistic production context, circulated primarily through literary and visual culture networks, and addressed to readers attuned to multimodal textuality; the feature film is produced within the cinematic industry, distributed through theatres and streaming platforms, and targets audiences sensitive to narrative and affective immersion, including non-Arabic-speaking viewers; the talent show is conceived as a live broadcast performance, reaching a mass television audience and structured to elicit immediate participatory and evaluative engagement. Taken together, these cases providing a framework for examining how distinct media logics interact with different audiences and reception contexts.

To further deepen the analysis of the selected multimodal texts, this study integrates semiotic and intertextual methodologies, attentive to how meaning is constructed across multiple modes and texts from a diachronic perspective, bringing contemporary communicative practices into dialogue with traditional literary imagery and forms²⁴. Overall, qualitative media analysis, informed by semiotic and intertextual perspectives, offers a systematic yet adaptable methodology that foregrounds the dynamic interplay of modes and

²² D.L. Altheide, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, Sage, London 1996, pp. 23-25.

²³ For a comprehensive overview of the foundational studies on the concept of media ecology, see L. Strate, *Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study*, Hampton Press, Cresskill (NJ) 2006, pp. 15-91.

²⁴ I.O. Rajewsky, *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality*, in “Intermedialités / Intermediality”, 6 (2005), pp. 43-64.

meanings within media texts and offers nuanced insight into how such artefacts operate as active sites of cultural negotiation and identity articulation, rather than as neutral vehicles of information.

Ḥaddaṭatnī wa qālat: Poetry and Comics bridging Tradition and Pop Culture

The first multimodal product I will examine is *Ḥaddaṭatnī wa qālat. Li-kull imr'āh 'abbāsiyyah sīratuha* (She told me, saying. [Dedicated] To all the Abbasid women and their stories), a collaborative work published in November 2022 by Līnā Mirḥiḡ (Lena Merhej) and Inās Ḥansah (Enass Khansa)²⁵.

This multimodal work, structured as a visual biographical dictionary, presents a series of anecdotes about ten women who lived at the courts of caliphs and sultans between the 3rd/9th and 7th/13th centuries. Their short stories are enriched by the inclusion of poetic compositions, either improvised or recited by the protagonists, providing concise portraits of female figures who have remained marginal in mainstream history and offering an unusual glimpse into the literary talents and wisdom they embodied²⁶. By integrating verbal narration with comic art, the ten portraits of the protagonists are enhanced with contemporary details. Each figure is imbued with a renewed physical presence that, through contextual elements, reinterprets and redefines the historical and literary legacy. On the other side, the verbal texts, enclosed in speech balloons and captions, remain largely faithful to Ibn al-Sā'ī's (d. 674/1276) anthology *Nisā' al-ḥulafā'* (The Women of the Caliphs)²⁷, with only minimal alterations, thus preserving a strong connection to

²⁵ Lena Merhej is an illustrator of children's books and a visual storyteller, renowned for her work in comics and graphic novels. She is a co-founder of the *Samandal* collective, a pioneering platform for independent comics in the Arab world. Born in Beirut to a Lebanese father and a German mother, her bicultural heritage often permeates her more autobiographical works, which predominantly engage with themes of identity, genre, cultural hybridity, and conflict. Enass Khansa is Assistant Professor in the Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages at the American University of Beirut. Her research explores classical Arabic literature – particularly *adab* – with a focus on anthological practices from the 4th/10th to the 6th/12th centuries. She also engages with broader questions of genre, intellectual tradition, and manuscript culture. Her work is characterised by an interdisciplinary approach that bridges literary criticism, historiography, and the study of knowledge transmission within Islamic civilisation.

²⁶ See also H. Kilpatrick, *Women as Poets and Chattels: Abū l-Faraḡ al-Iṣbahānī's "Al-Imā' al-Ṣawā'ir"*, in "Quaderni di Studi Arabi", 9 (1991), pp. 161-176; P. Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in 'Abbāsid Literature on Women*, University of Gothenburg, Göteborg 2010.

²⁷ In Sh.M. Toorawa's edition, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad* (New York University Press, New York 2015), the translations from Arabic to English were curated by the editors of the Library of Arabic Literature.

a well-established literary and historical tradition. As for the accompanying illustrations, created through a meticulous research process, they accurately recreate the architecture and spaces that define the settings of these women's stories. At the same time, these portraits carefully blend meticulously rendered costume details with contemporary Pop references, aiming to provide readers with more immediate interpretive keys for understanding gestures and words passed down through voices from past centuries. In this way, the multimodal approach seamlessly aligns with a broader communicative strategy employed by the authors: the message conveyed through the iconic imagery amplifies the intertextual network carried by the verbal text.

The graphic organisation of the pages also functions as a semiotic resource in the design of this multimodal work. Indeed, through a precise arrangement of space between the sequential images and the page margins, contemporary references and explanatory notes enhance the accessibility of the work to a broader audience, as intended by the authors, while preserving the integrity of Ibn al-Sā'ī's original text. Traditional ornamental motifs (geometric, floral, or pseudo-calligraphic) frame each page, occasionally interrupted by white or black lozenges used for annotations and biographical notes, further supporting the interplay between past and present.

In a previous essay, I had the opportunity to analyse one of these ten anecdotes, particularly rich in intertextual elements: the literary tale of Maḥbūbah and al-Mutawakkil, which centres on the reversal of roles in romantic courtship, with considerable emphasis on the protagonist's poetic prowess²⁸. In that research, my focus was primarily on the intricate network of symbolic references underpinning the narrative. In this contribution I wish to shift the focus towards examining how the multimodal nature of this visual biographical anthology enables the condensation of meanings in a cohesive and effective manner. Therefore, I chose to analyse a different anecdote, this time centred on the relatively obscure figure of Sitt al-Nisā' bint Ṭūlūn al-Turkī²⁹. What little is known provides a narrative scaffold onto which the authors layer intertextual references and contemporary cultural allusions. As the analysis reveals, the five-line poem attributed to Sitt al-Nisā' is positioned as a response to the social constraints imposed by male figures, emphasizing her agency and voice within the narrative.

According to Ibn al-Sā'ī she was the daughter of Ṭūlūn the Turk, likely a member of the Turkish military elite stationed in Baghdad during an unspecified period between the end of the 3th/9th and 4th/10th centuries. She was renowned for her extraordinary wealth, which she paired with a reputation

In the present essay, I translated the texts directly from the Arabic version while the previously published translations are provided in the footnotes.

²⁸ I. Licitra, *Eros e poesia nel fumetto libanese contemporaneo*, in G. Lalomia; M.S. Sapegno (eds.), *Eros e modernità*, in "Critica del testo", 25, 3 (2022), pp. 103-134.

²⁹ Sh.M. Toorawa, *Consorts of the Caliphs*, cit., pp. 135-137.

for conspicuous generosity. Her prodigal nature was exemplified by her extravagant wedding, during which she reportedly spent one hundred thousand dinars on the banquet to celebrate her marriage to one of her paramours. However, a dramatic reversal of fortune led to the loss of her considerable assets, and she ultimately saw her fortunes collapse, ending up working in the markets of Baghdad and forced to beg for her survival.

In this short story, as in the others included in the comic anthology, the authors have chosen to omit the *isnād* that typically accompanies the anecdotes in Ibn al-Sā'ī's text. As a result, several male characters, not identified in the graphic narrative³⁰, are introduced onto the scene, interacting with the protagonist and thereby setting in motion the narrative situation in which the recitation of a poetic passage occurs. The 5 lines poem recited by Sitt al-Nisā', probably composed by herself, serves as her response to the offer made by one of the men, who proposes to provide her with money to alleviate her difficult circumstances:

Leave the world to its lovers; they shall soon become its victims.
I behold the world, and even in its praise, it reveals its vices.
Let not the fragrance deceive you, as it reaches through its scents
for its joy is but poison, in its delights lies your doom,
and its musician, with his instrument, returns to its mournful laments³¹.

The anecdote, along with the poem, was also transmitted by al-Ṣafadī (d. 763/1362) in his *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi'l-Wafayāt*³², although he does not offer further chronological or biographical details. Therefore, while the character of Maḥbūbah has a more substantial narrative background, enhanced by multiple literary sources and a more established reimagining of her love story with the Caliph³³, very little is known about Sitt al-Nisā' beyond her paternal

³⁰ The *isnād* of the Arabic text presents a chain of transmitters composed of scholars and jurists from the Ṣāfi'ī and Ḥanbalī schools, tracing the transmission of the anecdote from the 7th/13th to the 4th/10th century. It culminates in the figure of 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 415/1024-25), a prominent theologian of the late Mu'tazilite school, who is described as a direct witness to the encounter between Sitt al-Nisā' and the wealthy man who engages her in dialogue. See W. Madlung, 'Abd al-Jabbar b. Ahmad, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*; an updated version is available at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abd-al-jabbar-b-ahmad> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

³¹ Sh.M. Toorawa, *Consorts of the Caliphs*, cit., p. 136; for another English version, see also *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³² al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi'l-wafayāt*, taḥqīq Aḥmad al-Arna'ūt; Turkī Muṣṭafā, *Dār iḥyā' al-turāt al-'arabī*, Bayrūt 2000, al-ġuz' al-ḥāmis 'aṣar, p. 74.

³³ In addition to her appearance in the biographical account by Ibn al-Sā'ī (Sh.M. Toorawa, *Consorts of the Caliphs*, cit., pp. 76-83), the figure of Maḥbūbah also features as the protagonist of the eponymous tale in *The Thousand and One Nights*, as preserved in Richard Francis Burton's 1885 English translation (vol. 5),

lineage and lifestyle. This relative lack of information, however, offers the authors of the comic anthology greater creative freedom, allowing them to enrich the intertextual network with contemporary references. Consequently, the short story of Sitt al-Nisā' introduces a distinctive dimension to the narrative, shedding light on the roles of lesser-known women in courtly circles. This exploration, however, unfolds subjectively, allowing for a more nuanced and personal interpretation of the text's treatment of gender, power, and poetic expression. Through this lens, the narrative broadens its scope, offering a richer, more intimate understanding of these complex themes.

The creative autonomy of Lena Merhej in reinterpreting the anecdote and its poem is primarily manifested through two narrative choices, which are predominantly conveyed via the iconographic language of the comic. The most striking representation is that of the wedding, in which the female protagonist is kissing her beloved, yet she is a woman. The scene, markedly unusual in the context of the story's historical background, may reflect a deliberate choice by the authors to interpret the expression "*lu 'bata min lu 'abihā*" (one of her lovers) as a feminine subject, a choice apparently validated by the presence of the *tā' marbūṭah* in the singular form *lu 'bah*.

In the latter case, however, Lena Merhej incorporates contemporary extratextual cultural references, subtly alludes to various elements of recent pop culture, weaving them into the narrative to create a sense of relevance and familiarity for the reader. On the opening page of the section dedicated to Sitt al-Nisā', the protagonist is depicted with rather distinct physical features and stylistic attire that evoke the likeness of a well-known contemporary figure: the famous daughter of an extremely wealthy family, Paris Hilton.

The resemblance might seem like a mere coincidence or simply an aesthetic choice. However, as the author herself emphasised in an interview published on "L'Orient-Le Jour", it serves a specific communicative purpose: to structure this graphic biographical anthology around the association between medieval references and contemporary writing codes³⁴.

As additional evidence of the communicative intent behind this iconographic characterization, the narrative of Sitt al-Nisā' incorporates a further, more significant contemporary reference, which strengthens the extratextual connection to late 1990s and early 2000s pop music and establishes an intertextual link between the poem and a renowned song by Madonna. The protagonist is depicted in the act of reciting her poem with a proud and austere appearance, standing against the backdrop of a desert landscape, with her

based on the Calcutta edition. See U. Marzolph; R. Van Leeuwen, *al-Mutawakkil and His Concubine Mahbūba*, in *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*.

³⁴ J. Hobeika, *Revisiter le harem abbasside de Bagdad, et laisser parler les femmes*, in "L'Orient-Le Jour", 25/09/2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1312688/revisiter-le-harem-abbasside-debagdad-et-laisser-parler-les-femmes.html> (last accessed 29 May 2025).

hand extended towards her interlocutor, surrounded by a flight of black crow wings. This is an implicit yet well-defined pictorial reference that evokes the music video for the song *Frozen* (1998) and, perhaps, establishes a direct connection between the message of the premodern poetry quoted and the central theme of Madonna's song: «You only see what your eyes want to see / How can life be what you want it to be?».

Thus, the interaction of verbal and iconographic codes in this multimodal work enables a synthesis of references to the past and contemporary allusions, fostering the revival of the 4th/10th century poem. This reimagining provides a fresh interpretation of the female figures depicted, engaging with the evolving social and cultural contexts of a new audience.

Une histoire d'amour et de désir: Premodern Erotic Literature Reimagining Contemporary Sexuality

The intertextual interplay between contemporary cultural elements and ancient poetic tradition serves as the film's leitmotif in *Une histoire d'amour et de désir, Mağnūn Faraḥ* (2021), directed by Laylā Būzīd (Leyla Bouzid)³⁵. The narrative intricately weaves these dimensions, exploring how modern identities and experiences are shaped by, and engage in dialogue with, the enduring legacy of classical Arabic poetry. Indeed, throughout the entire narrative arc, intertextuality and multimodality intertwine to create a refined network of meaning that bridges historical and contemporary narratives. In this way, by blending literary references with visual storytelling to forge connections across time and space, the story moves beyond being a mere love affair, evolving into a deliberate act of cultural dialogue between the past and present.

The protagonist, Aḥmad (Ahmed)³⁶, a Sorbonne student born and raised in Paris to an Algerian immigrant family, embarks on a twofold journey: one of sexual discovery and the other of intellectual reconciliation with his multiple inherited cultural identity, going beyond stereotypical perspectives to uncover a more nuanced understanding of the self. His relationship with

³⁵ The film is in French and Arabic and is produced by Blue Monday Productions and Arte France Cinéma. It was the closing feature of the 74th Cannes Film Festival's Critics' Week in 2021 and received a nomination at the César Awards and three nominations at the Lumières Awards. At the 2021 MedFilm Festival, the film garnered several accolades: the Special Jury Prize for Best Film, the Valentina Pedicini Award for Best First and Second Feature, and the PiùCulture Award for Best Film. In the same year, it was awarded the Valois de Diamant for Best Film at the Angoulême Francophone Film Festival. The Italian distribution was handled by Cineclub Internazionale Distribuzione, led by Paolo Minuto, who courteously authorized the use of the Italian-subtitled dialogues in this contribution.

³⁶ Played by Sāmī 'Uṭālbālī (Sami Outalballi).

Farah (Farah)³⁷, a Tunisian student on a scholarship, acts as a catalyst for his self-exploration, offering an intriguing counterpart.

The film's richness precisely lies in its intellectual engagement with Arabic literary traditions, particularly its exploration of eroticism in classical Arabic poetry and this theme is subtly woven into the narrative as Farah introduces Ahmed to literary works that frame sensuality and desire in ways that challenge his conventional views. Meanwhile, as Farah navigates the complexities of life as a foreigner in Paris, her own quest for emotional and intellectual autonomy provides a crucial commentary on the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West. As a result, their encounter with erotic literature becomes a transformative process for both characters, highlighting the liberating potential of reclaiming cultural narratives often suppressed or overlooked in contemporary discourse.

Through this connection, Bouzid delves into the psychological undercurrents of desire, not merely as a personal experience, but as one deeply shaped by cultural legacies. This convergence of themes enhances the film's narrative complexity, offering a profound reflection on the enduring influence of cultural legacies in shaping of contemporary sensibilities. Such a fusion of textual and visual elements underscores the film's nature as a multimodal work, where narrative complexity arises through the integration of literary tradition and cinematic storytelling, ultimately reshaping the characters' sense of cultural belonging.

Among the various instances in the film's narrative where literary text and the protagonists' experiences deeply intertwine through the motif of eroticism, I have chosen to analyse the multimodal discourse in the final sequences, coinciding with a critical moment in the relationship between the two young lovers. In this segment of the narrative arc, Farah addresses Ahmed a letter containing the verses of a poem in Arabic, without any accompanying gloss, explanation of the author, or, more crucially, a translation. This absence of mediation places the full burden of interpretation on Ahmed, whose limited linguistic proficiency renders him unable to access the meaning of the text. Indeed, although the young man recognises the text as a poetic composition, likely due to the progression of the monorhyme verses, he lacks the linguistic ability to read and comprehend the message, as he is entirely unfamiliar with both the script and the syntax of the Arabic language.

The letter bearing the Arabic text is framed by the camera for several moments, acquiring a distinct prominence within the scene. The handwritten words and the letter itself gain a tangible, almost corporeal quality, akin to the books the two young protagonists exchanged in previous scenes. However, the message remains cryptic and inaccessible, and the lack of contextualisation intensifies the sense of distance between the main character and the

³⁷ Played by Zubaydah Bilḥaġmūr (Zbeida Belhajamor).

Arabic written word, highlighting the theme of linguistic and cultural alienation that runs throughout the entire narrative. This condition also extends to the audience, who participate in the search for comprehension during Ahmed's attempts to decode the poetic message, relying solely on those within his personal network who possess full competence in the Arabic language. Ultimately, it is Ahmed's father who unravels the enigma, reading and translating the text, thereby making its meaning comprehensible.

At this point in the narrative, the film's plot unfolds elliptically, deliberately omitting the moment when the hidden meaning is revealed through translation, thereby granting the young Ahmed access to the content of the poetic text. Equally absent are any revelations regarding the origins or authorship of the verses. Instead, the audience is seamlessly immersed in a sequence enacting the reconciliation of the two lovers, scenes without dialogue but accompanied by a French translation of the poem, recited in voiceover by Farah:

Les nuages sont de mes yeux tourments, les disciples
 Abreuvant l'univers d'une pluie monotone
 Et cette nuit, en pleurs, me consolera-t-elle de toi demain?
 Ou, en veille, me tiendra-t-elle compagnie?
 Car si elle dissipe les ténèbres,
 Le sommeil ne saura clore mes paupières.
 Je ne sais plus le chemin de la lumière,
 En chaque instant s'accroît l'insomnie
 Comme si la nuée voilait l'éclat des astres
 Aux regards qui voudraient les contempler.
 Tel ton amour, au fond de mon âme,
 Ô mon désir invisible, ne se laisse déchiffrer³⁸.

This passage is an excerpt from Ibn Ḥazm's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah* (The Ring of the Dove), a selection of verses centred on the recurring motive of insomnia, which afflicts lovers, drawn from the second chapter of the book, which is dedicated to the "signs of love"³⁹.

As I have observed elsewhere⁴⁰, throughout the entire storyline, Leyla

³⁸ 01:34:48:05-01:35:32:22.

³⁹ Ibn Ḥazm Abū Muḥammad 'Alī, *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah*, Hindāwī, al-Qāhirah 2014, p. 20. See also R. Arnaldez, *Ibn Ḥazm*, in EI²; M. Cassarino; C. La Rosa, *al-Andalus e la Sicilia. La prosa e le traduzioni*, in F. M. Corrao, M. Ruocco (eds.), *La letteratura araba. Dall'epoca preislamica all'età postclassica*, Mondadori, Milano 2023, pp. 192-194.

⁴⁰ I. Licitra, «*Le parole non mordono*»: *erotismo e revival poetico in Une histoire d'amour et de désir*, in A. Fabiani; G. Lalomia (eds.), *Il vento di Eros, Atti del XIII Colloquio Internazionale Medioevo romanzo e orientale (Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche, Catania, 21-22 settembre 2023)*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli 2024, pp. 265-287.

Bouزيد gradually establishes a series of intertextual connections between the poetic tradition and the romantic plot of the two students, particularly by means of Ahmed's identification with the literary figure of Qays "Mağnūn Laylā". This alignment placed the characters within the rich context of classical Arabic poetry, drawing on its symbolic and cultural significance. However, the exploration of the relationship between cultural legacy and the written tradition, between language and poetic expression, is largely sidelined within the narrative until the moment when Ibn Ḥazm's poem is introduced. At this juncture, the written word assumes a distinct role within the cinematic framework. In fact, in the sequence that visually transposes the written text, the Arabic language emerges not merely as a medium of communication but as a significant cultural and aesthetic component. The script itself becomes almost painterly, imbued with cultural resonance, temporarily detached from its semantic meaning, which remains elusive both to the characters and to the audience. This deliberate withholding of the text's meaning heightens a sense of alienation, drawing attention to the gap between the characters' comprehension and the literary heritage that the poem conveys.

The renowned treatise by Ibn Ḥazm is thus invoked as an authoritative extratextual reference, both validating the process of falling in love and exploring eroticism and establishing it as a primary source in the tradition of Arabic love literature. Indeed, up to that point in the story, every literary work and author has been clearly identified through explicit details, enabling even the most inexperienced audience to follow the protagonists' coming-of-age journey, both within Arabic literature and beyond. In contrast, Bouزيد deliberately refrains from providing such clues in this instance.

These two approaches reflect distinct multimedia strategies, each corresponding to a different aim. While the audience has been guided through a rich literary repertoire, often leading to unexpected outcomes, Farah's letter, as presented in the frames, can only be fully understood by a spectator well-versed in pre-modern Arabic language and literature, capable of recognising both the authorship of Ibn Ḥazm and the origin of the poetic excerpt.

Amīr al-šū'arā': Reviving Poetry through Multimodal Performance and Media

Through this fusion of the spoken word with contemporary visual culture, the talent *Amīr al-šū'arā'* (Prince of Poets) emerges as a particularly striking example of reimagining traditional poetic forms within a mainstream contemporary production. Launched in 2007 and funded by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH), the show aims to breathe new

life into classical Arabic poetry by positioning it within a competitive television format that blends performance with entertainment⁴¹.

This pioneering experiment, met with considerable enthusiasm and a broad following from its target audience, over the course of its 11 editions has evolved into a significant cultural initiative. Indeed, the show combines literature and entertainment, positioning poetry within a media landscape where the integration of visual and auditory elements – such as dynamic lighting, music, and carefully designed sets – creates a sensory experience that amplifies the emotional and intellectual impact of the poetry: while the core of the programme remains the oral recitation of poetry, it has transformed into a new mode of creating and experiencing poetry, demonstrating how traditional forms can flourish in a media-saturated environment. Through this innovative approach, *Amīr al-šu‘arā*’ redefines the boundaries of poetic presentation, dissolving the distinctions between literary art and multimedia performance.

The programme’s format incorporates both traditional and modern elements, with poets initially introduced through video segments showing them in their everyday environments, dressed casually in t-shirts and jeans, and sometimes speaking in their regional dialects. This contrast between the informal personal self and the elevated public persona they adopt once on stage is marked when they appear in traditional attire. Men typically wear the *kandūrah* and *ġutrah*, while women, increasingly prominent in recent editions, dress in elegant sultana-style gowns. Despite these sartorial differences, all contestants recite their poetry in classical Arabic, maintaining a solid connection to tradition, whereas the studio set, adorned with elegant calligraphy, balances contemporary and classical aesthetics, creating an environment that honours the historical while embracing the modern.

Such a profound intertwining of tradition and contemporaneity is particularly reflected in the nature of the awards conferred upon the competition’s winner⁴². The recipient is honoured with the distinguished *laqab* of *Amīr al-šu‘arā*’, a title that has been historically bestowed upon eminent poets, most notably the celebrated Aḥmad Šawqī. This title, rich in cultural and literary significance, is further complemented by the *burdah* (cloak), a powerful symbol of Arab heritage whose origins trace back to the pre-Islamic period, thus reinforcing the connection to a long-standing tradition within Arabic poetic and political culture.

The recitations themselves can last for several minutes, and the poets manage to hold the audience’s attention throughout, a remarkable feat in today’s media landscape, where quick-paced entertainment is the norm. The

⁴¹ <https://princeofpoets.ae/ar/home> (last accessed 30 May 2025).

⁴² B. Michalak-Pikulska, *Karīm Ma‘tūq and Other Winners of Amīr ash-shu‘arā’ (Prince of Poets) First Contest*, in I. Król (ed.), *Contemporary Arab World: Literary and Linguistic Issues*, Jagiellonian University Press, Kraków 2022, pp. 11-24.

slow tempo of the format might seem unfeasible in Western commercial television, yet the silence between verses is broken only by applause, illustrating the continuing emotional power of poetry in the televised context. In addition to recitations, the competition features impromptu composition challenges, where poets are tasked with quickly crafting verses, reminiscent of freestyle rap, yet with a distinct intellectual and literary focus. These improvisational challenges, in fact, echo a conventional mode of premodern poetry, where poets were often invited at caliphal or provincial courts to engage in improvised pieces, creating verses on the spot in response to spontaneous inspirations, such as the description of an event, a tribute, or a virtuosic variation on a given theme.

As for the content of the poems featured in the television competition, it is largely unrestricted, with only modesty and decorum as boundaries. Current political themes are often explored, further emphasising the programme's role not merely as a celebration of ancient poetic forms, but as a space for cultural dialogue and reflection. This underscores *Amīr al-šu'arā'* as a mainstream and dynamic platform for the reimagining of Arabic poetic tradition, transcending conventional expectations of entertainment and moving audiences at the intersection of cultural heritage, media communication, and contemporary socio-political discourse.

The victory of 'Ā'ishah al-Sayfī (Aisha al-Saifi) in the 10th edition (2023) represents a significant milestone in the programme's history, not only for her personal achievement but also for its broader cultural significance⁴³. As the first Arab woman to be awarded this esteemed title, al-Saifi's triumph challenges traditional gender boundaries within the realm of Arabic poetry, making her victory a symbol of both artistic excellence and societal transformation. In recognition of al-Saifi's remarkable accomplishment, the title was adapted specifically for the occasion, crowning her as the first *Amīrat al-šu'arā'* (Princess of Poets), and bestowing upon her the *burdah*, the other significant symbolic honour awarded in the competition. This emblematic gesture underscores her status as the first woman to receive such an honour, having emerged victorious in the competition amidst a field of predominantly male poets, a triumph already firmly established by her groundbreaking achievement as the first female poet to win the Omani Poetry Festival. al-Saifi's literary corpus, encapsulated in her four published collections⁴⁴ contributes to the ongoing renaissance of Arabic po-

⁴³ Mīrzā al-Ḥuwaydī, 'Ā'ishah al-Sayfī: ḥāwālāt an aḡīd šakk^{an} li 'l-qubūl bī šā'irah dāḥil al-qabīlah. «Amīrat al-šu'arā'» taqūlu li man ḥāḡamahā: al-nās maqāmāt fī 'l-talaqqī, in "al-Šarq al-Awsat", 1/4/2023, available at: <https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/arabe/revue-de-presse/05-4-2023-al-chaira-al-omaniyya-aicha-al-sayfi-amirat-al-choaraa> (last accessed 30 May 2025).

⁴⁴ The first one was *al-Baḥr yubaddil qumṣānahu* (The Sea Changes its Gown), al-Kawkab, Riyāḍ 2014, followed by *Aḥlām 'l-bint 'l-āširah* (The Dreams of the Tenth Girl), Dār al-Masār, al-Šāriqah 2016. In the subsequent year, she published

etry, while also critically engaging with the evolving discourse on gender social identities and roles, personal agency, and cultural heritage in contemporary Arabic literature.

The absolute dominance of female competitors in the 10th season of *Prince of Poets* was further emphasized by the runner-up position achieved by Nağāh al-Zāhirī (Najat al-Dhaheri), an eminent Emirati poet. Renowned for her skill in weaving complex emotions and cultural reflections into her verses, Najat's influence extends beyond her individual works, as she is an active member of the UAE Writers and Authors Union and the Copyright Society. These roles allow her to shape the literary discourse of the United Arab Emirates, contributing to the nation's evolving artistic identity. Her poetic portfolio, spanning eight celebrated collections⁴⁵, addresses themes that resonate deeply with contemporary audiences and continue to inspire and elevate Emirati culture, securing her place as one of the most esteemed poets in the Arab world today.

In December 2024, the 11th season of the program was inaugurated by both poets, who came together to co-write and recite the poem titled *al-Ši'r yağma 'unā* (Poetry unites us)⁴⁶, marking a poignant and unified opening in this edition of the show:

Poetry has hearts that bear it,
a lantern of peace it kindles,
a homeland of light, its abode,
in the seven generous Emirates.

Enchantment, beauty, and profound meanings,
enduring across all ages of time,
instilling love for humankind
through the pen's sincere letters.

In the Land of Poetry and Their Assembly
wisdoms were firmly embedded in their meanings.
Their foundations rose high in dignity,
and Abu Dhabi stood as their pinnacle,

Lā uhibb abī (I Don't Love My Father), Mu'assasat 'Umān li 'l-šihafah wa 'l-našr wa 'l-i'lān, Musqaṭ 2017. After winning the 10th edition of *Prince of Poets*, she released the monographic collection *Fī 'l-ṭalāṭīn min naḥliḥā* (At the age of her thirty palms), Dār Taškīl, al-Qāhirah 2023.

⁴⁵ Her collection *al-Ġāsiq* (The Twilight, Manšūrāt Ġāf, al-Šāriqah 2023), which won the prestigious Best Emirati Book by an Emirati Author Award at the Sharjah International Book Fair in 2023, exemplifies her growing prominence in the literary world. Additionally, her work *Alaq* (Clot, Manšūrāt Ġāf, al-Šāriqah 2024), showcases her commitment to exploring complex societal and personal themes with originality and sensitivity.

⁴⁶ <https://alnaba.news/?p=166772> (last accessed 30 May 2025).

on its shore, Arabs anchor,
and glory is accompanied by literature.
The seas of the reed flute bring forth melody,
drawing the distant near and raising ambitions.

Poetry unites our people,
and grants voice to the bloom of its rhymes.
The language of *Dād* calls out to it:
“Live on, you who are the noblest in values!”

A language as radiant as the sun,
with boundless horizons and stately palaces.
It soars, encircled by beauty,
and through it, we encounter a magnificent dream⁴⁷.

The poem serves as both a celebration of poetry’s timeless power and a reflection of the United Arab Emirates’ cultural prominence on the global stage. It is composed of six chained quatrains⁴⁸, each adhering to a rhyme scheme wherein the first three lines rhyme uniformly, followed by a distinct rhyme in the fourth line, producing patterns such as AAAB, CCCB, DDDb, and so forth, which imparts a rhythmic variation that enriches the poem’s sonic texture.

Its opening verses, recited by Aisha al-Saifi, eloquently evoke themes of peace, love, and unity, positioning poetry as a cohesive force that transcends boundaries and illuminates the hearts of humanity. In the second part, recited by Najat al-Dhaheiri, the composition assumes the traits of a lyrical meditation on the enduring nature of poetic expression itself – one that exalts enchantment, beauty, and layered meaning as timeless qualities. By conveying the concept of literature as a means of fostering universal love, the poem reaffirms poetry’s role as a vessel of emotional depth and cultural continuity. Through their lyrical craftsmanship, the two poets intertwine cultural pride with artistic depth, offering a tribute to the UAE’s role as a beacon of cultural enlightenment.

Indeed, the televised performance was designed to provide the audience with a multimodal engagement with the text, where various languages, me-

⁴⁷ <https://princeofpoets.ae/ar/season-episodes/lmosm-lh-dy-aashr-lhlk-lmb-shr-laol> (last accessed 30 May 2025).

⁴⁸ The scheme differs from that traditionally employed in the Persian *rubāʿiyyāt* (AABA or AAAA), see C.H. de Fouchecour, *Rubāʿī (I. In Persian)*, in EI². On the literary trend of composing quatrains in premodern Arabic poetry, see T. Seidensticker, *An Arabic Origin of the Persian Rubāʿī?*, in “Middle Eastern Literatures”, 14, 2 (2011), pp. 155-169; G. Schoeler, *The Genres of Classical Arabic Poetry: Classifications of Poetic Themes and Poems by Pre-modern Critics and Redactors of Dīwāns*, in “Quaderni di Studi Arabi” (n.s.), 5-6 (2010), pp. 1-48.

dia, and modes of communication converge. The key elements that contribute to the execution of this television moment include the music, the studio's set design, and the choreography. Indeed, the performance features the evocative musical composition of Muḥammad al-Aḥmad – music director, composer, show's creator and co-founder of al-Waṭan studio (Abu Dhabi) – alongside the participation of young students from the National Schools of the UAE in Abu Dhabi. At the beginning, the poem is initially recited by its two authoresses, accompanied by soft instrumental music, while both male and female children remain in the background, moving the glowing silhouettes of Arabic letters in harmony with the rhythm of the music. The lighting is directed toward the two main protagonists, while the remaining performers are enveloped in shadow, creating a mysterious and evocative atmosphere. The studio's set design, which will later reveal a complex arrangement based on precise architectural hierarchies and distinct planes of proximity, in this initial moment dissolves entirely, enveloped by the uniform guise of a starry sky - deep blue, dotted with a myriad of lights.

Upon the conclusion of the poetic recitation, and as the musical accompaniment resumes its subtle, cyclical motif, the two authoresses proceed to withdraw from the central scene. They move with quiet dignity through the assembly of children, eventually positioning themselves at the periphery of the stage. Their exit marks a symbolic transition in the performance's dramaturgy. Taking their place at centre stage are two male figures clad in traditional Emirati attire, each bearing a national flag – an unmistakable gesture towards the ceremonial and civic dimensions of the presentation.

At this juncture, the lighting undergoes a marked transformation: what had previously been a cool and subdued palette gradually intensifies, suffusing the stage with warm, radiant light that encompasses the entire ensemble. The children, now fully illuminated and arranged in a rigorously ordered formation, begin to chant in unison the opening stanza of the poem, repeating it twice – a refrain that reinforces the thematic coherence of the composition and affirms its central message of enduring cultural identity and collective voice. Then they proceed to chant the second stanza of the poem, serving as a refrain, followed by the introduction of a third and a fourth previously unperformed sections. The refrain is repeated once more, succeeded by the fifth and sixth quatrains of the poem. This final part further emphasizes the prominence of Abu Dhabi as a cultural epicentre, rich with symbolic resonance. Through this concluding section, the performance strengthens the city's role as both a patron and emblem of the poetic tradition, seamlessly intertwining national pride with literary expression.

Conclusive Remarks

By examining the interplay between literary forms, modes and cultural context, this study has explored how Arab popular culture, through its contemporary multimodal configurations, articulates poetic expression both as a site of collective memory and as a vehicle for the reimagining of individual identity.

The three case studies analysed here employ distinct strategies to establish intertextual connections that not only revive but also reinterpret classical poetic traditions for a contemporary audience, each according to its specific formal and medial characteristics. Despite the diversity of media and modes employed, all three examples underscore the active role of the audience in the multimodal construction of meaning. As Kress pointed out, «communication is the response to a prompt; [...] communication happens only when there is ‘interpretation’»⁴⁹. This pervasive resurgence of poetry, spanning multiple literary forms and expressive modes, is made possible by the enduring and deeply embedded relationship between a transnational Arabic cultural identity and the ancient poetic tradition. It is precisely this longstanding and affective bond that allows poetry to persist as a vital and resonant force within contemporary Arab aesthetics.

Ḥaddaṭatnī wa qālat consciously draws upon the structural conventions and cultural functions of premodern Arabic biographical dictionaries, offering a multimodal reinterpretation of a curated selection of female portraits. Through the transposition of the text of Ibn Saʿī, along with its numerous interpolated poetic compositions, the work re-situates these historical voices within a distinctly contemporary framework. The result is a hybrid narrative form that integrates visual semiotic devices with verbal storytelling, enriched by a network of intertextual references – both classical and contemporary.

The historical and literary consistency of the project owes much to the scholarly contribution of Enass Khansa, whose expertise ensures fidelity to the source material while allowing for interpretive fluidity. Equally crucial, however, is the sophisticated semiotic sensibility informing the multimodal design of the work, a sensibility that can be traced to Lena Merhej’s sustained research into the poetics of graphic narration.

In her 2015 doctoral dissertation, *Analysis of Graphic Narratives: War in Lebanese Comics* (Jacobs University Bremen)⁵⁰, Merhej conducted a corpus-based analysis of adult-oriented Lebanese comics that engage with war, focusing in particular on the visual and narrative strategies used to represent conflict and militarised subjectivities. Her methodology, which synthesises

⁴⁹ G. Kress, *Multimodality*, cit. p. 35.

⁵⁰ L. Merhej, *Analysis of Graphic Narratives: War in Lebanese Comics*, PhD thesis, Jacobs University, 2015.

insights from narratology, multimodality theory, and formalist approaches to comics, culminated in the creation of a visual-analytical tool named *Amphibian* – a software designed to capture the layered semiotic operations specific to graphic storytelling.

As she wrote: «The automated interface is called *Amphibian*, based on the idea of ‘in-between-ness’ developed in the *Samandal* mission statement⁵¹. The name is relevant particularly because it is closely related to the amphibious ‘in-between-ness’ of comics – or multi-stability between text and image, past and present, fast and slow, line and table, traditional and experimental, high and popular art, and all mentioned in the first editorial of the magazine issued by *Samandal*. [...] The Comics Analytical system, *Amphibian* is a proposal for comics’ software that is designed to analyze comics and that could be also a tool for artists to create, organize and remix»⁵².

This “amphibious in-between-ness” is distinctly operative in *Ḥaddaṭatnī wa qālat*, where it enhances the convergence of historical textuality, poetic interpolation, and graphic narrativity. As such, this intermedial work stands as a paradigmatic example of how contemporary Arab visual culture mobilises inherited literary forms within new multimodal regimes of meaning.

Indeed, since modalities represent defining features of media forms, the theoretical foundations of multimodality are necessarily intertwined with the principles of multimodality and intermediality. This interconnected framework gains further relevance when intertextuality is introduced, revealing that meaning is not confined to the boundaries of a single medium but is dynamically generated through the interaction of texts, references, and cultural frameworks across multiple expressive modes. As Bateman aptly observed, «the ascendancy of the multimodal document is also accompanied and accelerated by the dramatic growth of technologies by which such documents are produced, distributed and consumed»⁵³ – that is, multimodality is not merely an aesthetic or communicative choice; it is also a direct outcome of the technological transformation that has reshaped the infrastructures of cultural production, distribution, and reception – from authoring tools and software platforms to digital dissemination channels and audience practices.

In the film *Une histoire d’amour et de désir*, far from presenting the pre-modern erotic literature as a relic of a bygone era, Leyla Bouzid breathes

⁵¹ I. Licitra, “A Lebanese Recipe to Say the Unspeakable: Verbal and Figurative Language Against the Censorship”, in L. Benedetti; A. R. Suriano; P. Villani (a cura di), *Stigma, censure e oscenità. L’indicibile nelle culture del Mediterraneo e dell’Asia orientale*, Orientalia Editrice, Roma 2020, p. 82.

⁵² L. Merhej, *Analysis of Graphic Narratives*, cit., pp. 142, 158.

⁵³ J. Bateman, *Multimodality and Genre. A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal Documents*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2008, p. 2.

new life into the literary *corpus* she recontextualises, allowing them to shape the personal and cultural awakenings of the film's protagonists. In this fusion of past and present, classical Arabic poetry is not positioned as remote or obsolete but rather becomes a dynamic intertext that informs contemporary subjectivities and mediates the tensions between tradition and modernity, cultural inheritance and individual agency. Through the interweaving of poetic language, visual storytelling, and cinematic affect, the film exemplifies how premodern literary forms can be recontextualised within new multimodal frameworks, demonstrating that classical texts retain the capacity to shape present-day narratives of desire, identity, and self-expression. Ultimately, what emerges from this analysis is a renewed conception of poetry, not as a static or antiquated cultural form, but as a dynamic and multimodal practice, capable of engaging with the complexities of a digital society in which meaning is increasingly shaped through audiovisual, performative, and intertextual channels.

This dynamic is also evident in the enduring success of the talent show *Amīr al-šu'arā'*, albeit manifesting with a distinct set of outcomes. Its longevity and widespread popularity over the past decade can largely be attributed to the intimate connection between pan-Arab identity and the poetic tradition.

Despite this foundational link, the televised performance of the poem *al-Ši'r yağma'unā* exemplifies a reworking of the classical heritage that foregrounds an explicit and recurrent encomiastic agenda, designed to celebrate Emirati patronage of the programme and to reaffirm Abu Dhabi's elevated status within the contemporary cultural landscape. The text draws upon a well-established repertoire of images deeply rooted in the collective memory, but it notably lacks sustained intertextual engagement with a defined poetic *corpus*. Concurrently, the televisual staging employs theatrical conventions, scenic design, and digital graphics to generate a resonant, amplified communicative effect. However, the proliferation of modes and media involved simultaneously necessitates processes of simplification and codification, which paradoxically limit the interpretive scope and universal appeal traditionally associated with poetry.

This tension underscores the challenges and compromises inherent in adapting poetic forms within multimodal media environments, where communicative efficacy often comes at the expense of poetic complexity and openness.

Within the triadic framework of intertextuality, intermediality, and multimodality, the modal transposition and adaptation of premodern poetic forms and texts – whether rooted in classical heritage or reimagined through contemporary innovation – are revitalised through the convergence of diverse communicative modalities, including audiovisual, graphic, performative, textual, and spatial modes of expression. This hybrid nature strengthens

the intricate network of intermedial elements and intertextual references, enabling contemporary Arab artists not only to recontextualise inherited literary traditions but also to reconfigure them in ways that resonate with the logic of contemporary media, thereby engaging younger and more diverse audiences attuned to digital aesthetics.