

Review

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Andrew Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), ISBN 9781503631441 (pb).

Two photographs of a merchant's sidewalk kiosk in a Cairo neighbourhood bookend Andrew Simon's 2022 monograph. The first, taken in 2015, shows a tall glass case housing 'hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cassettes covered in a thick coat of dust' (1). In the second photograph, from 2019, the tapes are gone: 'the shop's towering display case no longer contained a single cassette recording' (179). When Simon first encountered the tower of tapes, the store's proprietor explained regretfully that 'the age of cassettes was over', thus the undisturbed dust – and the low prices he was offering. Upon Simon's discovery of the cassettes' absence on his return trip, the store owner had a different lament: the tapes had been confiscated by the state because of an expired permit.¹

The two photographs represent in visual form Simon's claim that cassettes open 'a window onto everyday life' in Egypt (3, 7), a theme he explores throughout the book. Simon has a keen eye for details that reveal the social life of cassette technology, as when he observes that the kiosk's tapes compete with baby wipes and sunflower seeds for customers' attention or when he performs a close reading of a discarded family photo that prominently displays a cassette player. But he is also invested in the broader implications of cassettes, especially as they took part in and shaped Egypt's *infitah*, the 'opening' of its economy to private investment initiated by President Anwar Sadat in 1974. One of Simon's central arguments is that 'cassette technology decentralized state-controlled Egyptian media long before the advent of satellite television and the internet' (3). The kiosk owner's triumphs and woes offer a microcosm of that fraught relationship among retailers, producers, and the government.

The photographs of this one small store also offer a window into Simon's methodology, shaped as much by his wide-ranging curiosity and obvious love for ephemera as it was by the lack of relevant materials available in formal archival collections. What *was* available to Simon was a 'shadow archive' – a 'constellation of visual, textual, and audio materials that exist outside the Egyptian National Archives' (13). Visual materials turn out to be central sources in this study of a sonic medium. Some of Simon's most compelling documents are

¹ Because of the constraints of academic publishing, the photos are monochrome and hardly sharp. Fortunately, a clear full-colour reproduction of the first can be seen in a 2023 online article by Simon in *Al Jazeera*. Andrew Simon, 'Sixty Years of Sound: The Cassette's Past Present and Future in Egypt', *Al Jazeera*, 30 August 2023, www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/30/sixty-years-of-sound-the-cassettes-past-present-and-future-in-egypt (accessed 17 May 2024).

photographs found in family albums and cartoons published in the popular press, which he often discovered not in libraries but in markets, stored haphazardly in large piles or stuffed into garbage bags. Given Simon's eclectic and dogged sleuthing, born of inclination and necessity, *Media of the Masses* would be a fascinating case study in a research methods course. (I would have welcomed, however, some reflection on how Simon's identity and his positionality as a scholar and outsider informed his methods and shaped his observations and interactions.)

Simon organizes the six chapters of the book into two main parts. The two chapters in Part I, 'Selling' and 'Desiring', examine the development of a market for cassettes from the perspective of consumers and smugglers, respectively. Part II contains four chapters, likewise titled with single-word gerunds: 'Censuring', 'Copying', 'Subverting', and 'Archiving'. The first three of these explore tensions that arose around the rise of cassettes as a popular medium, with case studies on *sha'bi* music (a widely beloved genre condemned as 'vulgar' by state authorities); piracy and the rise of Egypt's 'cassette police'; and Shaykh Imam's song 'Baba Nixon' ('Father Nixon'), which skewered the official telling of the 1974 visit by the disgraced US president. The final chapter stands apart, surveying the various efforts to preserve audiocassettes independent of state institutions. The book's organization is meant to suggest a mixtape with the two parts representing A and B sides, though I am not sure what it would mean to experience the book as Simon intends. (I did not feel the urge to eject it and flip it over after reaching the end of chapter 2, though perhaps the way Simon concludes each chapter by teasing the next emulates the crossfading between tracks on a well-produced mix.) Nevertheless, I found the sequence of case studies compelling and likely more engaging than a chronological structuring.

Rather than examine each chapter in turn, I want to reflect on two broad issues that I repeatedly paused to contemplate as I read *Media of the Masses*. The first is how music technologies serve as agents of change, whether personal, cultural, or political. The second and related issue revolves around the darker side of technology, how it can be deployed to demean, degrade, or divide.

Throughout the book, Simon asserts variations on a central claim about the power of cassettes. For example, 'audiotapes empowered anyone to become an artist' (80); they 'enabl[ed] essentially anyone to be a cultural producer' (108); 'enabled anyone to become a cultural distributor' (111); and 'empowered an unprecedented number of people to become cultural distributors, changing the very circulation of cultural content' (113). Collectively, these claims paint a picture of radical social change in which those previously excluded from formal power structures come to influence the production and distribution of culture to an unprecedented degree. 'In the end', he writes in the final chapter, 'by following traces of cassette-tape technology and mobilising the memories of its users, we were able to elucidate the production of Egyptian culture from the bottom up and call into question the politics of its top-down preservation' (176). From this perspective, the cassette is a protagonist in a broader drama, imbued with the qualities of a plucky underdog battling the formidable monolith of state-run media. At the same time, however, Simon resists a straightforward characterization of cassette technology as a heroic change agent. As he points out, the very qualities that made cassettes

accessible to anyone were also harnessed by the government to reinforce the status quo: 'Mobile, durable, and affordable, audiotapes presented the state and its constituent bodies with a powerful technology for shaping Egypt's acoustic culture' (106).

Simon seems to want it both ways, depicting the cassette as a tool for promoting individual self-expression and voicing resistance *and* as a potentially repressive, homogenising force in the hands of the state. And he is right: cassettes functioned in both ways. This nuance, this rejection of common binaristic depictions of technology as utopian or dystopian, as forces for good or for evil, is one of the strengths of this book. If I have a critique here, it is that this nuance arrives belatedly. The introduction offers a more one-sided, bottom-up characterization of the use of cassette technology in Egypt that later chapters complicate. It would have been helpful to hear early on, for example, that 'cassettes did not simply challenge high, state-sanctioned culture but were also integral to its circulation' (104). In one of the final pages of the book, Simon makes a valuable point about agency that also would have had more force if stated in the introduction. In a recommendation for future research, he writes that more work needs to be done to understand 'everyday technologies, not as historical actors in their own right but as tools infused with agency by people, items whose lives, much like those of their users, may reveal a great deal about the past' (184).

Simon's interest in the multivalent qualities of technology means that he is unafraid to reveal the darker side of cassettes, the second issue I want to address. Chapter 2 considers the 'criminal biography of cassette technology in the 1970s and 1980s' in Egypt (51), two threads of which involve theft and smuggling, while chapter 3 addresses cassettes as perpetrators of noise pollution and vulgarity (as described by Egypt's official censors). Chapter 4 chronicles the rise of piracy and the Sisyphean efforts of Egypt's 'cassette police' to stop it. To be clear, Simon is not taking a deterministic view of technology or even implying that the distinctive qualities of the cassette inevitably lead to certain uses. Rather, he sees cassettes as 'tools infused with agency by people' who are guided by their values, biases, and insecurities. Some of the book's most intriguing stories come in these chapters. He recounts the exploits of Wafiq Fayid, the brash 12-fingered cassette player thief who intentionally left prints of his child-sized bonus digits at his crime scenes to throw authorities off his trail (57–9) and tells of the arrest and decades-long repression of Shaykh Imam, whose 'Baba Nixon' circulated on cassette outside the control of state authorities (131–47). I cite these examples to acknowledge and encourage this exploration of the negative valence of music and its technologies. The literature on music censorship and piracy is already robust; Simon enriches the discourse with his dual focus on cassette technology and modern Egypt.² Scholars have been increasingly turning their attention to the narrower subject of how music technologies do harm. Examples include Suzanne Cusick's study of music in the detention camps during the so-called Global War on Terror and Kyle Devine's research

2 For broader studies of music censorship and piracy, see Patricia Hall, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Barry Kernfeld, *Pop Song Piracy: Disobedient Music Distribution since 1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

on recording technology as an exploiter of natural and human resources.³ Taking a cue from these studies, I wonder whether cassettes played a role in interrogations of political dissidents in Egypt as tools of sonic torture and to what extent the manufacture and disposal of cassettes have contributed to environmental degradation in Egypt. These would no doubt be challenging topics to research. I was not expecting Simon to cover them in his book; rather, I mention them here as avenues for further, if fraught, exploration.

A certain wistfulness pervades *Media of the Masses*. The first page cites the kiosk owner's lament that 'the age of cassettes was over'; later, Simon refers to the 'once robust cassette tape culture' in Egypt (173) and then notes in the conclusion, 'Today, one is hard-pressed to find a cassette player to listen to the tapes cited in this book' (186). By the time Simon was conducting his research, the heyday of the cassette in Egypt had long passed. But just as *Media of the Masses* was going to press, a new trend was being reported in English-language media around the world: the comeback of the cassette.⁴ Sales of blank cassettes, pre-recorded cassettes, and tape players of all types were on the rise. Pop groups – including some of the biggest names in the business such as Taylor Swift, Harry Styles, and Blackpink – were increasingly releasing new music and reissuing older music on tape. Young people started thinking cassettes were cool. As I was writing this review, I wondered whether cassettes were also making a comeback in Egypt. I could not get a clear sense, no doubt because of my lack of Arabic. (When I asked a search engine, 'Are cassettes making a comeback in Egypt?' most of the top results were either reviews of *Media of the Masses* or articles by or interviews with Simon.) But if cassettes are making a comeback in Egypt, we can be sure, as we learn in *Media of the Masses*, that their creation, consumption, dissemination, and regulation will tell us a great deal about everyday life in Egypt. I hope Andrew Simon is on the case.

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3 Suzanne G. Cusick, "'You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World . . .': Music in the Detention Camps of the 'Global War on Terror'", *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 (2008), 1–26; and Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: A Political Economy of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

4 See, for example, Steve Knopper, 'Cassettes are Making a Comeback, But Can Production Keep Up?', *Billboard*, 1 February 2023, www.billboard.com/pro/cassette-tapes-comeback-taylor-swift-artists/ (accessed 17 May 2024); and Marc Masters, 'Tape's Not Dead: The Cassette Comeback', in *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 151–73.