

Special Dossier

Living 2016
 Cultural Codes and Arrays
 in Arab Everyday Worlds
 Five Years After the “Arab Spring”

Proceedings of a workshop, held at the
 Department for Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS),
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edited by
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Introduction: *Living 2016* and the *In 2016* Project

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Abstract

This introduction presents the idea as well as the theoretical, methodological and ethical background of the *In 2016* project, a research project that looks into the realities of everyday life and other post-revolutionary lifeworlds (*Lebenswelten*) in Egypt and Tunisia. Its aim is to provide a kind of ‘encyclopedia of 2016’ that enables users, in a snapshot portrait of one year, to ‘jump right into’ and move around (via cross-references) in post-revolutionary Arab realities; a tool that allows readers to approximate the experience of ‘how it feels/felt’ to live in these countries in this period of transition and historic change that the Arab World is currently going through. Taking its inspiration from Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT’s *In 1926*, an “essay on historical simultaneity,” the project focuses on two key fields of cultural production where salient issues and ‘the meaning of life’ are regularly discussed and from where reflections of bodily experiences, emotions and affects can be collected: fiction and social media.

The present *dossier spécial* emerged from a first, exploratory workshop connected to the *In 2016* project. The dossier’s objective is twofold: while the introduction will give the reader an idea of background of the project in general, the contributions will mirror a first stage in the project group’s experience: the collection of an overwhelmingly huge amount of fresh relevant material, its ‘close reading’ or ‘thick description’, and the individual researchers’ first, preliminary attempts to find the “arrays”, “codes” and “collapsed codes” that seem to be typical of living the ‘2016 experience’.

Keywords: Historiography of the ‘Arab Spring’, social media, fiction

The present dossier contains the ‘proceedings’, enriched by a few additional contributions, of a workshop, held in May 2016 at the University of Oslo, Norway, under the title *Living 2016: Cultural codes and arrays in Arab everyday worlds*. The workshop was the first in a series of both smaller and larger gatherings, to be continued in 2017 and 2018, connected to the NRC¹-funded research project *In 2016: How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the ‘Arab Spring’*.² It gathered a number of researchers who share an interest in everyday life and popular culture in the contemporary Arab world, with a particular focus on Egypt and Tunisia, with the aim of an initial collection of observations and impressions as well as a preliminary discussion of some theoretical and methodological issues arising from the project’s objective to produce a historiographical work on life in the present-day Arab world.

1 Norwegian Research Council (NRC) / Norges forskningsråd (NFR), <www.forskningsradet.no>.

2 Project website: <<http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/the-arab-world-five-years-after-the-arab-spring/>>.

In the Call for Papers, the organizers had explained the case of the project as follows:

In contrast to the overwhelming focus on political and security issues that dominates not only Western media reports but also much of the research on the contemporary Middle East, the *In 2016* project places the socio-cultural sphere at the core of its interests. It aims to foreground salient aspects of the everyday life, the concerns and the expectations of ordinary Arabs five years after the 2011 uprisings.

Instead of assuming that 2011 is a threshold year and the 2011 uprisings are a turning point, the project deals with ordinary time lived by ordinary people. The target year—2016—was chosen on this basis, when it was still to come. The arbitrariness of this choice aims to enable a look at cultural dynamics without a prefixed set of topics and a pre-oriented reading frame.

The main incentive behind the effort the project designers made to submit an application to the NFR~NRC was indeed to try to get funding for a kind of research that seemed to be almost completely lacking from the media coverage on the contemporary Middle East, but to a large extent also from academia, an approach that would go beyond the mostly superficial day-to-day reporting about elections, a focus on ‘big politics’ and attempts at political prophesy, the sensationalist accounts of violent clashes, the many clichés that regrettably often border on something one is tempted to term ‘neo-Orientalism’.³

As specialists in modern Arabic Literature (Stephan GUTH) and Arabic Media studies (Albrecht HOFHEINZ), the two main project designers were, and still are, convinced that a look into cultural production and social media has a high potential to fill evident gaps, mainly because, in our opinion, these spheres are closer to what matters most—the individual human being—; because they are much richer and therefore also more adequate; and also because we have some tools at hand already that allow for a deeper analysis.

The purpose, then, of the project is to identify phenomena that are, or have the potential of becoming, cultural trends or ways of life, as well as concepts used by people to categorise and structure their experiences and to locate themselves in space and time. This ap-

3 ‘Neo-Orientalism’ is termed a perspective that “recapitulate[s] key elements of Orientalism in a contemporary setting” – Zachary LOCKMAN, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004: 219; cf. also Dag TUASTAD, “Neo-Orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in the Middle East Conflict(s),” *Third World Quarterly*, 24/4 (Aug. 2003): 591-599 <DOI: 10.1080/ 0143659032000105768>. – On the feeling of ‘unease’ that many researchers on the Middle East experienced already earlier, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, as academics whose expertise was challenged both by the events themselves but also by politicians and the media, cf. the collection *Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft: Ein klassisches Fach im Scheinwerferlicht der Politik und der Medien*, edited by Abbas POYA and Maurus REINKOWSKI, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008 (available only in German, unfortunately); as an especially enlightening description, contained in this volume, of the challenges in face of all kinds of prejudices and neo-/Orientalist discourses about Islam (‘Islam spectres/phantoms’, as the author labels them), I would like recommend Manfred SING, “Auf dem Marktplatz der Islamgespenster: Die Islamwissenschaft in Zeiten des Erklärungsnotstandes” [roughly: At the Fair of Islam Phantoms: *Islamwissenschaft* in Urgent Need of Answers], *ibid.*: 171-192. – For an attempt at an update in light of recent developments, cf. my forthcoming article: Stephan GUTH, “A Losing Battle? ‘Islamwissenschaft’ in the Times of Neoliberalism, IS, PEGIDA... and Trump,” scheduled for a *festschrift* to be published by E. J. Brill, Leiden, presumably in early 2018.

proach takes its intellectual inspiration from Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT's⁴ famous study *In 1926*.⁵ Published at a time when the writing of history was itself undergoing a severe crisis (in the wake of Hayden WHITE's discovery of the fictional aspects of historiography and Francis FUKUYAMA's proclamation of the 'end of history'), Gumbrecht intended his book as "an essay on historical simultaneity"⁶ in which he as an author rather than writing *about* the past would retreat as far as possible behind his material and instead let the original sources 'speak themselves', as *directly* as possible. In this way, the reader should experience historical time as *immediately* as possible; when opening the book, s/he should become able to 'jump right into' the world of 1926.

Like any other world of a synchronous section, the year 1926 was of course a complex system of correspondences, oppositions, concepts, etc., a fact that Gumbrecht tried to accommodate by arranging his material like an 'encyclopedia', with entries in *alphabetical order* and the many cross-references between them mirroring the "myriad labyrinthine paths of contiguity, association, and implication"⁷ within the large variety of phenomena observable in the world of 1926. This arrangement would allow the reader to choose his/her own way through this world and to move around in it in an associative manner, exploring one phenomenon after the other.

Gumbrecht was also eager, and so are the contributors to the *In 2016* project that aspires to emulate his model, to underline the fact that the result of what can be achieved via such an approach can never claim to represent the totality of the worlds of 1926 or 2016; rather, what we can hope to get is "an asymmetrical network", a "rhizome"⁸ of sometimes connected, sometimes unconnected individual aspects, phenomena, traits, structures, etc., a loosely woven fabric that, ideally, does cover a lot, but that also will always have considerable holes.

Like Gumbrecht, the contributors to the *In 2016* 'encyclopedia'⁹ will try to describe "the most frequently observed phenomena and configurations" met in the 'target year', and

4 Born 1948, Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University, California; website: <<https://dcl.stanford.edu/people/hans-ulrich-gumbrecht>>. For more general information cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Ulrich_Gumbrecht>.

5 H. U. GUMBRECHT, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time*, Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard UP, 1997. – The first acquaintance of the writer of the present Introduction with Gumbrecht's study goes back to the late 1990s / early 2000s when I dealt with the problem of historical periodization (in the context of my post-doctoral thesis, a comparative study of the history of the Arabic and Turkish novel). I did, however, not make systematic use of it earlier than 2005/06 when I prepared a case study on an Egyptian short story written—presumably—in (or at least around) the very same year 1926; cf. Stephan GUTH, "The Modern School and Global Modernity: The Example of an Egyptian Ghost Story of the mid-1920s (Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn, *Qiṣṣat 'ifrīṭ*)," *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 10/3 (2007): 231-250, <DOI: 10.1080/14752620701664597>.

6 GUMBRECHT 1997: 433.

7 GUMBRECHT 1997: 435.

8 GUMBRECHT 1997: 435.

9 Here and in the following, the term 'encyclopedia' is used for the sake of convenience only. The reader should however always remain aware of the fact that neither Gumbrecht nor the *In 2016* project have an 'encyclopedic' ambition (in the original sense of the word as a general, all-encompassing education and

with this the general cultural atmosphere—Gumbrecht would prefer the German term *Stimmung*—according to three main categories: *arrays* (French: *dispositifs*), *binary codes*, and *codes collapsed*.¹⁰

Arrays are ways in which “*artifacts, roles, and activities influence bodies*”, because these “artifacts, roles, and activities [...] require the human bodies to enter into specific spatial and functional relations to the everyday-worlds they inhabit”.¹¹ For instance, for the year 1926 Gumbrecht identified the following arrays (my selection):

Artifacts: Airplanes | Assembly Lines | Automobiles | Bars | Elevators | Gomina | Gramophones | League of Nations | Movie Palaces | Mummies | Ocean Liners | Railroads | Revues | Roof Gardens | Telephones | Wireless Communication

Roles: Americans in Paris | Employees | Engineers | Hunger Artists | Reporters | Stars

Activities: Boxing | Bullfighting | Cremation | Dancing | Endurance | Jazz | Mountaineering | Murder | Six-Day Races | Strikes

What Gumbrecht calls **codes** are *clusters of arrays* that coexist and overlap in a space of simultaneity and “tend to generate discourses which transform [their] confusion into [...] *alternative options*”,¹² e.g.,

Codes: Action vs. Impotence | Authenticity vs. Artificiality | Center vs. Periphery | Immanence vs. Transcendence | Individuality vs. Collectivity | Male vs. Female | Present vs. Past | Silence vs. Noise | Sobriety vs. Exuberance | Uncertainty vs. Reality

Since such binary codes “provide *principles of order* within the unstructured simultaneity of everyday-worlds, one might”, according to Gumbrecht, “reserve the concept of ‘*culture*’ for the ensemble of such codes.”¹³

When the codes lose their de-paradoxifying function, Gumbrecht calls them **collapsed codes**. Collapsed codes, he says, “are *particularly visible* because, as *areas of malfunction and entropy*, they attract specific discursive attention and, often, specific *emotional energy*.”¹⁴ Here are the collapsed codes the author identified for his target year:

Codes Collapsed: Action = Impotence (Tragedy) | Authenticity = Artificiality (Life) | Center = Periphery (Infinitude) | Immanence = Transcendence (Death) | Individuality = Collectivity (Leader) | Male = Female (Gender Trouble) | Present = Past (Eternity)

training in the essentials of liberal arts and sciences). What is meant here is simply a collection of articles/essays/entries, arranged alphabetically.

10 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.

11 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434 (my emphasis, S.G.).

12 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434 (my emphasis, S.G.).

13 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434 (my emphasis, S.G.).

14 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.

It goes without saying that work in the *In 2016* project has not yet reached the stage where we would be able to identify the most prominent arrays, codes and collapsed codes of our target year—in the moment I write this introduction the group has just finished the first step—though a very important one: the collection of ‘raw data’—on its way to the final product (which is planned to come not only in book form but also as a website with the help of which the reader/user will have the possibility to re-visit the year 2016 by ‘clicking him/herself through’ it, the cross-references in the book corresponding to active links in the web version). Even less far had we arrived in May 2016 when the workshop from which the following papers emerged, was held. Yet, both the fruitful discussions triggered by the presentations as well as the time that has elapsed between the workshop and the submission and editing of the papers have without doubt contributed to a deepened engagement with the issues treated in the papers, not the least thanks to the fact that every contributor to the present *dossier spécial* has had the chance to be each other’s peer-reviewer and to profit from being peer-reviewed by everybody else.

As the dossier is now it mirrors very faithfully not only the large variety of the material that the project has to cope with and that will—I believe this can be said with some certainty already now—without doubt provide valuable insight into many aspects of life and many lifeworlds that until now are only rarely, if at all, written and talked about in the media (from language practices to dark humour, from the approach to the past to the imagination of the future, from soap operas to ‘New Age sufism’, from the feeling of alienation in one’s own country to attempts to uphold some sparks of humanity in an increasingly anti-human environment). But the dossier also provides some nice examples of the many ways of collecting our 2016 material and of somehow processing it. While Ragnhild J. ZORGATI and Mona ABAZA contribute with personal impressions and reflections, underlining the fact that (unlike Gumbrecht) the researcher is now also often a personally involved observer, other colleagues prefer to present their thoughts in a more ‘processed’ form, trying to identify at least *some* arrays, codes, or collapsed codes in a Gumbrecht’ian spirit, without however leaving the classical genre of a research article. Others, including myself and Albrecht HOFHEINZ, focus on a more or less uncommented presentation of the ‘material itself’ and the voices of the sources, while not refraining from suggesting some ‘candidates’ that seem to have the potential of deserving an entry in the final ‘2016 ency’. Furthermore, as will be clear from some contributions, both of the impressions- and the article-type, we, the editors, have ourselves often added a Gumbrecht’ian or pre-Gumbrecht’ian layer to the texts of our colleagues by highlighting in **bold** some terms that struck us, based on our experiences and readings of other 2016 material, as obviously worth to be taken into consideration and discussed when Stage II of the project will gather way.

There is probably no better way to conclude this introduction than to draw a list of all these terms. Together with the list of keywords and preliminary suggestions of arrays, codes and codes collapsed that has been created in another place—an online working platform we called our “*In 2016* Researchers’ Notebook”—this list serve as one of the starting points from where we will set out in 2017. It goes without saying that the list is still unedited and not double-checked for those entries that could be treated as one. This, and many other things, will be subject to inspiring group discussions—as well as two other workshops... But first, the list:

4share.com	Auto-documentary	Chewing gum
Absurdity	Autonomy	Child: ~ labour; importance of ~hood
Academic unemployment	Average apolitical co-citizen	Christian
<i>Adab sākhir</i>	Back to the roots	Civil disobedience
Adventurous	Bardo	Clash(es)
Advice	<i>Barrah</i>	Close-up
Affluence	Bāsim Yūsuf	Collaborate
Affordable food & affordable housing	Be yourself	Collapse
Ahli massacre	Beard	Collective memory
Airport	Beautiful Islam	Comfort
Alarming	Beauty	Coming-of-age
Alexandria	Belief	Commentary
Alienation / <i>ghurbah</i>	Belly-dance	Commitment
Alone	Belonging	Common destiny
Alterity	Bereaved parents	Commuting
Ambivalence	Bestsellers	Comparing: past vs. Present
American dream vs. nightmare	Betrayal	Compounds
American pop	Beyond repair	Concrete: ~ building, ~ walls
<i>‘ammiyyah</i>	Big brother	Confidence
Amnesia	<i>Bildungsroman</i>	Confrontation
Anarchy	Black humour	Conscience
Ancient regime, old regime	Blackmail	Constitution
Anger	Blasphemy laws	Consumer society
Anonymity	Blind young man	Contemplative
Anti-authoritarianism	Blind young man	Continuity
Anticlimactic	Bodily, body	Contrasting/contradicting
Anti-colonialism	Boring	Conversion, the convert
Apocalypse, apocalyptic	Bourguiba	Copt
Appealing	Boyfriend	Corruption
Arab spring; ~ as ‘export model’	Breaking taboos	Cosmopolitanism
Armed forces land projects agency	Bureaucracy	Courage, ~ vs. Fear/Timidity
Army	Bureaucracy, bureaucratic routine	Cramped confines
Arranged marriages	Cairo: downtown, city centre, the divided city, urban de-composition, militarization	Creativity
Arrogance	Capital vs. Provinces	Crime, organized ~
Artist	Care = imprisonment	Critical assessment, ~ of the recent past
<i>‘ashwā’iyyāt</i>	Carthage film festival	Culture, pre-Islamic ~al heritage, ~al emancipation of “the South”
Asphyxia	Cartons and boxes	Daily life as slow torture
Assessment: of the ‘Arab spring’, of the deeper past	Cartoons	Daily routine
Authenticity	Centre vs. Periphery	Dancing
Authoritarianism	Challenged stereotypes	Danger
Autobiographical	Challenging	Dark comedy
	Chaos	
	Check point	

Dates: Prize of ~	Emancipation	Frustration
Dead end	Emasculation	Garbage, filth
Death threats	Emigration	Gated communities
Decay	Emotional: ~ mobilization, ~ism	Gender inequality
<i>Déclassement social</i>	Empowerment	Generation stuck <i>ghurbah</i>
Decline	Emptiness of public spaces	Goodreads
Defy all odds	Empty battery	Graft
Dehumanising	Endurance	Grief
Demanding	Europe	Grief
Depression	Everyday life	Guidance
Derision	Exciting	Guilt
Desire “to live a life to the full”	Exemplary story	Handicapped protagonists
Desolation	Exhaustion	Hands of God
Desperation, Desperate hope	Exile	Head scarf
Detective	Existential and creativity crisis	Health problems, health sys- tem
Detention	Exodus, to leave	Heat
Determination	Expat/immigrant milieu	Hectic pace and routine of modern life
Dialect	Explain: the present, re- cent/contemporary history, taḥrīr events, find explana- tions for what happened	Helicopters
Dichotomies	Exploitation	Hell
Dignity	Explore the past	Helpers
Dire living conditions	Facebook	Helplessness
Disappearance	False: ~ appearance vs. True being, ~ Islam	Hijab
Discussing politics	Family: constraints imposed by ~, ~ honour, ~ pressure, familial solidarity	Hip-hop
Disillusionment	Fantastic	History
Disintegration	Fear	Holistic approach, portrayal
Document	Feel the beat	Homosexual
Dog	Few people	Honesty
Domestic violence	Fights: constant ~, street ~, skirmishes	Hope: dazzling~, ~-inspiring, condemned to ~, defiant ~, no illusions
Double life	Flag	Horoscope
Doubt	Flight	Horror fiction
Drama	Foreign experts/specialists	Hospital
Dreams	Foreign machinations	Hospitality
Dress	Fragmentation, fragmented society	Housing shortages
Drop-out	Freedom, ~ of expression, ~ = anarchy: the ambivalent revolution	Humanity, human togetherness
Drugs		Humour
Dust		Husband and wife
Duty		Hush!
Dying father		Hygiene
Dying of human emotions		Idealism
Dystopia		Identity
Economy, weak		
Education		
Egyptian soil		
Egyptian-Tunisian competition		

Idle man vs. Hard-working woman	Language: native, standard, dialects, ʿammiyyah/dārijah vs. Fuṣḥā, arabic vs. French, langue-pont	Moustaches
Ignorance	Lawlessness	Moving
Immorality	Learning a lesson	Mubarak regime
Imperialism	Leaves everything behind	Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street
Importance: of cultural production, of education	Less well-off	Music
Imports	Lessons to draw	Muslim Brotherhood
Impotence	Lives may be rebuilt	Nail polish
Incompleteness of the revolution	Logic of control	Narrow spaces, closed rooms
Independence	Loose morals	Nation: ~, ~ state, ~al pride, ~alist hero, ~-rebuilding
Individual = collective: pre-taḥrīr conditions	Loss: of identity, of home	National imaginary
Individual appropriation	Love	Naturalness
Individual happiness	Loyalty	Neighbour: the treacherous ~
Indoctrination	Lynching	Neo-liberal commodities, ~ market
Inferiority	<i>Mada masr</i>	New Humanism
Injustice	Male vs. Female	Newcomers
Inner struggle	Malta	Nightmare
Innocent average citizen	Marginal, ~ized groups	Nike
Insignificance	Marry	Niqab
Internet: as source of know-how, internet café	Maspero	No one dares to confront
Intransigence	Maturation	Noise
Introspectiveness	Meandering, wandering, pondering, reflecting	Nostalgia
Inventiveness and creativity	Medical report, ~ treatment	Nouveaux riches
IS, ISIL, Dāʿish	Mediocrity	Observe
Islām Ġāwīsh	Megacity	Official discourse/narrative vs. Hidden truth/lived reality/visual evidence
Islamic networks	Melancholic	Older generation
Isolation	Memory	Open vs. Secret
January 25	Metafictional reflection	Oppression
Jews	Metamorphosis	Order = Chaos
Jihadist	Metro line	Ordinary citizen = Hero / The Nobody = Omnipotent (Enduring everyday life)
Journey	Metropolis	Ordinary people
July 1952 coup/revolution	Migrant labour	Originality/authenticity
Juxtaposition: reality vs. Official discourse	Migration	Oscillation
Keep appearances	Militarization of daily urban life	Outside, <i>barrah</i>
<i>Khawāga</i> complex	Military and financial aid	Outsider = insider
Kitsch	Miniskirt	Pan-Africanism
Know one's place	Minorities, non-Muslim	Pan-Arab
Laboratory, trying out	Mistrust	Panoramic/holistic approach
“La vie en vert”	Mobile phone	Paralyzing
Lack of security	Modern architecture	Paramilitary
	Modesty	

Pardon	Psychiatrist, Psychology	Rolls vs. Volkswagen
Participation, political, elections	Public morality	Romance
Parvenus	Public space	Rubbish
Passport	Punico-berbère	Ruin
Past: ~ as treasure box, ~ vs. Present, recent ~	Puritanism	Sacrificing
Patient	<i>qillat adab</i>	Safe-haven
Patriotism	Quest for oneself	Safety
Pending	Questions	Salafi look
People vs. Elite	Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah	Salafi looks
Persistence	Racism	Satire, <i>adab sākhir</i>
Persistence of society’s discrimination	Radicalisation	Schengen
Personal	Real estate, ~projects	Screen world
Pessimism	Reality: ~ vs. Fiction, ~ = a joke (satire)	Sea
Pharaohs: Egypt’s modern ~	Re-assessment of the past	Search for meaning
Physical	Rebalance	Second generation Arabs
Piety vs. Blasphemy	Recent history/past	Secret
Pity	Reconciliation	Secret past
Pleasure	Reformism	Secularists
Poetry	Refugee	Security, lack of ~
Police, ~ state, ~ = criminals	Regime, despotic system	Self-confidence
Political rock	Register	Self-determination
Pollution	Reintegration	Self-realisation, be oneself, feel yourself
Pornography	Rejection	Self-reliance
Posthuman	Relatives	Sense of duty
Potential	Religiosity vs. Humanity	Sense of loss
Poverty	Religious intolerance	Sexual harassment
Powerlessness, impotence	Religious symbols	<i>shabāb</i>
Prayer mats: Islamism occupying public spaces	Religious-political activism	Shaken
Pre-‘Arab Spring’	Remains from the colonial past	al-Shāri‘ al-Tis‘īn
Present = future (dystopia)	Remake	Shaving/depilation (whole body)
Present tragedy	Remembering, ~ vs. Memory loss, erasure of reminiscence	Sheesha
Pride	Resilience	Shouting
Prison	Resistance: (non-violent) ~ , ~ vs. Terror	Silent resistance
Privacy	Resoluteness	Singing
Private clinic	Resourcefulness	Slavery
Processing	Restaurants	Slow-motion
Progress	Return	Slums
Proprietors	Reveal the truth	Small shops
Prostitution	Revenge	Sneakers
Protest marches	Revolution	Soccer
Provinces: Tunisian south	Rhetoric of opposition	Social conditions/poverty, inequality
	Risky	Social control

SODIC	Terror, “war on ~”, ~ists, ~rist	Uphill
Soldier heroes	attacks	Urban violence
Solidarity	Threatened by extinction	Urban wars
Spatial distance	Thugs	Utopia
Speaking up	Time pressure / hectic rush	Vanity
Speculation, financial	Timidity	Villette condos
Stagnation	Tolerance	Violence
State violence	Torn between two women	Voice from the radio
Steadfastness	Torture	Voice: to have a ~, listen to me!
Strangeness	Tourism, tourists, tourist re-	Vulnerability
Street café	sorts	War crime
Strong will	Tradition	<i>Waraqah, al-</i>
Subversion	Traditional songs	Waste
Superiority	Traffic jams	<i>waṭan</i> ‘homeland’ = <i>ghurbah</i>
Survival, ~ in dignity	Transfiguration	‘exile’ (alienation)
Suspicion	Translocate	Water, ~ supply
Symbolic-mythical abstraction	Trauma	Wedding errands
System	Travesty	West, ~ernized
Systematic alteration	True identity/self	Whistle-blowing
Taboos	Tuk-tuk	Will to life
<i>ta’dīb</i>	Unauthentic/false	Wish to understand
Tahar Cheriaa	Uncertainty	Women
Taḥrīr	Undecided	Xenophobia
<i>Taḥyā maṣr</i>	Underground	You vs. Us / We vs. Them
Take the challenge	Underprivileged	Young generation
<i>tamarrud</i>	Unemployment	Youth
Taxi	United States	Youthful love
Tears	Unreliable	<i>zaḥmah</i>
Temptation of faith	Unvarnished	
	Unveiling	

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Cairo: Personal Reflections on Enduring Daily Life

MONA ABAZA

Tale I

Meanderings and wanderings through regular commutes to the desert

In Palm Hills we dream of the return of love and beauty... and clear enjoyment... and the return of mercy to our heart... and the dream of the return of culture and the arts.... And enlightened thought.... Palm Hills for construction... the return of the Egyptian spirit (*Advertisement on ONTV channel, during Ramadan, June 2016*).

“La Vie en Rose” located in the 5th Compound Service Center, New Cairo.

“La Vie en Vert.” Villette New Cairo, SODIC. For more information, visit us at the SODIC Sales Center Headquarters km 38 Cairo–Alexandria Desert Road.

“**La Vie en Vert**”¹ is an advertisement I encounter on a daily basis on the depressing desert road that takes me to my simulated-like shopping mall-cum-American University campus located in the eastern desert of New Cairo. The commute is about fifty kilometers one way, thus about one hundred kilometers round-trip. For an American such a **commute** might not be an issue at all, were it not been for the deadly interminable traffic jams paralyzing the city on a daily basis. One could easily argue that the chief predicament of modern Egyptians today is that they waste almost half of their lives in commuting from one end of the city to the other. Not only that, one way of defining who belongs to the working class today in Egypt is through their means of transport and whether the commuter uses three different means of transports to reach one



Visions of a daily commute
Fig. 1: SODIC La Vie en Vert

1 [Editor’s note: Here and in the following, terms emphasised in **bold** indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project’s search for Gumbrecht’ian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed (cf. S. GUTH’s Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier). The emphasis is the editor’s.]

destiny on daily basis—public buses, micro buses, collective taxis, the metro, and **tuc-tucs**—to reach their destination. (See photos 1 and 2).



Visions of a daily commute

Fig. 2: Stand-alone for sale in Village Garden Katameya £E 3.670.000

The construction costs of the 260-acre campus, inaugurated in 2008, rocketed to some \$400 million.² The idea was to hybridize elements of Islamic architectural traditions into modern lines, which succeeds as a first impression. It seems, however, that functionality was neglected by that colossal construction's designers. Eight years have not been sufficient to conciliate my **alienation** from the new campus. At the start of every semester, I have trouble finding my classes. I keep on constantly doubting about myself. Am I ageing prematurely? Perhaps I am suffering from an everlasting **disorientation** that has to do with a continuous **erasure of memory**, inflicted on me by the powers that be and I keep on wondering whether this is becoming a national collective exercise. My nostalgia and sense of loss towards the old Taḥrīr Campus where I grew up and taught for many years has been growing by the year. But the Taḥrīr campus has been altered too and the Cairo I grew up with no longer exists.

2 <<http://www.aucegypt.edu/about/visitor-information/new-cairo-campus>> (accessed 8 September 2016).

Day in, day out indoctrination

Grab your last opportunity for clean air... Grab the last place in heaven... Invest in the clean and beautiful life of the compounds of upscale New Cairo. We provide you with your dream villa and a swimming pool... All you need is to sign a down payment.... Pay a seven years installment to be in paradise... Choose a worthy life in a gated compound... You deserve a more beautiful life...

These sentences are witch-hunting me everywhere, on billboards, in newspapers, on television and last but not least they are sent repeatedly as messages on my mobile phone. Villas, **villetes**, **condos** and **compounds**...

“You deserve a decent life”... This is an advertisement I read somewhere. But what’s a decent life today in Cairo? My Facebook account is constantly invaded by advertisements for lavish villas and walled-off condominiums worth millions, which I cannot afford anyway. And who cares? The last thing I would want is to live in such walled-off spaces among neighbours I would certainly dread. Billboards after billboards selling virtual dreams... Because life at the **heart of Cairo** has turned into **hell**. Truly unsustainable. How long can disposable humanity remain disposable?

We all know that human life here is cheap and worthless, but this is certainly no novelty. I know... I know that I am still quite privileged. Above all I am not a political activist... I do not really fear forced **disappearance**, or incarceration since I am not the clearly targeted age group by the authorities. I am in fact too old to be a suspect by the regime, neither am I really fearing torture or death or being asphyxiated in a police truck by tear gas, as it was the dramatic case in August 2013.³ Nor do I fear being banned from travel, as has been the case for a number of human rights activists, journalists and critics of the military regime.⁴ But who knows? **Big Brother** is expanding by the day.

I am perplexed at how a-political I have become in the last two years. More disturbing is that being a-political does not make life easier, neither does it solve the problem of an infernally chaotic daily life under authoritarian rule and the mounting corruption scandals which confirm vertiginous, unbridled disasters of food, air and water **pollution**, day after day. However, I often speculate about potential, but all too possible, car accidents on my daily ride... The depressing ring road leading to the new campus is lined with endless red-brick slums and then ugly and cheap high-rise buildings.

But, but... “We’ are fortunate, we are not Syria or Libya, we have managed to avoid a civil war and remain as the only secure oasis in an abysmal region”, as countless taxi drivers, several low income publics and above all, the well-off *fulūl* class (the pro-Mubārakists), keep on constantly saying over and over, perhaps as a self-conviction strategy that life has to go on. Even if one lives by endurance, even if life is unbearable, is not stability irreplaceable? Have we not seen how hard it is to experience the turmoil and violence of revolutions? But what is harder: **Revolutions or slow torture in daily life?**

3 See KINGSLEY 2014.

4 On the question of chasing and harassing intellectuals and activists resulting into a massive exodus, see ‘ABD AL-‘AZIZ 2014.

Cairo, early 2016

January 2011 is so remote, almost like a mirage. Has **Tahrīr** been completely deleted from our **memory**? An endless growing sense of **loss** and **desolation** reigns in my surroundings;



Fig. 3: Museum of the Revolution in Tahrīr. Captured 12 December 2012



Fig. 4: Tahrīr. Captured 1 April 2011



Fig. 5: Violent Incidents of Muḥammad Maḥmūd, Captured 23 November 2012

Taḥrīr has been reduced into a **nostalgic** and **utopian** memory among those who have experienced it.⁵ This nostalgic moment translates naturally into a constant struggle to retain, if not freeze memory, even if it is painful and sad, since it is coupled with an eager-



Fig. 6: Taḥrīr, March mourning journalist al-Ḥusaynī Abū Ḍayf, killed in December 2012 during the Ittihādīva Demonstrations. Captured 7 December 2012

5 On the question of growing nostalgia and the sense of loss with respect to the revolution, see the ABOU EL-NAGA 2015.

ness to record and archive the unfolding events of the past five years, as many have been attempting to hopelessly do. That might also explain why there is an urge to recall, invent and re-invent the “lieux de memoire” (Pierre Nora)⁶ of the past five years’ turmoil (see figs. 3-6). This effort is coming to be seen almost as a calling in order to stop the withering away of a vivid memory. Such is the fate of counter-revolutionary moments. Once again, we have been royally overpowered. The dream of change, and the possibility of dreaming, was just a dream turned into a nightmare. This translates into bipolar and pessimistic, if not bleak sentiments. But the present consists of a hard, counter-revolutionary, ruthless moment. The **old regime** has never really departed. The wounded counter-revolutionary powers that have learned the lesson; Taḥrīr is not repeatable and our present is not quite exactly identical to Mubārak’s time. It is certainly much worse.

Tale II

Internal migration, or: The flight to the gated communities?

... For counter-revolution—the word having been coined by Condorcet in the course of the French Revolution—has always remained bound to revolution as reaction is bound to action.

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 1963 [1990]: 18

Internal migration? Or when to decide to leave in favour of **Exodus, to leave this nightmare for good?** So many people I know have already left the country, not to mention some of the young activists who keep on leaving, one after the other. It looks as if I will never have the nerve to leave Egypt once more for good.⁷ I seem to be in denial of my past, I have already migrated once to the North, determined to never come back and did come back nonetheless. How archetypal is this return to one’s roots or origins after the classical, colonial/post-colonial, Ulyssean experience of traveling overseas for the sake of learning?

I seem to be eternally **attached** to Egypt, for without doubt, this country has been my endless source of inspiration. But is there an inspiration without suffering and endurance? “So what’s your problem?” my friends would say, who have to struggle through endless queues in front of the various embassies to obtain short-term visas. “You are privileged to be able to leave whenever you want.”

Some of my acquaintances, who, just like me, are caught in the dilemma of escaping Cairo’s inferno, repeatedly tell me: “We all seem to be bound to follow the urban exodus to the desert. It is the only exit for clean air. Go with the better off to the newly built satellite cities.” New Cairo in the eastern desert, Sheikh Zayed, City View, the ever expanding projects of **SODIC** in both the eastern and western deserts, or the Sixth of October City in

6 NORA 1989.

7 It is no coincidence that in this special dossier Elena CHITI refers to the burning question of exile and homeland in relationship to contemporary fiction.

the western desert, and I have had several students find that their quiet residences on the Cairo–Alexandria desert road that have turned into a densely urbanized area. I cannot help perceiving such an exodus but as speeding up the already **nightmarish dystopia** I am confronted with regularly. I cannot help thinking that in one of my writings, I once called New Cairo in one of my writings the *'ashwā'īyyāt* (the slums) of the rich and I still perceive it as such.

Could my utter distaste for the so-called upscale New Cairo simply stem from my elitist hallucinations. Snobbism perhaps? But if this is Cairo's future, then I certainly don't want to get old here. The schizophrenic aesthetics and the alienating architecture of New Cairo lead me to believe that this must be a conscious **erasure of reminiscence**. For me at least my past life-world has withered away and my **sense of loss** is growing by the day, with each commute to the new campus. These desert landscapes of unfinished, mushrooming hideous constructions I encounter on my daily commute, after crossing the city slums via the Sixth of October flyover, clearly have little to do with the old Cairo I grew up in. I am far from saying that there were no slums in earlier times. I recall quite well what the poor decrepit neighborhoods looked like some four decades ago, and I know, too, that poverty hurts. However, the architectural ugliness induced by quick money and wealth have become a rule, exacerbating the atrocious space/class **divide of the city**. Time and again the sense of **alienation** is renewed.

Coming from the **center of town**, after leaving the Sixth of October bridge, the traveler enters the gigantic and extended zone of the army barrack. One can observe some of the army's industries, the bottled water and soft drinks factories, and privatized spaces, which include their clubs, hotels, the Air Force stadium and endless desert land that we are told is managed by the army. The military area starts at Naṣr City after, just beyond the Sixth of October Bridge. It is followed by the desert with its endless billboards and countless unfinished so-called luxurious, walled-off cities, gated communities, and condos.

After the new flyover, recently constructed by the army, one drives along the famed **al-Shārī' al-Tis'īn** (Road 90). This iconic but otherwise nameless road is the symbolic aperture to the future Cairo, the New upscale Cairo, with its large shopping complexes—including the gigantic Cairo Festival Centre—its endless office spaces, villas, villettes and gated communities of the rich. This landscape looks like a *déjà-vu* copy / cityscape, but of a much worse quality, that I have seen, perhaps in Kuala Lumpur, because it reminds me of the relatively new satellite quarter of Kuala Lumpur called Bandar Utama, where I have once lived for half a year. In reality, in a couple of years, Road 90 will once again look like a replica of earlier Naṣr City in its earlier days. Originally, Naṣr City was a military zone overflowing with army barracks. It eventually evolved into the then new and modern post-colonial satellite city constructed under Nasser, and today it is an agony of unbearable traffic jams, mushrooming shops, and wild, falling-apart construction.

Road 90 quickly evolved into a loud and busy highway with once again interminable **traffic jams**, as if Cairene city planners excel in replicating the same unresolved problems in each newly-built satellite city. As the French would say, these newly constructed replicas are the best example of *la fuite en avant* (the headlong rush forward). If the traffic jams are just as hellish on Road 90, why leave the center and move so far away to the desert? On the right side, once again, sticking to each other and competing in ugliness, one large villa after another and two or three-story buildings; on the left side, offices,

shopping malls, banks, and endless spaces for business. Every morning I ask myself who these lunatics are, who have given away millions for these monstrosities that are just a few meters away from the daily movement of thousands of vehicles. But being located along a lousy highway for the **newly rich** equals to being modern and moving rapidly towards one's destination.

Since the campus moved in 2008, the commute I confront is a nightmare, not only for being stuck in a bus or a car for hours, but even more because the alienating aesthetics that depress me. These horrific grotesque larger-than-life villas of the *nouveaux riches*, glued next to each other, filled with fake quasi-Roman columns, and—noblesse oblige—jammed with flowered wrought iron gates, replicating everywhere, make me say time and again melancholic. It is a sin that these villas fill up all the space that could have surrounded them with gardens or greenery. Then, just a few kilometers before I reach the campus, there is the surreal Future University with its kitsch pseudo-Roman construction. **Kitsch** following more kitsch seems to be the destiny of so called “modern” New Cairo.

This dystopia might not be seen as such by the younger generation and strangely enough, the 2011 Tahrir effect did not manage to undo it. But, purchasing real estate in New Cairo is a good investment, everyone tells me, “you can simply double the price in a couple of years”. **Real estate** never loses value in Egypt, we are told. How many people in my own circle did that? I remain, with only a few of my friends, in the weird minority that remains solid in the center.

The commute time and again. Interminable, unbearable commutes. I choose another road, but it is worse. The routine of being stuck on the Sixth of October Bridge. Constantly dreaming to flee the country? The **militarization** of the urban **downtown** after the bloody incidents of the **Muhammad Mahmud Street** fits together perfectly with the gentrification of another part of the city. Walls and more new walls around the ministries, embassies and the security offices, making it impossible to move in the city.

If the main benefit of the rich is that people can easily plan their life through assets and reserves, which then turn for them into a ‘natural’ device for predicting and thus efficiently shaping the future, this is exactly why the mindset of the poor is mainly caught in the spiral of fatalism. The **hardship of everyday survival** implies that one can never really be able to predict or plan much, particularly about where to live. Yet, what makes the uniqueness of Cairo's urban texture is that even if one is considered to be among the well to do, one can never really predict how the residential quarter so ‘rationally’ chosen will evolve, or how fast the deterioration of the surrounding **public space, noise and air pollution**, will be. This could be understood as a kind of an unplanned form of equality or divine justice, in the sense that even the rich cannot really be spared from the “invasion of the riff-raffs” (a term used with a grain of salt, as it is a typical middle class obsession). It is only that the rich have certainly more liquidity, which allows them to keep on constantly moving outward to the fringes of the city, leaving behind them spaces to be occupied by the newly ascending middle and lower classes. This brings me to the next question: how long can the gated communities and walled off spaces of the satellite cities be maintained as clean and exclusive spaces, and what could guarantee their continuity?

Tale III

My exhausted and exhausting building

I am exhausted from the significant material degradation in my daily life since I moved to the neighborhood of Dokki in February 2016, after having lived in the residential island of Zamalek. Some friends have teasingly told me that the psychological process I have been undergoing is an obvious form of a *déclassement social*, but such a statement would be an over-exaggeration, since countless Cairenes would immediately identify with the descriptions of material deteriorating of the urban life that I have traced in my meanderings.

It is true that this problem is not really specific to my neighborhood. One point, however, is different. The insular character of the residential island of Zamalek has certainly been much less affected by the recent spectacular **urban decomposition** that affected the numerous old quarters of the city. After January 2011, the Zamalek residents turned out to be for sure better organized through the association they created and its Facebook account that circulates valuable information on sales, gatherings and collective organizing for cleaning streets, cutting trees, the timely problem of accumulating garbage and how to collect it in a well-managed way and the attempts at restraining the chaotic mushrooming of cafés at the expense of residences. But above all, the Zamalek Association proved to be quite efficient at organizing public events at the Fish Garden over the past few years, which entailed bringing together musicians and artists, and organizing spaces for sales of books, crafts, and arts.

The communal work of Zamalekites through this association which emerged after the January revolution became the target of attacks by official circles and the media. Its residents were disparaged as the rich “bourgeois”, often publicly being attacked as ‘egoists’ for not allowing the future metro line to pass through the middle of the island, right through the very narrow street of Ismail Mohammed Street, (and incidentally revealing how impractical the **metro line** will be). The skirmishes between the residents of Zamalek and the regime revealed how complex civil initiatives can be since the metro line will be seriously affecting the old, and by today’s standards, historical buildings of Zamalek, like the Šidqī buildings. Yet, regardless of whether such a project is or is not justifiable, there are certainly issues that go beyond the question of the bourgeois class interests; the questionable ecological sustainability of such a project, and the uncontrollable occupation of public spaces, and the multiple forms of pollution that would follow. One thing is clear, the association has clearly revealed the impact of the revolution had indeed an impact in opening new paths for collective work (ironically, working well for the better off) on the local neighborhood level on questions regarding garbage collection and the serious challenge of reordering public space.⁸

Having said that, the building into which I moved to in Dokki is an interesting case in point of the class mobility of a quarter that once witnessed a particular magnificence but has totally degenerated into decadence, due to the fact that its previous residents have left

8 For the controversy related to the Zamalek Association, see EL KHAWAGA 2014.

for better neighborhoods or satellite cities. They were replaced by newcomers, not without wealth, but perhaps from the lower middle classes, with clearly different life styles. The majority of the residents of my building are old, and over sixty years old, which explains why they are mostly conservative. It has been practically impossible to get them to agree on anything, least of all to organize any collective work to improve the infrastructure of the building. Meanwhile offices and commercial activities have invaded the residential spaces, leading to an open antagonism to the very notion of **privacy**.

Like the majority of the old quarters in Cairo, Dokki decomposed because of the invasion of unregulated and chaotic commercial activities and shops which occupy almost all the first floors of countless buildings. These include popular coffee shops and, above all, the roving street vendors who cater to the poorer publics of the many popular cafés and shops. Year after year, wonderful but often decaying villas, probably disappear due to multiplying disputing heirs and familial greed to be replaced by frightening, cheaply constructed high rise buildings. This seems to be the predicament of almost all the old gentrified quarters of Cairo.

Since the mid-nineties, the district has changed radically, and even more so after January 2011, as if **chaos** has become the dominant and uncontrollable state of all Cairo. The endless problem of the piling **garbage** resulted from the long absence of the garbage collector in my street, and it became uncontainable after January 2011—not to mention of the uncollected heap of **filth** in the two stairwells of the building.

The public school across from my building, which starts at about 8 o'clock, with classes ending around 3 o'clock, plays **extremely loud** amplified Arabic films music every day. The amount of rubbish the students produce is spectacular, and it is mostly swept under two buses, parked permanently in front of my street. Every day we hear many of Su'ād Husnī's film songs followed by some eccentric English songs by a Muslim American **convert** about how **beautiful Islam** is, which the children have to repeat by screaming behind the amplifiers. Alternating classes of children constantly belly-dance for almost six hours at the tiny entrance court of the school. The court is so tiny is the court of the school because the larger part was probably sold out to a private investor, and the space was distorted by a huge unfinished **concrete building** of some fifteen floors. It has remained deserted for more than a decade, a phenomenon not uncommon in Cairo. It is easy to speculate that either it has a serious defect or there are **problems with the proprietors**.

Quite often, too, many mothers are competing to penetrate the entrance door while waiting in the street to meet their children as they come out. When the students leave the school, the street is caught in a general panic, if not a paralysis, between **traffic jams**, the desperate mothers, the roving peddlers, the employees of the numerous banks and government offices, and the double or triple parking.

Actually, the incessant, highly noisy belly-dancing in the school could be a rich material for a surrealist film, which could be nicely shot from my fifth floor living room. However, it also means that I cannot possibly sit or work in any part of my flat and wait until the evening. But work is impossible then as well because of my upstairs floor neighbours, a hostel for Palestinian girls (some fourteen female students, almost all registered at Cairo University) who also love to **belly-dance** until early dawn. In fact, the director of the hostel, Madam M., an elderly, well-intentioned Palestinian woman, seems to be quite strict in not allowing the young ladies to go out in the evening. Nor are they

allowed to receive male relatives in the hostel, which means that they stand outside in the corridor of my floor when they receive visits from their male cousins. And last but not least, the television being one of their main form of entertainment, this has resulted into escalating **fight**s about **noise**.

Lawlessness prevails on all levels, among neighbours and between the *bawwāb* (the building keeper) and the garage keepers and **constant fights** lead to anonymous parties causing flat tires on some cars, or to garage keepers stealing objects from other cars. But **no one dares to confront** the family of the garage keepers because they are powerful and can resort to **violence**. Umm Tāmīr, the garage keeper, who is a strong, stout *baladi* (working class/popular) woman in a black *gallābiyyah* (long robe), has squatted some four empty rooms on top of the garage, which were meant to be storing rooms for the owners of the building. Two of these rooms entail two beds and a sofa in which Umm Tāmīr (spends quite a lot of time). Here again, no resident dares confront her about the squatting.

We have had quite a few endless and extremely tiring meetings in preparation for forming an *ittiḥād al-shāghilīn* (a building residents association).⁹ In these meetings, the topic of evicting Umm Tāmīr has been often brought up. However, none of the residents has had the courage so far to undertake any action against her and her sons. Umm Tāmīr, now a grandmother, has raised four boys on her own, two of whom spent quite some time in jail for taking part in violent beatings and **street fights** at the corner of our building. This has definitively given her not only material but symbolic strength in her further control of the street. Then, Umm Tāmīr decided to like me because I immediately understood that I would be better off as her friend than foe. I keep a warm relationship with her sons, who have been socially stigmatized by the middle class residents of the building. There is a Robin-hoodish element about her in the way she would defend the garbage collector and the sons of the housekeeper, i.e., the weakest character of the neighborhood.

Umm Tāmīr, does not live in the building because she owns an entire building elsewhere, but she can be seen every day occupying a chair, right in front of the entrance of the garage, deciding who can and cannot park in the entire street which is filled in any case, with school buses and double-parked cars. It goes without saying that Umm Tāmīr truly controls the street through her networks and her friendship with the shop owners in my building. I am fortunate not to own a car, but I am an eyewitness to constant loud **shouting** and **skirmishes** in the street and on our stairs between Umm Tāmīr and her numerous enemies among the new residents who have purchased flats during the last decade.

Half of my building has been turned into substandard **offices**. The flats have been registered as *tigārī* (commercial) spaces, which means that numerous employees come and go constantly all day, even as late as 10 o'clock, in the evening on certain days of the month. Once a month, the numerous female employees come to pick up their salary, which means that after their departure, the entire entrance is littered with rubbish and **chewing gums**. It is quite normal to find coffee and tea spilled, and cigarettes butts are thrown on the fine-looking but quite old marble stairs. While the *bawwāb* (housekeeper) and his two sons are

9 This attempt at creating a residents association was quickly destroyed by one of the residents, who was in **constant disputes** with two other residents on issues of water and electricity bills and other public utilities.

constantly scolded for not cleaning the entrance and stairs enough, no resident really wants to pay him a proper salary.

On the third floor, two flats have been turned into a franchise for a French perfumes and make-up company. They are owned by a well-to-do *Ṣaʿīdī* (Upper Egyptian) businessman. The owner of the company, a truly honest person, has committed himself to collect money from each resident for the collective electricity and water bills since he owns three flats. His secretary, Madame M., an astute and thorough accountant, who has been constantly chasing every single resident to pay his dues of £E 120 per month (which would also include the *bawwāb*'s salary), has meanwhile lost stamina after several skirmishes with the tenants. After all, this is not her job, she often told me. She is only doing us, the residents, a favour. She does not see why she should be insulted or humiliated daily by the residents for just a few pounds. Furthermore, the owner of the company was kind enough to allow the many meetings of the residents to take place at his office. However, over time, he too became exhausted from some neighbours' tenacity in refusing to pay the collective water and electricity bills for the elevator and the entrance door. So he has decided to pull out of the association avoiding the residents' meetings under the pretext that he is constantly traveling.

Meanwhile, the owner of the company and his numerous employees sustain an open and fierce war with the *bawwāb* and Umm Tāmir. Umm Tāmir seems to excel day after day in the art of blocking the cars of the perfume company owner, his son, and the employees. The employees have thus learned how to park quite far away to avoid her fierce behaviour. But these tactics work both ways: some of the employees and the owner's son have learned to replicate Umm Tāmir's tricks and block the other cars in order to make Umm Tāmir's life with her parking clients even more difficult. Through these progressively sophisticated blockades, my harmless and extremely well-mannered neighbors on the next floor have ended up having their cars blockaded too. How unfortunate it is to see them being involved in endless fights and losing their temper every other day!

The perfume company owner stopped paying any salary or communicating with the *bawwāb* housekeeper too, after a huge fight for a reason I failed to grasp. "Our *bawwāb* and the garbage collector are richer than you and me... The garbage man makes money with garbage, so why pay him?... Besides, we have no real garbage, and our maids take it downstairs," This is what I heard from one of my newly-arrived neighbors who refused my proposal to raise the salary of the garbage collector from £E 5 (not even half a dollar per month) to £E 20. Bear in mind that, this is a retired businessman, who owns a car and employs a chauffeur and various other servants.

Two sides of the garage and the entire entrance facade have been transformed into numerous **small shops**. There are six shops at the front selling clothes, school bags, shoes, and sportswear, and an extremely filthy and abominable café that closed down recently, and a small supermarket. The café closed down last year after its owner, another *Ṣaʿīdī* millionaire, had a violent fight with the tenant who failed to pay the rent. We are told that the millionaire, theatrically, shot him in the leg in front of everybody in the street. This melodramatic Hollywood scene apparently frightened and intimidated all the residents. This millionaire owns about four flats in the building and never pays any public utilities, elevator maintenance, electricity, or water bills which accumulate in the thousands per month. Strangely enough, nobody ever spoke of any police interference; the culprit was

never punished, because the owner is obviously influential. This also explains why no one wants to confront him by creating a legalized Residents' Association as some of the residents insisted in the meeting, it would be a lost cause.

The shopkeepers hang around in the street the entire day and do not seem to be doing well or selling anything, as the shops are mostly devoid of customers—except for the shop selling school bags just before the opening of the schools in September. There is one tiny clothes shop that seems to me to be a cover-up for some other activity, although I am not really sure what it is. The shopkeepers excel at registering every single movement on the street [**social control**]. They have their chairs all lined up in front of the entrance door of the building and they often inform me gently who has come into or out of the building (the postman, the collector of electricity bills for example, my daughter and her friends, or my own friends who have lost their way) and when.

These tiny and apparently useless shops produce an endless amount of **cartons and boxes** that are profitable for the garbage collector, but this **waste** would certainly not make him rich. During the first years after the Revolution, the garbage collector almost stopped coming altogether. Only last year, when I made a deal with him to pay him £E 50 per month provided he regularly cleans all the stairs, that he did start coming every second or third day. The reason for his infrequency was not only the fact that he was not properly paid by the residents, but also that he has to rent out a truck and usually lacks the cash, unless he can be sure of collecting the cartons/boxes of the shops that would cover up for the cost of the other residents' waste.

Would one define my neighbor's reaction towards the garbage collector as a pure form of class discrimination? Not only that, the garbage collector is a Copt, which makes me wonder if it is not a typical Muslim middle-class religious racism? Only three residents followed my initiative of paying the garbage collector after the pile of garbage reached gargantuan dimensions. I ended up hiring a small truck with professional garbage removers who took away some thirty large sacks of accumulated garbage from the back stairs. It costs me £E 500 plus an entire lost day of work. But no other resident wanted to contribute to the payment of the removers.

The problem with the commercial offices of the building is their abuse of elevators as if it were a vendetta, a collective endeavor to destroy this poor antiquated moving wooden box. Only if a terrible accident were to occur, perhaps that would enough of a reason for the residents to take action.¹⁰

The fifth floor co-working space

An **Internet café**, no, let us be precise: a “co-working space” for young people, has opened a year ago on my floor, across from my flat on the fifth floor. Some fifty to seventy or more visitors come on a daily basis, and remain until midnight. They socialize and hang

¹⁰ In fact, in November 2016, the elevator fell down, while two employees from the perfume company were inside. Though being seriously traumatized, fortunately, they were not hurt. While the owner of the company banned his employees to use the elevator, some neighbours remain in denial of the incident. They insist that no collapse occurred. It is only a matter of how one perceives reality, some would say. While the Internet café users continue to carelessly use and abuse the elevator, I have ceased to use it.

around in the corridors with **extremely loud** laughter, chatting and constant mobile phoning. They are so loud that I can no longer sit in my living room without hearing clearly everything they say and do. The visitors do their best to not only further ruin the antiquated moving wooden box, the poor elevator, but these publics also produce regularly a gripping amount of **rubbish**. I should be tolerant towards youth, since we had a revolution which I support; but these visitors are not only noisy, they also litter the stairs with endless rubbish. The stairs are made of old, beautiful marble, but it seems that anything antique-looking, is worthless not modern enough and has to be abused. Perhaps, a not modern enough building would justify littering.

My floor has turned into a theatre of constant power struggles over space, with young girls and men hanging around in the corridors. They love to leave hand and shoe prints everywhere on the walls of the corridor, which I painted twice. The poor plants I have put in the corridor have been ruined too, and some have disappeared, not to mention the rubbish I have to pick up daily between the poor sick plants.

Time and again, I wonder whether Cairo is a unique in having become a place where it is an acceptable pastime to spit, litter and write in its elevators. No one wants to believe that the elevator will soon break down, but no one really cares. “Be optimistic and it will not collapse,” says Mr. M., the director of the co-working space who apparently has been trained by an NGO in dialogue and tolerance and how to speak softly to people. But he, too, seems reluctant to pay the *bawwāb* the salary I had proposed after a long struggle with the various residents. This so-called decent salary is namely £E 100 (less than \$ 9 a month), whereas a cappuccino at the Cilantro café opposite to my building costs £E 25, i.e., or one fourth of the would-be “decent salary”. As I keep reminding my neighbors when the littered plastic cups from these expensive cappuccinos are constantly found littering the antiquated moving wooden box, that it is logical that the *bawwāb*’s son was tempted to steal a play station from their office when they employed him as a cleaner.

Meanwhile, living in this building for less than a year, has turned me into a melodramatic theatrical character. When the *bawwāb*’s son cleans the stairs and it is instantly littered in no less than an hour, I take the liberty of shouting with all my strength playing with the powerful acoustics of the stairs that the times of **slavery** are over. Often, too, I would stick a paper on the entrance door of the co-working space, stating that the son of the *bawwāb* is *not an Abyssinian slave*, or I would collect the cigarette butts from the stairs and throw them on their desks. But to no avail. They think I must be a lunatic since I clean the public stairs by myself, while I have never seen any of those youngsters picking up a broom. No cleaning, lest because physical work is a humiliating task fit only for maids. Each fight I have with my neighbour, smiling-trained by some banal NGO, Mr. M. ends up denying that this constant noise and littering are a violation of my own space. After almost six months of talks and negotiations about the urgency of putting out trash baskets or removing these, Mr. M. still finds it more practical to litter the stairs than empty the baskets, because complains that his “bell boys”—a term he is proud to use in English since he seems to have just learned it his “bell boys”— keep on disappearing one after the other. After firing so many useless “bell boys”, Mr. M.’s soft and trained voice turned to be eventually one of the main reasons why my aggressive instincts kept on the rise, until I completely lost my temper and started screaming like mad in the stairs on a regular basis. I am now ready to call in the police to shut this place. Gone are the days when I cared if whether

I was counted to be among the *fulūl*, if I would have undertaken an action against **youth**. But their presence is becoming unbearable.

Chewing-gums everywhere

After all, it's all in our heads. "If you don't notice the chewing gums sticking to the stairs, it won't exist, but if you keep on noticing it too much, it is because you have lived too long in Germany, Madam, you tend to focus on details which we never see," as my Mr. M. keeps on telling me, laughingly. That is why no one sees the accumulated black mud in between the stairs. After having spent days with the *bawwāb*'s son removing the sticky blackened gums from the floor, and having hung so many warnings on the walls of the entrance hall about the horrid gums, the inventive youth started sticking their gums on the iron bars on top of the stairs. It is cleaner this way, right?

If you tell the people to take the stairs, because the elevator is about to fail, they take it as an affront to their pride that you have offended their masculinity, or femininity-cum-chastity. How dare you humiliate them with further physical endeavour such as going down the stairs when there is an elevator? When they noticed that I started threatening them, some of the customers started to take the elevator to the fourth floor and then the stairs to the fifth, knowing that I am observing them at the entrance of the co-working space. When the electricity bill for public utilities was raised to £E 2000, Mr. M. refused to pay his share, for how could the residents prove that his customers are the main consumers? How to take matters lightly? My nightmarish building is another "dark comedy"¹¹ among so many others encountered in Cairene daily life.

Tale IV

The army's involvement in public life and real estate

From *il-Gēsh wil-sha'b ʿīd wāḥdah* (Army and People hand in hand) to *Yasquṭ, yasquṭ ḥukm al-ʿaskar* (Down, down with the rule of the military), to *Kammil gamīlak* (Return your favour), a slogan in support of Sisi's campaign for the presidency. Today the voices of civil society, which backed the Revolution, find themselves entrapped in the unresolved paradox of being cornered between two competing counter revolutionary forces, that is to say, the military establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood. These two competing forces, which ended up in an open and declared war, culminating in 2013, ironically share certain elective neo-liberal and conservative affinities. They also converge on questions of '**public morality**' and **religious intolerance**. It is no coincidence that the question of censorship and the banning of so-called morally decadent, literature labeled then as "**pornographic**" or "irreligious", and the recent enhancing of the law of **blasphemy laws** had their seeds planted already under the rule of Sadat, then Mubārak. It continued under Mursī and goes on under the military as a constant flow of one and the same **logic of control**.

11 I am referring here once again to Elena CHITI's article, "A Dark Comedy: Perceptions of the Egyptian Present between Reality and Fiction," in this special issue.

The two major forces, the Muslim Brothers and the military establishment, seem to be equally entrapped in repertoires, and even becoming mirror images become mirror images of each other, depicting the **continuity** of the mindset of the **ancient regime** of Mubārak. This explains the impasse that resulted from the discord among intellectuals, secularists and civil society activists regarding the army's interference and the unfolding massacre of **Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah** in August 2013, but which cannot be analyzed in this brief article.

There is much controversy regarding the army's involvement since the 28 January when the tanks took to the streets and encircled Taḥrīr Square before Mubārak's ouster, supposedly to protect the protesters from the thugs of the Mubārak regime.¹² Most probably, Mubārak's ouster would have been unthinkable had the armed forces not received the green light from Washington to remain neutral towards the Revolution. If a form of "fraternization" between the "people" and the army, as Neil Ketchley argues,¹³ took place in the early days of January 2011, there is a myriad of readings and interpretations regarding the ambiguity of the army's position and their deteriorating popularity as time went by.

The iconic images that circulated globally in 2011 must be recalled here, images of the protesters sleeping under the army tanks, or the insults and anti-Mubārak slogans that were written on the army tanks or the elderly women kissing soldiers in Taḥrīr after Mubārak's departure. Looked at in another way, however, it was the rather antiquated army tanks (completely unpractical for conducting any urban warfare) that took over and encircled the television building in Maspero street on the 28th of January, that could be interpreted as a rather symbolic repertoire of a *déjà vu* scene, recalling to the former Free Officers taking over the broadcast station to announce the **July 1952 coup/revolution** when they overthrew King Fārūq.

However, the image of the army continued to decline after the take over by the SCAF (The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces). Numerous incidents unfolding over time such as the attacks on the protesters on Taḥrīr in March 2011; the torturing and undertaking of virginity tests on female protesters; then the **Maspero** massacre in October 2011; the Ultra's **Ahli massacre** in Port Said; and then the violent incidents of **Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street** in November and December 2011—all pointed to the fact that the army was clearly siding with the counter-revolution. Observers at the time interpreted the early actions of the army in January as falling on the side of the protestors. But the army's position is explainable not so much in term of aspiration for freedom and democracy, but rather as a golden opportunity to get rid of Gamāl Mubārak and his entourage of crony capitalists,

12 As an eye-witness on the night of the famous Battle of the Camel in Taḥrīr in February 2011, watching it from a flat overlooking the Square, I recall that around 5:30 pm a large crowd of the thugs of the regime came from Taḥrīr Square and Ṭal'at Harb Street heading towards the square. They threw Molotov cocktail bombs. They were shooting live ammunition towards the protesters and they were burning anything that was in their way, particularly cars, which they would then turn upside down. One could clearly see that the army tanks did nothing to stop the burning of the cars or to fight back against the thugs. The anti-Mubarak protestors could only defend themselves by barricading the checkpoints with some metal shields that were collected from the construction site of the former Hilton hotel, which was being renovated. Their only weapon were stones, which they collected and threw. The streets were in real chaos and many people were wounded. I also recall phoning a friend who had gone to all demonstrations since the 25th.

13 KETCHLEY 2014.

whose economic interests were clashing with the army's parallel control of a significant proportion of the economy. However, in 2013 Mursi's ouster went hand in hand with the revival of further nationalist sentiments through the portrayal of al-Sisi's as the **nationalist hero** who opposed intercontinental **Islamic networks**. He was depicted as the born-again Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir who would rescue the nation from **foreign machinations**, alluding to the **Muslim Brothers'** extra-territorial connections. And these nationalist sentiments seem to have worked quite well for the past few years.

One thing about the military has been evident since 2011: the public visibility of the military in the urban remaking of cities after January 2011 became more obvious than ever. So many of the army's actions remain in the **collective memory** as vivid images of the

mounting militarization of daily urban life: the presence of the army tanks in the streets of the center of town (constantly appearing, disappearing, and re-appearing from 2011 until 2014); the erection of **concrete walls** as barriers between the protesters and police forces; the piercing and demolition of these **isolating** and **paralyzing** walls by the citizens (see fig. 7); the blockading of entire areas for security reasons; the **urban wars**; the vertical control of the city through the presence of **helicopters** at peak moments in



Fig. 7: Block wall Muḥammad Maḥmūd. Captured Dec. 15, 2011. It appears like these young men are praying in front of the wall.

Tahrir in January 2011 and on 30 June 2013; the numerous attacks and retreats and killings by the police forces in various busy, central streets of the city between 2011 and 2013; the tear gas, resulting in numerous deaths and epileptic attacks; the emergence of newly created **paramilitary** troops parading in the city; and finally the **Rabe'a al-'Adawiyya** massacre and the increasingly militarized **terrorist attacks** by the Islamists. These kinds of events turned into a quotidian exercise which no longer astonished anyone. The international policies of the **"war on terror,"** and the multiplication of gigantic **concave** walls around official buildings and embassies all over the city in 2015 and 2016—reminiscent of the Green Zone in Baghdad—all of which remain vivid images of the mounting **militarization of daily urban life**. These created collective habits on how to deal, circumvent, or resist under such circumstances.

Zeinab Abul-Magd's crucial work¹⁴ is perhaps among the first studies to have pointed to the paramount role of the army's involvement in the current economy and why their activities have been kept opaque from the public sphere. Essentially, again according to Abul-Magd, the armed forces have been financially involved for many decades, in an esti-

14 ABUL-MAGD 2016.

mated of 25% to 40% of Egypt's economy. These include some mega-projects, including large factories of food and beverage industries, running cafeterias and gas stations. This would explain the two parallel competing poles and why the army opted to depose of Mu-bārak and his son's entourage of crony capitalists who constituted a parallel competing elite to the army's economic interests.

But, above all, the military has been able to manage huge amounts of land. Egyptian law allows them to obtain of any land for lucrative commercial purposes. Most significant is the army's visible involvement in gargantuan **real estate projects** through controlling desert land to be developed with joint venture transactions in lucrative **financial speculation**. This became all the more evident when the **Armed Forces Land Projects Agency** recently took over the supervision of the New capital City and Sheikh Zayed, extending to some 16,000 acres.¹⁵ A year earlier Sisi announced the military's involvement in a 40 Billion \$ joint project for Low income housing with the Arabtec Company from the Emirates.¹⁶ The *Cairoobserver* informs us that in 2014 the Defense Ministry signed a contract with the mega-company based in the UAE Emaar, to construct a huge Emaar Square that would include the largest shopping centre in Uptown Cairo, contrasting the neo-liberal market-oriented Dubai as a model against Tahrir. Yet, a market economy is envisaged and dreamt of only under the authoritarian military rule under which the army becomes the major manipulator of vast amounts of land and can market it as it wishes without providing any transparency in the transactions.¹⁷ Once again, this is not new, market economy and neo-liberal dreams and authoritarian militarism work together very well.

To conclude, many keep on raising the following unanswered questions: how long can the military regime remain in control of the situation? And, is the regime really in control of the escalating, acute economic crisis caused by the conditional reception of the World Bank loan, which led to the floatation of the Egyptian pound, resulting into the loss of almost 80% of its value in just a few days after the implementation of the floatation? How long can the regime's credibility last with the perpetration of identical repertoires of violence¹⁸ and violations of human rights, in a harsher way than under Mubarak?¹⁹ And when the commemoration of the martyrs of the revolution remains consciously neglected? How long can the discourse of the military "order" be sustainable when precariousness and daily endurance are tied to cruel survival strategies? And when chaos is becoming the rule? There is no doubt that the spectre of a forthcoming violent explosion is in the air. Yet, the collective fear prompted by the neighbouring decomposing states of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya, remains one main reason why many would still insist: "we are still fortunate to have avoided a civil war".

15 Cf. SAWAF 2016.

16 SABA 2014.

17 N.N. (*Cairoobserver*) 2014.

18 Regarding the point of repertoires in the political culture see ABAZA 2016.

19 On the point of why the regime is undertaking harsher measures towards liberties and human rights, see the recent interview with Hazem KANDIL 2016.

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« La Rolls et la Volkswagen » Ecrire en tunisien sur Facebook en 2016*

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Abstract

L'image de « La Rolls et de la Volkswagen », métaphore empruntée à Edward Saïd, rend compte, dans une certaine mesure, d'une partie de la réalité sociale linguistique partagée par les pays arabophones dont les langues natales, des « Volkswagen », n'ont pas le poids de l'arabe standard, la « Rolls ». Or, si ces langues ont été politiquement construites en ces termes, les usages scripturaires, eux, ne se sont pas toujours pliés à cette conception. A partir d'un travail de terrain basé sur l'observation des pratiques d'écriture de pages et de groupes sur Facebook et accompagné d'entretiens menés auprès des administrateurs, je montre dans ce texte comment ce réseau social rend visible la langue tunisienne qui endosse différents statuts (celui de langue étrangère, de Rolls et de langue-pont). Je montre, enfin, comment il est utile de considérer Facebook comme un array au sens de Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.

Key Words: Anthropologie du langage ; Ecriture ; Facebook ; langue natale ; Tunisie.

Dans un article paru *post mortem*, Edward Saïd rapporte l'anecdote suivante :

Quand j'ai donné mon premier discours en arabe, au Caire, il y a deux décennies, un de mes jeunes parents s'approcha de moi après que j'eus fini pour me dire combien il était déçu que je n'aie pas été plus éloquent.

« Mais vous avez compris ce que je disais », demandai-je d'une voix plaintive – mon principal souci étant d'être compris sur quelques points délicats de politique et de philosophie.

« Oh oui, bien sûr », répondit-il d'un ton dédaigneux, « aucun problème : mais vous n'avez pas été assez éloquent (...) ».

Cette récrimination me poursuit encore quand je parle en public. Je suis incapable de me transformer en orateur éloquent. Je mélange les idiomes dialectaux et classiques de manière pragmatique, avec des résultats mitigés. Comme on me l'a fait aimablement remarquer une fois, je ressemble à quelqu'un qui possède une Rolls Royce, mais préfère utiliser une Volkswagen.¹

* Certaines idées développées dans la première partie de ce texte ont été présentées à l'université de São Paulo en novembre 2013 et à l'Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) à Paris en juillet 2016.

1 Le texte entier est paru sur le site de *Al-Ahram weekly*. Cet extrait est issu de sa traduction française, SAÏD 2004.

Cette métaphore en termes de Rolls et de Volkswagen rend compte, dans une certaine mesure, d'une partie de la réalité sociale linguistique partagée par les pays arabophones dont les **langues natales**, des « Volkswagen », n'ont pas le poids de l'**arabe standard**, la « Rolls ». Or, si ces langues ont été politiquement construites en ces termes, les usages scripturaux, eux, ne se sont pas toujours pliés à cette conception. Les – relativement – récents espaces graphiques fournis par les réseaux sociaux ont participé à amener une redistribution des usages langagiers.

Dans un premier temps, je commencerai par décrire comment ces statuts sociaux des langues ont été progressivement construits politiquement. Dans un deuxième temps, je montrerai de quelles manières la **langue tunisienne** se déploie sur des pages et des groupes sur **Facebook** ainsi que les différents statuts qu'elle y occupe.² Enfin je montrerai comment il est utile de considérer Facebook comme un *array* au sens de Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.³

1. La construction politique de la « Rolls »

La Tunisie, pays pauvre et fragilisé par la colonisation (traité du Bardo du 12 mai 1881) s'est trouvée à l'indépendance (le 20 mars 1956) contrainte à puiser dans ses ressources matérielles comme symboliques pour bâtir un Etat indépendant. Celui-ci devait à la fois être consolidé de l'intérieur – à travers la création de cohésions nationales et régionales avec d'autres pays arabophones –, mais aussi constituer une force vis-à-vis de la domination des puissances européennes. L'une de ces ressources a été fournie par la langue arabe qui a été retenue comme langue du pays dans la Constitution de 1959. Celle-ci stipulait dans son article premier : « La Tunisie est un Etat libre, indépendant et souverain, l'Islam est sa religion, l'arabe sa langue et la République son régime ».

Ce choix linguistique n'est pas spécifique à la Tunisie mais a été celui de l'ensemble des pays arabophones. De même, l'idée de l'arabe standard comme ressource de cohésion tire son origine de fondements idéologiques qui ne sont pas locaux. Ceux-ci relèvent, comme le rappelle Laroussi, d'une part, des mouvements de nationalisme arabe (panarabisme) que sont principalement le nassérisme et le baasisme et, d'autre part, de l'islamisme politique.⁴ En dépit des différences de leurs points de vue, ces mouvements partagent deux points communs. Le premier se rapporte au fait qu'ils ont traversé l'ensemble des pays arabophones du Maghreb et du Machrek marquant ainsi l'histoire sociale et politique récente dans chacun de ces pays. En Tunisie, ces différents courants sont apparus principalement entre les années 1950 et 1970. Le nassérisme, mouvement important dans les années 1960, a été porté par la faction arabisante du Néo-Destour (parti politique tunisien créé en 1934). Le courant baasiste, devenu « mouvement baasiste », est un parti politique qui a participé aux élections de l'assemblée constituante tunisienne d'octobre 2011. Quant à l'islamisme politique, il s'est illustré à travers le MTI, le

2 Je parlerai tout au long de ce texte indifféremment de langue tunisienne ou de tunisien pour désigner la langue natale en Tunisie sans tenir compte de ses variantes régionales.

3 J'ai fait le choix de garder la terminologie anglophone de *array* plutôt que d'utiliser le mot français de « dispositif » par exemple.

4 LAROUSSE 2003.

Mouvement de tendance islamique, devenu parti An-nahdha fondé par Rached Ghannouchi et vainqueur des élections de 2011. Le deuxième élément partagé par ces mouvements est le fait que, pour les trois, la langue a été un instrument fort et l'arabe standard une arme à capital symbolique à la fois religieux et proprement politique (nationaliste).⁵ En effet, cette langue devait à la fois fédérer l'ensemble des pays arabes et conforter l'appartenance religieuse à l'islam puisque langue sacrée, celle du Coran.⁶

Le « Eux », le « Nous » et les Constitutions

Les textes des Constitutions représentent un lieu fécond d'observation des enjeux relatifs aux langues et de leur évolution suivant le contexte historique. Pour ce qui est des pays du Maghreb, certaines langues natales ont été, dans de rares exceptions relativement récentes, reconnues par les constitutions algérienne et marocaine. Au Maroc, l'article 5 de la Constitution de 2011 rend officielle la langue amazighe. Voici ce qu'il stipule :

L'arabe demeure la langue officielle de l'Etat. L'Etat œuvre à la protection et au développement de la langue arabe, ainsi qu'à la promotion de son utilisation. De même, l'amazighe constitue une langue officielle de l'Etat, en tant que patrimoine commun de tous les Marocains sans exception. Une loi organique définit le processus de mise en œuvre du caractère officiel de cette langue, ainsi que les modalités de son intégration dans l'enseignement et dans les domaines prioritaires de la vie publique, et ce afin de lui permettre de remplir à terme sa fonction de langue officielle. L'Etat œuvre à la préservation du Hassani, en tant que partie intégrante de l'identité culturelle marocaine unie, ainsi qu'à la protection des parlers et des expressions culturelles pratiquées au Maroc. De même, il veille à la cohérence de la politique linguistique et culturelle nationale et à l'apprentissage et la maîtrise des langues étrangères les plus utilisées dans le monde, en tant qu'outils de communication, d'intégration et d'interaction avec la société du savoir, et d'ouverture sur les différentes cultures et sur les civilisations contemporaines. Il est créé un Conseil national des langues et de la culture marocaine, chargé notamment de la protection et du développement des langues arabe et amazighe et des diverses expressions culturelles marocaines, qui constituent un patrimoine authentique et une source d'inspiration contemporaine. Il regroupe l'ensemble des institutions concernées par ces domaines. Une loi organique en détermine les attributions, la composition et les modalités de fonctionnement.

Ce long article 5 rend très bien compte du contexte politico-linguistique entourant la reconnaissance de la langue amazighe au Maroc.

L'Algérie n'est pas en reste : l'article 3 de sa constitution stipule :

L'Arabe est la langue nationale et officielle. L'arabe demeure la langue officielle de l'Etat. Il est créé auprès du Président de la République un Haut Conseil de la Langue Arabe. Le Haut Conseil est chargé notamment d'œuvrer à l'épanouissement de la

5 Je parlerai d'arabe standard au sens *al-'arabiyya al-fuṣḥā* pour désigner l'arabe standard moderne.

6 Voir DAKHLI 2009.

langue arabe et à la généralisation de son utilisation dans les domaines scientifiques et technologiques, ainsi qu'à l'encouragement de la traduction vers l'arabe à cette fin.

Cet article est suivi par l'article 4 qui avance :

Tamazight [la langue amazighe] est également langue nationale et officielle. L'Etat œuvre à sa promotion et à son développement dans toutes ses variétés linguistiques en usage sur le territoire national. Il est créé une académie algérienne de la Langue Amazighe, placée auprès du Président de la République. L'Académie qui s'appuie sur les travaux des experts est chargée de réunir les conditions de la promotion de tamazight en vue de concrétiser, à terme, son statut de langue officielle. Les modalités d'application de cet article sont fixées par une loi organique.

Il est néanmoins rappelé à l'article 212 dans son point 4 que :

toute révision constitutionnelle ne peut porter atteinte à (...) l'Arabe comme langue nationale et officielle.

Qu'en est-il de l'autre langue officielle ? Par ailleurs, il reste également à relever qu'aussi bien en Algérie qu'au Maroc, il est finalement bien moins question de l'algérien et du marocain que de l'arabe et du tamazight.

Pour ce qui est de la Tunisie, si la Constitution de l'indépendance a évoqué à travers son seul article premier cité plus haut la question de la langue de l'Etat, tel n'a pas été exactement le cas de la récente Constitution tunisienne de 2014 ni de la première Constitution. En effet, les politiques linguistiques en Tunisie n'ont pas toujours posé l'arabe standard comme langue du pays. Dans la première constitution tunisienne de 1861 comme dans le « pacte fondamental tunisien » qui l'a précédée (1857), il n'est pas question de langue de Tunisie. La question linguistique ne devient un enjeu constitutionnel que près d'un siècle plus tard, après l'indépendance, dans la constitution de 1959 avec l'article premier cité plus haut consacrant l'arabe comme langue de l'Etat. Cet article n'a pas changé dans la récente Constitution de 2014. Du côté des discours politiques, aujourd'hui, les partis au pouvoir comme dans l'opposition ne contredisent pas l'instauration de l'arabe standard en tant que langue officielle ainsi que l'énonçait déjà la Constitution de 1959. De ce point de vue, la posture politique concernant la place de l'arabe standard dans le pays n'a pas changé. Ce qui est différent, en revanche, est un deuxième article, l'article 39 qui stipule :

L'État veille également à l'enracinement des jeunes générations dans leur identité arabe et islamique et leur appartenance nationale. Il veille à la consolidation de la langue arabe, sa promotion et sa généralisation.

Lors de son adoption par l'assemblée nationale constituante, cet article a suscité de nombreuses réactions. Yadh Ben Achour, universitaire et juriste médiatisé, a fait partie des réfractaires qui se sont exprimés pour qualifier l'article de « catastrophique » pour les Tunisiens d'aujourd'hui et pour les générations à venir, de « grave erreur » et de « journée

noire » celle de son adoption.⁷ Les réserves et protestations exprimées à l'encontre de cet article ont abouti à sa révision. Il a été complété par :

[L'Etat] encourage l'ouverture sur les langues étrangères et les civilisations. Il veille à la diffusion de la culture des droits de l'Homme.

Une constitution s'adresse évidemment directement aux citoyens concernés, tentant ainsi de fabriquer une sorte de « Nous » idéal. Mais des altérités y ont, aussi, tout à fait leurs places. En réalité, l'appréhension exprimée était en rapport aux types d'altérité vis-à-vis desquels la Tunisie allait s'orienter : rédigeant sa Constitution après des décennies de dictature, les problématiques relatives à l'identité (comme celles relatives à l'altérité) étaient plus que jamais posées. Si la Constitution de 1959 exprimait par son article premier l'affranchissement vis-à-vis du pouvoir colonial (la Tunisie devenait un Etat libre, une république et instaurait une langue officielle), la formulation des articles de la Constitution de 2014 devait correspondre aux « aspirations » d'un maximum de parti-e-s aux visions bien éloignées les unes des autres. En effet, il convient de rappeler qu'entre novembre 2011 et novembre 2014, moment de la réécriture de la Constitution, le pays est dirigé par les représentants de trois partis politiques (la troïka) : An-nahdha, le parti islamiste ; le CPR, le Congrès pour la République ; et le FDTL, le Forum démocratique pour le travail et les libertés (Ettakatol). La proposition de cet article 39 au moment où ces partis, islamiste pour le premier et nationaliste pour le deuxième, sont au pouvoir inquiète une partie de l'opinion publique. En définitive, cet article ne fait pas qu'insister sur l'idée que l'arabe standard est la langue du pays mais relie explicitement langue et identité, choisit l'identité-cible et établit la langue-vecteur. Les craintes exprimées portaient sur le risque d'ôter à la Tunisie sa diversité culturelle, son ouverture au monde et de l'enfermer dans une sorte d'entre soi culturaliste où les altérités amies envisagées demeurent cantonnées au reste des pays islamo-arabophones à l'exclusion des autres. A ces risques de repli identitaire était opposée l'insistance sur l'importance des valeurs universelles et l'ouverture aux autres langues.

Le sort des politiques nationales vis-à-vis des langues est tributaire de l'état d'apaisement ou de tension des politiques eux-mêmes vis-à-vis de la gestion de cette fameuse question identitaire. Celle-ci porte en son sein des enjeux linguistiques et il n'est pas nouveau que les politiques utilisent les langues en leur faisant porter un poids identitaire. Les questions relatives aux langues ont donc un caractère sensible dans la Tunisie d'avant la révolution mais aussi, incontestablement, dans cette période de transition politique.

Dans le même temps, ce choix d'instaurer l'arabe standard comme langue du pays ne signifiait pas l'exclusion d'autres langues du paysage linguistique. La scolarisation a été, sous l'influence de Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000), premier président de la Tunisie indépendante (1957-1987), franco-arabe. Le pays est passé ensuite, comme d'ailleurs ses voisins maghrébins, par un processus d'arabisation qui a consisté principalement à donner davantage de poids à l'arabe standard dans le système éducatif. Les résultats,

7 Voir <<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/ben-achour-a-propos-de-l'article-38--le-7-janvier-est-une-journee-noire-sur-le-plan-politique--video,520,43392,3>> ou encore <<http://www.kapitalis.com/politique/20044-tunisie-politique-article-38-de-la-constitution-yadh-ben-achour-lance-un-cri-d-alarme.html>> (dernière consultation le 13 mai 2014).

rétrospectivement, sont loin d'avoir fait l'unanimité, non pas tant pour des raisons proprement linguistiques mais surtout pour la qualité jugée médiocre du processus même d'arabisation mis en place dans les programmes scolaires.⁸ Sous Ben Ali, deuxième président tunisien (1987-2011), la langue officielle a demeuré l'arabe standard et le français maintenu langue obligatoire de l'enseignement à partir de la troisième année de l'école primaire.⁹

Présage du passage de la Rolls à la Volkswagen

Il existe quelques signes avant-coureurs ayant amené progressivement l'apparition puis la diffusion des écritures en **tunisien**. Si, aujourd'hui, la langue arabe est celle de la presse écrite, de l'éducation, des manuels scolaires, de la sphère administrative, de l'écrit, le tunisien, limité aux sphères informelles, n'a pas de trace officielle.¹⁰ Celui-ci a demeuré la langue des échanges, de la chanson, de l'humour, du théâtre, mais bien moins celle de la science, du religieux, de l'officiel, et encore moins celle de l'écrit.¹¹ De manière générale, une langue était d'usage, l'arabe standard ou le français. Les journaux apparaissaient en arabe standard ou en français et les radios émettaient, aussi, en arabe standard ou en français.¹²

Il a fallu attendre novembre 2003 pour qu'une radio privée, *Mosaïque FM*, voie le jour, et pour que certains ajustements linguistiques oraux soient revus : apparaît ainsi le tunisien mais aussi le mélange des langues (arabe standard, français et tunisien). D'autres radios

8 Plusieurs travaux ont traité ce sujet. Voir par exemple celui de SEBAA 1999.

9 Le ministre tunisien de l'éducation a exprimé le 26 octobre 2016 sa volonté de remplacer le français par l'anglais dans un entretien accordé à la radio Diwan FM (entretien relayé par plusieurs médias écrits. Voir par exemple l'article intitulé « L'anglais remplacera le français comme 2ème langue d'enseignement en Tunisie », <<http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2016/10/27/langlais-deuxieme-langue-denseignement-au-lieu-du-francais/>> consulté le 11 novembre 2011) suite à quoi les réactions n'ont pas tardé à fuser. Le 1er novembre, l'ambassadeur de France a été reçu par le ministre de l'éducation et l'ambassade française de préciser sur sa page Facebook : « S'agissant du renforcement de l'apprentissage des langues, le ministre a insisté sur la place privilégiée de l'enseignement de la langue française, première langue étrangère enseignée en Tunisie, dans le système éducatif tunisien » (sic !), <https://www.facebook.com/458441454242764/photos/ms.c.eJw9y8kNACAMA8GOUB_zn7L8xDgHf0S6gTYtUsXIPG9hASSScRVyAkLWiiFe0H8i~;dJ9FOAHNTRDk.bps.a.1129326740487562.1073741975.458441454242764/1129331033820466/?type=3> (consulté le 11 novembre 2016). D'autres réactions ont eu lieu comme la parution d'un article sur le Huffington Post Maghreb ayant pour titre « A bas la langue arabe ! Manifeste pour la langue tunisienne », <http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/hakim-fekih/a-bas-larabe-manifeste-po_b_12694080.html> (consulté le 11 novembre 2016).

10 Une étude historique à partir des archives montrerait néanmoins que certains documents administratifs étaient bien écrits en tunisien par le passé (bien que, vraisemblablement, en marge de toute planification politico-linguistique à l'échelle nationale). Malheureusement ces travaux manquent encore.

11 L'on fera remarquer que Bourguiba utilisait le tunisien dans ses discours comme outil de communication. Mais cet usage était de type véhiculaire et n'avait pas pour objectif de conduire à officialiser la langue. Il en est de même pour la publicité souvent écrite en tunisien.

12 Notamment sur la chaîne Radio Tunis chaîne internationale (RTCI) qui émet ses programmes en français (tout en consacrant régulièrement une heure pour l'anglais, une heure pour l'allemand, une heure pour l'italien et une heure pour l'espagnol).

privées (comme *Shems FM*) l'ont suivi, partageant le même ton, mais aussi des chaînes de télévision privées (comme *Nessma TV*) ont été lancées, ayant globalement la même ligne éditoriale linguistique.¹³ Le langage retenu par ces médias était indexé à une attitude décontractée et non prescriptiviste.¹⁴ Mais cette apparition du tunisien n'a concerné jusqu'à là que la sphère de l'oral (chaînes de radios ou de télévisions) ne touchant pas encore celle de l'écrit. Les usages numériques vont changer la donne.

2. Pratiques d'écritures sur Facebook ou le choix de la « Volkswagen »

C'est dans ce contexte d'évolution du langage oral que s'est propagé un nouveau type d'écritures sur Internet, notamment sur Facebook qui est mon lieu d'observation des pratiques scripturaires. En premier lieu, alors qu'il convenait d'écrire en une seule langue, sur Facebook il est ordinaire de lire des phrases utilisant plus d'une langue. En deuxième lieu, alors qu'il convenait d'utiliser l'alphabet arabe pour écrire en arabe, l'alphabet latin pour écrire en français (plus rarement en anglais), il est courant, sur Facebook, de lire des mots français ou anglais écrits en caractères arabes ou, inversement, des mots arabes écrits en caractères latins. Dans ce dernier cas, étant donné que certains phonèmes arabes n'existent pas dans cet alphabet, l'on utilise des chiffres choisis pour leur similarité graphique avec les lettres arabes correspondantes. C'est par exemple le cas du 7 pour la lettre *hā'*, du 9 pour le *qāf* ou du 3 pour le *'ayn*. Par ailleurs, et indépendamment du support graphique utilisé, il est devenu commun d'écrire en tunisien. Or, comme la langue n'est pas encore standardisée, il existe différentes manières de l'écrire : en utilisant l'alphabet latin, l'alphabet arabe, les deux alphabets dans une même phrase ou encore en ajoutant des chiffres.¹⁵

Si, à leur apparition, c'était essentiellement pour des raisons techniques que ces écritures sont apparues – les claviers étaient en alphabet latin –, aujourd'hui, ce n'est plus le cas puisque l'alphabet arabe est désormais disponible. Ce n'est donc plus pour des raisons techniques que ces choix sont opérés puisque, d'une part, les claviers comportent généralement les deux alphabets, arabe et latin et que, d'autre part, certains écrivent des mots français en recourant uniquement à l'alphabet arabe, et inversement.

Il est difficile de déterminer avec précision et de manière définitive qui a commencé à écrire de la sorte sur le web. *A posteriori*, nous pouvons avancer qu'un ensemble de facteurs a amorcé le changement : bien-entendu, les SMS ont fait partie des premiers espaces d'utilisation de ces écritures. Mais ceux-ci étaient envoyés aux seuls destinataires du message et non pas à un public large comme il peut être le cas sur Facebook. D'autre part, l'apparition de chaînes satellitaires a participé à modifier certaines pratiques sociales :

13 Allant même plus loin que la pionnière *Mosaïque FM* puisque les flashes d'informations, anciennement marquant des limites de spatialisation linguistique, sont désormais formulés en tunisien sur les chaînes de radio *Shems FM* et *IFM* ainsi que sur la chaîne de télévision *Nessma TV*, alors qu'ils continuent à l'être en arabe standard sur *Mosaïque FM*.

14 Pour plus de développements sur cette question, voir ACHOUR KALLEL 2011.

15 Ce ne sont pas les moins bien lotis qui écrivent en cette langue. Pour plus de développements sur cet aspect cf. ACHOUR KALLEL 2016.

des bandes défilantes reproduisant ces écritures apparaissaient en bas de l'écran. Enfin, la relative démocratisation de l'internet a aussi participé à élargir et à accélérer la diffusion de ces écritures.

Ces pratiques langagières scripturaires ne sont pas l'apanage de la Tunisie. D'une part, d'autres pays arabophones témoignent des mêmes pratiques scripturaires. A tel point qu'on en est venu à parler d'« arabizi » dans le proche orient – à entendre « arab easy » – et de « e-darija » au Maroc – à entendre « darija électronique » : *darija* désignant les langues tunisienne, algérienne et marocaine – le mot se déploie différemment selon ces pays. D'autre part, cette « électronique » du langage n'a pas touché les seuls pays arabophones comme en témoigne le 4 anglais pour signifier « for » par exemple. Seulement dans le cas du tunisien écrit, il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une économie graphique mais aussi de la diffusion d'une langue non écrite.

Ainsi, si Facebook (et internet de manière générale) a amené un changement du rapport à l'écrit à l'échelle mondiale et que ces libertés prises avec les règles de l'écriture ne sont pas l'apanage de la Tunisie, il n'en demeure pas moins que chaque groupe social construit nécessairement une compréhension contextualisée de ses usages de l'écrit. Certains défendent l'idée selon laquelle le langage politique basé sur l'arabe standard était lui-même l'une des armes de la dictature politique parce que, d'une part, il utilisait une langue extérieure et peu accessible aux Tunisiens et que, d'autre part, il ne reconnaissait pas la variété linguistique du pays (le tunisien mais aussi, dans une moindre mesure, le berbère, dont la population est estimée à 1%). Par conséquent, le recours aux langues natales pouvait amener une relative ouverture politique.¹⁶ Quoi qu'il en soit, aujourd'hui, la présence écrite du tunisien sur Facebook vient rompre avec cet ancien modèle de répartition scripturaire.

Si certains écrivent en tunisien dans leurs Statuts ou Commentaires, d'autres en revanche ont fait le choix d'utiliser le tunisien de manière plus systématique par la création de pages et de groupes. J'ai cherché à repérer, de manière non exhaustive, ces espaces puis à comprendre les motifs sur lesquels est basé l'emploi de cette langue. Les créateurs de ces pages et de ces groupes – leurs administrateurs – partageraient-ils un dessein idéologique visant à faire reconnaître politiquement la langue ? Le travail de terrain que j'ai mené sur ces espaces web ainsi que les entretiens que j'ai conduits auprès des administrateurs de certains de ces espaces m'a amenée à distinguer trois ensembles correspondant à des statuts différents de la langue suivant les objectifs des utilisateurs. Le tunisien peut avoir le statut de langue étrangère (*TLE*), de Rolls, pour reprendre la métaphore de Saïd, ou de langue-pont.

Tunisien langue étrangère, « TLE »

Les groupes « Apprendre à parler le tunisien » (971 personnes aiment la page ; figure 1) ou « Apprendre le tunisien » (668 membres ; 3250 personnes aiment la page ; figure 2) sont des pages qui ont principalement pour cible un public francophone. Comme leurs

16 Ces postures sont développées dans BRAS 2004 ; HAERI 2003 ou encore SAFOUAN & KHOURY 2008, pour ne citer que ces travaux.

noms l'indiquent, il s'agit d'espaces destinés à des non tunisophones désirant apprendre la langue. Sur ce dernier groupe, l'on peut découvrir des écritures en tunisien ou en français, les traductions étant réalisées entre les langues tunisienne et française. Ce ne sont pas les administrateurs du site qui traduisent. Ceux-ci font appel aux membres tunisophones du groupe et retiennent définitivement la traduction après avoir croisé les différentes propositions reçues. Leur idée est d'arriver à traduire en moyenne un mot par jour.

Il convient de souligner que Facebook n'est pas isolé du reste du web et que, fréquemment, ces pages et ces groupes, sont reliés à d'autres pages web partageant les mêmes pratiques graphiques. Ici, Facebook joue le rôle d'intermédiaire dont l'objectif est de multiplier les chances d'être vu mais amène, dans le même temps, le tunisien à multiplier ses localisations et à se répandre plus aisément sur Internet. C'est le cas du site web « Apprendre le tunisien » qui est une extension de la page sur Facebook portant le même nom et dans lequel le travail de traduction entre tunisien et français est plus structuré comme le montre la figure 3.

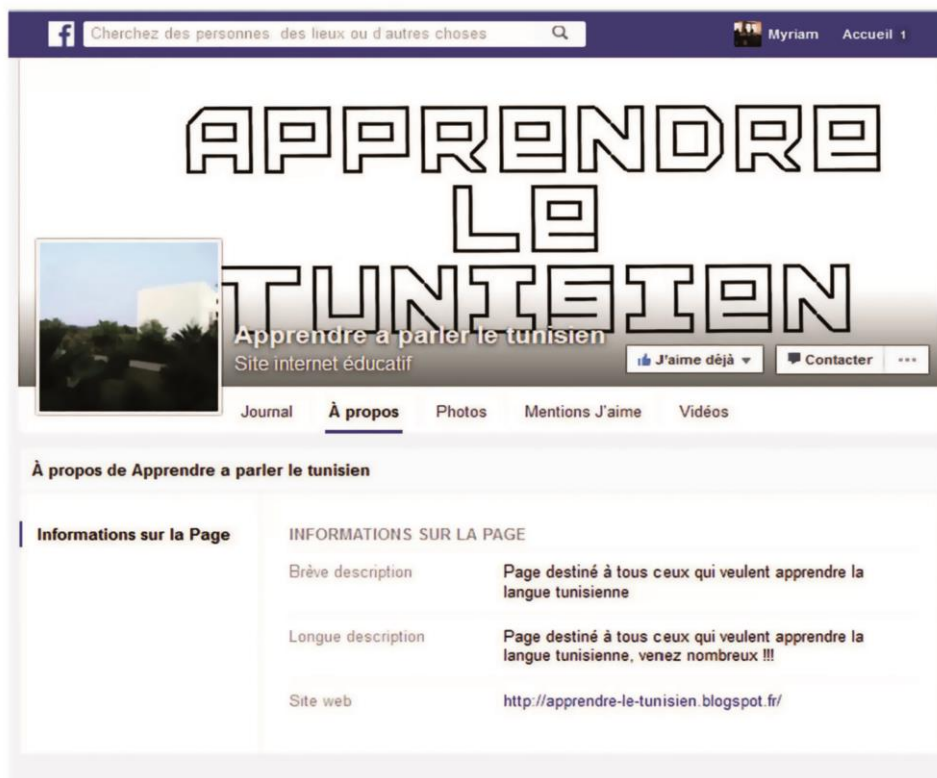


Figure 1



Figure 2

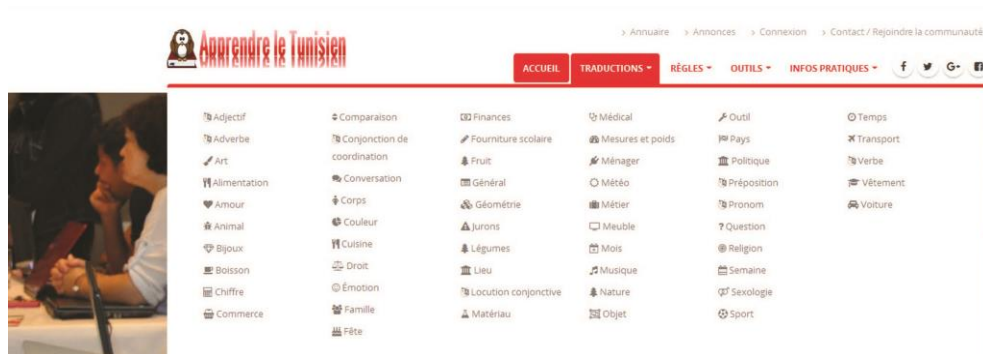


Figure 3

Le tunisien est donc utilisé ici dans le but d'être appris à ceux qui ignorent la langue, principalement à un public francophone. L'administrateur de cette page n'est ni un farouche défenseur œuvrant à faire reconnaître politiquement la langue tunisienne ni un jeune tunisien voulant réconcilier son histoire et sa langue tunisienne. En réalité, c'est à partir de Paris que cette page est nourrie par un jeune français que je nommerai Thomas, jeune trentenaire, actuellement webmaster dans une société de plomberie-serrurerie avec qui je me suis entretenue dans la capitale française en 2016. Thomas passe dix mois en Tunisie en 2013 où il lance une société qui n'a pas prospéré avant de revenir en France. Tout a débuté par une rencontre avec une jeune tunisienne dont il tomba amoureux. C'est suite à cette relation qu'il a commencé à souhaiter apprendre le tunisien. Webmaster de formation, il ne lui a pas été compliqué de créer d'abord un site pour noter les nouveaux mots tunisiens qu'il venait d'apprendre, une sorte « d'aide-mémoire », me confie-t-il, avant

de s'apercevoir que son entreprise séduisait et de l'étendre par la création de la page puis par celle du groupe. Point de mobile idéologique donc pour ce premier ensemble, ce qui n'est pas la posture du deuxième.

Une Rolls

D'autres pages et groupes sont créés et s'adressent principalement à des Tunisiens. C'est le cas des groupes « Derja » (figure 4), mot désignant la langue tunisienne, « la langue tunisienne 'derja' » (*dārġa*) (figure 5), ou encore, de manière plus explicite, « Pour l'officialisation de la langue tunisienne » (figure 6).



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Contrairement au premier groupe, les pages et groupes de ce deuxième ensemble promeuvent explicitement l'usage et la valorisation de la langue tunisienne. Ce choix est visible à travers les titres retenus mais aussi à travers ce qui est posté sur la page : il peut s'agir de chansons tunisiennes, des origines berbères de certains mots tunisiens, des informations sur la langue amazighe, sur le choix linguistique à **Malte** (pays qui revient souvent dans les discours des défenseurs de la langue tunisienne pour à la fois la proximité linguistique du maltais avec le tunisien et, dans le même temps, sa reconnaissance officielle). Cette promotion de la langue tunisienne challenge le choix politique posant l'arabe standard comme langue de l'écrit. L'administrateur du site Derja, que je nommerai Saber, la quarantaine, marié et père de deux enfants, est gérant d'une société à Tunis. Il me confie lors d'un entretien (mai 2016) que son intérêt pour la question de la langue a débuté par un voyage à Malte. Sa découverte du statut sociologique et politique du maltais l'ont d'abord surpris puis fait introduire le doute sur celui du tunisien en Tunisie dont le statut non officiel ne devenait plus une donnée évidente, doute progressivement prolongé par des recherches sur l'origine et l'histoire de la langue tunisienne. Il finit par réunir un ensemble d'arguments d'ordre historique légitimant la validité de cette langue en considérant qu'elle est d'origine **punico-berbère** et en insistant sur le statut privilégié de l'alphabet punique dans l'histoire de l'alphabet. Il décide alors de créer une association pour légitimer le statut du tunisien et diffuser son usage. Il dépose sa demande en 2013 et obtiendra l'autorisation trois ans plus tard.



Figure 7

C'est donc en tant que Tunisien lui-même que Saber cherche, à travers la page qu'il a créée sur Facebook, à poser son identité et celle de ses compatriotes par ce moyen linguistique. Le sigle qu'il a choisi pour sa page est d'ailleurs pensé en rapport à l'histoire du pays puisqu'il s'agit d' « un bateau qui traverse toute notre histoire [aussi bien avec] les lettres arabes que latines ». Pour lui, être tunisien passe par la langue tunisienne. Cette posture est partagée par cet autre jeune trentenaire tunisien résidant en France que je nommerai Ilyès. Il a, par exemple, tenté de traduire en tunisien « L'existentialisme est un humanisme » de Jean-Paul Sartre (à partir d'un blog : <http://sartrebetounsī.blogspot.com/2011/09/2.html>), visité le 17 novembre 2016). Il a créé des pages comme *Tarjim li-[t-]*¹⁷ *tūnsī* (« Traduis en tunisien », figure 7), et *Iktib bi-[t-]tūnsī* (« Ecris en tunisien », figure 8), peu actives aujourd'hui mais dont l'idée rejoint celle de Saber : celle de changer les représentations du tunisien qui devrait être pris au sérieux socialement, réhabilité culturellement et, pourquoi pas, reconnu politiquement.



Figure 8

17 Le *-l-* de l'article, écrit en arabe standard (*lil-t...*) mais assimilé au *-t-* suivant (*lit-t...*), n'est pas écrit ici à cause de l'inexistence d'une standardisation. En réalité ce qui est écrit sur la page correspondrait au double */tt/*.

Une langue-pont

Dans ce dernier groupe les acteurs écrivent aussi en tunisien mais pour des raisons différentes. Ici, ce n'est ni pour des raisons linguistiques ni à des fins idéologiques que ces pratiques sont développées, comme c'est le cas avec le deuxième groupe, ni pour apprendre le tunisien aux non tunisophones, le cas du premier groupe. Ce qui est écrit ici s'adresse directement aux Tunisiens, et l'usage de la langue a un but didactique.

C'est notamment le cas de Azyz Amami qui possède un blog dont il essaie de diffuser le contenu via sa propre page sur Facebook. Il publie en tunisien des traductions – comme

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كتاب الحكم لأبيقور، ترجمة أولى، جزء 1

25 avril 2016 by Azyz Amami | 3 commentaires

تقديم : الفلسفة في الأساس فكر حي، و الفكر يتغير بالوعدة. تاريخ الأفكار مهم في كونو يورينا كيفاه تطورت البشرية. كيفاه خلطنا هكة توة، و زيد يتجم يورينا برشة أفكار سليمة، مازال الوعي العام ما يحسن يتعامل معاها. ماهيتن اسامي معتدة و تركيبات صعبة، قدر ماهي أفكار .

الدارجة التونسية. البعض يعتبرها لغة متكاملة و البعض الآخر يعتبرها ما تتجاوزش درجة اللهجة. الحق، واحد م الناس موث موضوعي هذا، على خاطر الدخلة هاذي نشوفها غالطة و ما نتجم توصل كان لإتسكالات هوية و انقسام فيراحي بين متعلق بالفصحى (و وراها الإنتماء الثقافي العربي) و بين شكون يحب ع الدارجة و (إلا أي حكاية غير العربية من باب الانتسلاخ. انا نشوف فيها ع الأقل طريقة ناجحة باش الواحد يبسط الأفكار و الفلسفة م السما الأكاديمي المكذوب، و يستيهم ع القاعة وسط العباد. على خاطر هذاكه علاه موجودة الفلسفة في الأساس : باش الناس تفكر بالسليج. و بما أنو نعتبر انو في ها البلاد ناقصين ياسر معرفة و ثقافة، لذا يظهرلي ما فيها باس لو كان نبدا نترجم في أمهات الكتب متع الفلسفة (ولا الأصح، اللي نعتبرهم انا أمهات كتب. ماهي إلا تركيبتي قبل كل شي، نعمل فيها كيما نحب).

الكتاب لولاني هو مجموعة نصائح/حكم متع سي إبيكور (أبيقور في كتب العرب). سي إبيكور هذا كان مفكر اغريقي (يوناني معناها، أما يوناني قديم. اهوكا تحسها موهرة اكثر) معروف، أسس بطريقته في الحياة و التفكير مدرسة كاملة اسمها الإبيكورية (ولا الأبيقورية، انت و كيفاه بساعدك تنطقها) فحدث قرون مؤثرة ع الانتاج الفكري و الأدبي و الفني و السياسي. ماتيتن باش نعمل ملخص لحياتو، أما هاوكا [الويكيبيديا](#) للي يحب يزيد يغرق في الموضوع أكثر .

كتاب النصائح و الحكم فيه 44 نصيحة/حكمة . باش نحاول نهبطهم على تسعة نهارات، كل نهار 5 كجبات مترجمين بالدارجة، و في النهار العاشر، قراءة نقدية و رابط للكتاب كامل مترجم بالدارجة. الحاصل، نسكت انا و نخلي البلاصة لسي أبيقور خلي يحكي.

الكتاب

I

الكائن المثالي و الأيدي ما عندوش حتى وجيعة لا لروحو لا لخبرو، لا يتعشش و لا يحل على شي : الأحاسيس هادي علامة ضئيف.

Figure 9

celles du philosophe grec Epicure (figure 9) ou d'Antonio Gramsci –, des lectures critiques comme celle des *Frères Karamazof* de Dostoïevski ou encore de Roland Barthes.¹⁸

A la différence des scripteurs présentés précédemment, Azyz Amami annonce sur son blog qu'il ne souhaite pas inscrire son choix d'écrire en tunisien dans un registre identitaire. Il annonce clairement qu'il ne s'agit pas pour lui de débattre du statut du tunisien (langue ou dialecte). Il ne souhaite pas prendre position parce que, dit-il, aborder le sujet sous cet angle est « une fausse entrée qui ne peut qu'aboutir à des problématiques identitaires et de divisions ».¹⁹ Azyz Amami explique que son initiative de traduire la philosophie en tunisien découle de sa volonté de s'adresser aux gens dans le langage qu'ils comprennent le mieux. Pour lui, le tunisien est donc un véhicule employé pour mieux diffuser les idées philosophiques, pour « faire descendre les idées et la philosophie du piédestal académique et les faire marcher sur terre parmi les gens »²⁰ (**peuple vs. élite**).

Le tunisien devient ainsi une langue-pont permettant d'accéder à la philosophie, mais peut également servir d'autres causes, religieuses par exemple. C'est le cas de la page *al-Masīh fī Tūnis / El Massih Fi Tunis* (« Jésus en Tunisie », figures 10 et 11, voir page suivante).

Cette page tente de montrer la possibilité d'être à la fois **chrétien** et Tunisien.²¹ Ceci est évoqué par le choix des images ou, de manière plus explicite, par des mots. La première possibilité est illustrée dans la figure 10 qui montre des femmes de différentes générations, vêtues de manière aussi bien « traditionnelle » que « moderne ». La deuxième est illustrée par la figure 11 sur laquelle on peut lire le texte suivant : *ahnā twānsa – niktašfū wi-nšārkū wi-nṭī'ū 'l-inḡīl* (« Nous sommes Tunisiens. Nous découvrons, adhérons et obéissons aux Evangiles »).

18 Les liens vers ces textes sont respectivement : <<https://www.azyzamami.tn/2016/06/>>, (visité le 18 novembre 2016) ; <<https://www.azyzamami.tn/2016/07/11/أو-كيف-يبيع-الأخوة-كارامازوف-أو-كيف-يبيع/>> (visité le 05 janvier 2017) et <<https://www.azyzamami.tn/2017/01/03/م-الكلام-للكتيبة-ترجمة-لرولان-بارط-،>> (visité le 08 janvier 2017).

19 Ma traduction.

20 Ma traduction. Je précise que je reprends ici ce que Azyz Amami avance lui-même sur son blog en notant que, bien qu'ayant reçu son autorisation pour le citer, je n'ai pas encore conduit d'entretiens approfondis avec lui pour mieux comprendre le fond de sa pensée : s'agit-il de l'attitude qu'il souhaite afficher ou d'une position de fond ? Quoi qu'il en soit le tunisien est pour lui, dans ce cas précis, utilisé comme passerelle.

21 Pour l'intérêt accru pour toutes sortes de **minorités**, voir la contribution de Stephan GUTH dans ce dossier spécial, en particulier les films nos. #4 (travestie) et #10 (chrétiens en Égypte), mais aussi #1 et #22 (aveugles). Les minorités semblent représenter des **groupes marginalisés** de la société en général.



Figure 10



Figure 11

La figure 12 présente un exemple de la manière par laquelle la langue tunisienne est utilisée sur cette page. Il s'agit d'un cas typique d'intertextualité où le texte du fameux Bill (« This is Bill (...). Be smart. Be like Bill »), rebaptisé Mariam (Marie), dit : « sois intelligent sois comme Mariam », une bonne chrétienne. La chrétienté est exprimée ici en tunisien ; elle est « branchée ». L'on peut lire sur la figure 12 le texte suivant : « Je suis Mariam. J'aime mes amis et ne dis pas du mal d'eux en leur absence. Je ne casse pas du sucre sur leurs dos. Jésus a dit que ce n'est pas permis. Sois intelligent. Sois comme Mariam ».



Figure 12

L'administrateur de cette page m'explique ce choix du tunisien en ces termes : « Quand le Tunisien se convertit au christianisme, [il] se trouve obligé de lire et [de] se renseigner [à partir] de sites chrétiens arabes et la plupart d'[entre] eux sont du Moyen-Orient. L'arabe, même standard, est différent du nôtre et surtout avec l'introduction de nouveaux mots dans le contexte chrétien. Le Tunisien chrétien ou qui veut connaître [cette religion] a besoin d'un contenu compréhensible, loin de ces mots qui compliquent la foi chrétienne ».²²

Finalement, que leur objectif soit d'ordre philosophique ou religieux, les écritures en tunisien sur ces pages n'ont pas pour projet explicite d'appuyer l'usage de la langue tunisienne ni de la relier à des questions d'ordre politiques. Il s'agit plutôt de faire circuler plus rapidement des idées dans une langue accessible à une majorité de gens.

22 J'ajoute que la traduction en arabe standard de la Bible fait régulièrement émerger des débats assez vifs sur les mots utilisés (Allah ou Dieu ; Fils de Dieu, bien aimé de Dieu ou calife de Dieu) ou sur les propriétés du texte (éloquence et esthétique). Pour plus de développement voir KAOUES 2015.

3. Facebook comme “array”

J’ai cherché dans ce texte à montrer, à partir de quelques éléments de mon travail de terrain basé sur l’observation des pratiques d’écriture de pages et de groupes sur Facebook et accompagné par des entretiens menés auprès des administrateurs, comment ce réseau social rendait visible la langue tunisienne. Bien qu’il y ait eu des tentatives éparses par le passé d’écriture en tunisien (dans la publicité, dans certains journaux ou dans des titres ou dialogues de certains romans par exemple), Facebook constitue indubitablement un espace pour le faire graphiquement exister et circuler de manière rapide et assez efficace.²³ L’une des raisons tient à la capacité de ce lieu de contenir en son sein des profils divers : en dépit de la diversité des intentions qui les poussent à y être, les acteurs savent qu’ils peuvent gagner en étant sur Facebook. Ainsi, ceux qui souhaitent apprendre la langue tunisienne trouvent leur compte à être sur Facebook ; ceux qui œuvrent à lui faire changer son statut tirent également profit à s’y exprimer et ceux, enfin, dont l’usage du tunisien ne constitue pas une finalité en soi mais un moyen didactique supportant d’autres objectifs, comme de diffuser des idées d’ordre religieux ou philosophique ainsi que l’ont montré les exemples présentés plus haut, en tirent également un avantage. En conséquence, qu’il ait un statut de *TLE*, de *Rolls* ou de *pont*, le tunisien est rendu visible par Facebook.

La raison de ce dossier spécial *Living 2016* est de tenter d’identifier des pratiques ou des objets sociaux qui pourraient décrire ce qui correspondrait à *l’atmosphère ordinaire* de l’année 2016 en Tunisie comme en Egypte. Objets et pratiques qui, pensons-nous, participent à donner sa fragrance à l’année 2016, à l’image du travail de Gumbrecht qui s’est focalisé sur l’année 1926. Dans son *In 1926*, Gumbrecht classe son travail en deux parties : la seconde se compose de « Codes », qui constituent l’ensemble des codes culturels les plus saillants (en termes positifs ou négatifs : « codes » et « codes collapsed ») et qu’il mobilise en termes binaires (authenticité *vs.* artificialité ; centre *vs.* périphérie ; présent *vs.* passé, etc.) ; la première d’ « arrays » (comprenant la gomina, les ascenseurs, les avions, les téléphones, etc.) et qu’il définit comme suit :

There are certain artifacts, roles, and activities (for example, Airplanes, Engineers, Dancing) which require human bodies to enter into specific spatial and functional relations to the everyday-worlds they inhabit. Borrowing a word first used within the context of historical research by Michel Foucault, I call such relations—the ways in which artifacts, roles, and activities influence bodies—dispositifs, or arrays.²⁴

La manière par laquelle Facebook agit autorise à le classer parmi les objets saillants de 2016, là où l’action se situe (Gumbrecht définit son projet par l’identification de « *those*

23 Ce travail, qui ne prétend pas à l’exhaustivité, n’a pas abordé d’autres groupes et pages qui, toujours sur Facebook, utilisent le tunisien (comme dans des publicités par exemple) ou qui tentent de rendre plus visibles d’autres langues comme le berbère (qui commence à être un peu plus apparent sur Facebook) ou encore de défendre l’arabe standard (des associations de défense de l’arabe standard existent en Tunisie, c’est le cas par exemple de *al-‘arabiyya lughatunā*).

24 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.

places 'where the action was' »²⁵). Facebook est ainsi à comprendre comme un espace qui fait bouger les structures internes tout en s'y intégrant parfaitement. D'une certaine façon, il joue le rôle d'un **laboratoire** où les gens, tels des souffleurs de verres s'expérimentant à lui donner formes et couleurs, manipulent ces écritures en tunisien. Ce n'est pas un hasard si l'auteur parle de l'« impact incontrôlable » de la technologie sur le tissu social en donnant l'exemple du téléphone.²⁶ Ces pratiques permettent, dans ce sens, de capter un moment social offrant une meilleure intelligibilité de certains des enjeux de société. Facebook joue ainsi un rôle clé pour dé/re-construire des significations sociales à travers le langage, favorisant des possibles linguistiques comme ce chemin repris, mais dans le sens inverse de celui entamé dans les écoles, celui du passage de la Rolls à la Volkswagen.

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25 Ibid.: 433. Cette proposition a néanmoins pour corollaire l'idée que tout objet social ne se construit pas en une seule fois et de manière définitive (soudain en 2016 !) mais plutôt dans une graduelle progression.

26 Ibid.

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“A Dark Comedy”: Perceptions of the Egyptian Present between Reality and Fiction

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From a philosophical viewpoint, present is an aporia: an unattainable instant that goes by, perpetually out of reach. Nevertheless, from a socio-historical perspective, present does exist, at least as a margin: the grey zone between the moving boundaries of what is seen as the past and the projection of the future. In his essay on time and its wording, Paul Ricœur argues that only time accounts can bridge the gap, otherwise irresolvable, between time as collective yet unlivable dimension and time as individual experience impossible to share.¹

In the broader framework of the project *In 2016 – How it felt to live in the Arab world five years after the Arab revolutions*, this contribution aims at exploring Egyptian perceptions of the present by analyzing their accounts. The book that inspired the project – *In 1926* by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht – puts strong emphasis on simultaneity, as the way present is lived in its mixture of objects, thoughts, experiences in which fiction and non-fiction coexist in both naming and shaping reality.² In line with it, this contribution considers as sources, in parallel, fictional and non-fictional accounts of the Egyptian present, not to establish their equivalence, but to treat them as equally informative documents for historical research.³ The attempt of approaching simultaneity leads to the necessity of dealing with a heterogeneous body of cultural productions: from newspapers articles and editorials to cartoons, TV series, Facebook posts, literary works, integrated with fieldwork observations.⁴ They will be ordered through three analytical frames: namely space, time and everyday life, as categories that may give the present a meaning and make it readable. Since construing present is also referring to past and imagining future, attention will be paid to the definition of boundaries between them, in the aim of providing a first reflection on the relationship to time of the Egyptian society five years after 2011 revolution.⁵

1 RICŒUR 1985.

2 GUMBRECHT 1997.

3 CHITI 2014.

4 The definition of “cultural field” as the set of collective representations of a society implies that no kind of sources can be excluded *a priori*. See ORY 2004.

5 HARTOG 2003.

Space (Homeland as Exile)

The two interrelated concepts of homeland and exile are largely spread, and broadly discussed, in present-day Egyptian cultural productions. The topic is nothing new to Egypt, whose elite, since the mid-19th century, used to send its heirs to Europe, to be trained in foreign universities before taking high positions once back home. Since then, literature has been dealing with the topic of expatriation, exploring it through both literary witnessing and fictional writing.⁶ During the colonial epoch, expatriation was mainly an upper-class phenomenon, related to cultural or professional training abroad. In other circumstances, expatriation was forced and political ban was its cause. In both cases, the phenomenon only touched socio-economical or socio-cultural Egyptian elites. Reflecting upon it was investigating the asymmetrical relation between Egypt and European countries, between colonized and colonizer. It was not an angle for having an insight into asymmetrical relations between rich and poor, elite and non-elites within the Egyptian society. The massive economic migration that Egypt witnessed in the post-colonial period, and in particular since the seventies,⁷ changed the view. Becoming a non-elite phenomenon, expatriation also highlighted internal divides and inequalities, as well as inner dysfunctions of the state and social problems.⁸ Much broader attention was paid to departure from Egypt as a societal issue, collectively involving individuals from middle and lower classes and not only high bourgeoisie. In parallel, Egyptian migration towards non-European countries, especially the Gulf,⁹ led to rethink the phenomenon beyond the binary opposition between former colonizer and former colonized countries.¹⁰ As an ordinary event in Egypt and an experience widely shared by a high number of Egyptians, migration became part of Egyptian popular culture.¹¹

From its elitist origin to its routinization, expatriation was mainly described as a foreignizing phenomenon, calling into question identity and origin by providing a distanced perspective to rethink them. Literature and then cinema appropriated the theme, providing

6 For an English overview on expatriation in Arabic literature, from the early colonial epoch to the post-colonial present, see EL-ENANY 2006.

7 After the restrictions on outward migration in place under Nasser, the 1971 Egyptian Constitution gave all the Egyptians “the right to emigrate and to return home”. Restrictions on labor migration were lifted in 1974. For a historical overview, see ZOHRY 2003.

8 According to El-Enany, the first novel embodying this shift is *Aswāt* (1972) by Egyptian writer Sulaymān Fayyāḍ. See EL-ENANY 2006: 113-116.

9 MURSĪ 2003. Mursī highlights the weak link between the Egyptians living in the Gulf and the institutional representations of their home country. He talks about a foreignization (*ightirāb*) of the Egyptian diaspora in the Gulf.

10 The topic is present in Egyptian literature: Ġamāl al-Ghīṭānī explored it in his novel *Risālat al-baṣāʾir fī l-maṣāʾir* (1989) relating “destinies” of migrant workers in Europe as in the Gulf, Irak or Lybia; Ib-rāhīm ʿAbd al-Majīd talked about migration in Saudi Arabia in the novel *Al-Balda al-ukhrā* (1991), inspired from autobiographical experience. See also GUTH 2010 and ELAYYAN 2016.

11 Migration, and migration to the Gulf, is also part of the Egyptian future, as a dream or a hope: SCHIELKE 2015. The novel *Safīnat Nūḥ* by Khālid al-Khamīsī (2009) emblematically portrays this dimension.

accounts of emigration in both its fascinating and its difficult, sometimes excruciating, aspects. The concept of *ghurba*, roughly translated as “exile”, but simply indicating the separation from homeland, was at the core of these cultural productions. Connected with the root of both West (*gharb*) and foreigner/stranger (*gharīb*), *ghurba* embodied the feeling of being abroad. Even acknowledging its numerous problems, from political repression to economic decline and social inequalities, homeland remained the place of cultural and emotional attachment, opposed to the foreignization of *ghurba*.¹²

The distinction between homeland and exile – accompanied by subsequent oppositions between familiar and unfamiliar, comprehensible and incomprehensible, frightening and reassuring – seems to be challenged in current Egypt. Distance, estrangement and even fear are more and more often associated with life in the native country, rather than abroad. In 2015, the Egyptian TV series *Taht al-saytara* (“Under control”), one of the most popular broadcasted during the month of Ramadan, showed this shift.¹³ At its core is an Egyptian married couple living a wealthy and happy life in Dubai, before deciding to settle back in Egypt. Return is the beginning of all their problems. Their mutual love does not protect them from misunderstanding and eventually mistrust, increased by rumors spread by acquaintances. Their social status does not prevent them from falling down to an underworld of marginalization and suffering. The wife, who had overcome her addiction and completely recovered in Dubai, is led to take drugs again. The husband, who had an absolute trust in his wife, is led to doubt each word she says and turns his back on her when she needs him most. Their arrival to Egypt has nothing of a safe return to a cherished place. It is a travel towards the unknown, in which both characters get lost, losing each other at the same time. The frightening erosion of certainties that accompanies their return depicts Egypt as a foreignizing reality, as *ghurba* par excellence.

In a comics book entitled *Al-Waraqā* (“The paper”), cartoonist Islām Ğāwīsh offers a sharp satire of present-day Egypt, in its economic, social, cultural and political aspects. The two volumes he wrote until today, respectively published in 2015 and 2016, are very popular.¹⁴ *Al-Waraqā 1*, presented at Cairo International Book Fair in February 2015, sold more than 100.000 copies in one year, while *Al-Waraqā 2*, presented at the following book fair, sold 80.000 copies in a few months¹⁵ and both are still available in kiosks and bookstores. Throughout his work, Islām Ğāwīsh extensively talks about *ghurba* and homeland, playing with the two concepts and turning them into one another. In a cartoon we see a man passionately claiming: “I love your ground, Egypt!” In the following scene, the man is running in fear, trying to escape the ground of Egypt that threatens to swallow him.¹⁶ Another cartoon is set in a court, with a judge reading the verdict to the defendant: “You are sentenced

12 For an analysis of this opposition in the Egyptian cinema, see PAGÈS-EL KAROUI 2016.

13 For further details, see the series Facebook page <<https://ar-ar.facebook.com/TahtElSytara/>>; the episodes are available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=143NM-2750g>>

14 For an analysis of popular books and authors in Egypt, overcoming the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture, see JACQUEMOND 2013 and JACQUEMOND 2016.

15 Editorial board of Tūyā publishing house, personal communication, April 2016.

16 ĞĀWISH 2016: 173. For an analysis of Ğāwīsh’s work, see also HOFHEINZ 2016.

to Egypt". The man in the cell asks for mercy, screaming that he would prefer to be executed. The judge is inflexible: "You committed a horrendous crime and deserve the harshest punishment: being an Egyptian who lives in Egypt".¹⁷

Even the first cartoon in *Al-Waraqā 2* turns around an ironical reversal of homeland as a securing place, whose population can rely upon to build up a better future. It portrays a young veiled woman, symbol of Egypt, driving a scooter with a passenger aboard, representing the average Egyptian. The Egyptian asks, "Where are we going, Egypt?", while the homeland replies, "Shut up, kid!" (*Bass yāllā*). The launch of *Al-Waraqā 2* in February 2016, one of the major events at Cairo Book Fair, was based on this same idea. The publishing house welcomed its stand visitors with a giant cartoon. The woman-homeland did not appear in it, but the refrain was the same: *Bass yāllā*. Moreover, the identification between the characters she led, men and women, and the actual Egyptians was encouraged by the lack of one of their faces, which was not drawn. Visitors filled up the hole with their own, taking pictures of themselves as Egyptians misled by Egypt.

On September 7, 2015, Islām Gāwīsh published on his Facebook account a cartoon constituted by a single scene, in which a man watches birds in the sky and says: "One envies migrating birds now. No one prevents them from leaving. They don't need visas or money for the plane or residency permits and don't endanger themselves in death boats at the mercy of the sea".¹⁸ Among the 312 comments following the cartoon, some sadly stressed the fact that migrating birds die as well, flying in the middle of hunters and birds of prey. Nevertheless, none of them seemed to link the same fear to the destination of the migration process, as if, except for the dangers of travel, all assumed that *ghurba* itself is preferable to homeland.¹⁹ Some comments, on the other hand, saw in staying the risk of being hunted and put in a cage²⁰.

Indeed, the reversal between homeland and exile, with its clear social dimension, has also a political aspect. The lack of freedom is portrayed in the depiction of homeland as a cage, or a prison, and in the fear of being captured and forced into such a narrow space. More than a place of emotional attachment, homeland emerges as a forced belonging, to which Egyptians are chained by birth. In March 2016, the newspaper *Shurūq* published an article explicitly talking about this fear of the homeland.²¹ Its title was "I am afraid from this homeland and not for it" (*Anā khā'if min hādhā al-waṭan... wa-laysa 'alayhi!*). Its opening reads: "I left Cairo for a travel that was supposed to last no longer than three weeks. Almost four months passed since I went out. Every time the date of going back

17 *Ibid.*: 150. The caption may recall the close of Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's novel *al-Laġna* (1981) where the narrator, an Egyptian intellectual, is sentenced to the maximum penalty by a powerful and obscure Committee. He then returns home and achieves self-destruction, eating himself up.

18 <<https://www.facebook.com/Gawish.Elwarka/photos/a.1185311051492587.1073741835.108241269199576/1421266717897018/?type=3&theater>> (my translation).

19 This is also the perception of the twelve Egyptian characters portrayed in *AL-KHAMĪSĪ* 2009.

20 Young Egyptians stress the sharp contrast between the inclusion discourse of the ruling regime and its practice of incarceration of the youth, as if being "included" and being "imprisoned" meant the same in present Egypt: HOFHEINZ 2016.

21 *AL-SUKKARĪ* 2016 (my translation).

approached, I looked for a reason or a means to avoid return, because I’m afraid”. The author explains his love for foreign airports, which give him the impression of a brand new start, whereas Cairo airport became like “a blind octopus that hunts us, one after the other”, preventing Egyptian human rights activists and academics from going out or coming back in. Not only homeland airports, but homeland streets, squares, men and women scare him now, since he does not know what not to do to avoid being hunted and captured. And he concludes: a mandatory homeland (*waṭan al-ḍarūra*) does not deserve to be called a homeland.

Not only citizens may feel dispossessed from homeland, but homeland itself, as a unifying concept, may appear as distorted and deprived of its meaning. Its appropriation by the current government is overwhelming in both mass media and public space, where giant posters, and even basic products as home calendars, associate the picture of the ruling President with the slogan *Taḥyā Maṣr* (“Long live Egypt”). If the identification between the ruler and the country is nothing new to Egypt, which has a long history of military leadership taken by strongmen,²² its scale seems to be perceived as unprecedented by some Egyptian observers. On May 25, 2014 – the day before the beginning of presidential elections – the newspaper *Mada Masr* published a cartoon signed by Andeel, entitled *Ṣamt intikhābī* (“pre-election silence”).²³ It parodied the unbalanced access to political propaganda, which further increased the gap between the two candidates to the presidency. While the challenger was not even portrayed, the cartoon showed Sisi’s face on a giant billboard, allegedly devoted to an impartial celebration of homeland: the slogan *Taḥyā Maṣr* merged with Sisi’s first name, becoming *‘Abdelfat...taḥyā Maṣr* and thus breaking the ban on political campaigning during pre-election silence.²⁴

Turned into a partisan, one-sided notion, *waṭan* (“homeland”, connected with the feeling of belonging to a chosen country²⁵) becomes a synonym for *dawla* (“state”, referring to institutions and historically linked to the notion of “ruling dynasty”). In April 2016, the government’s decision to transfer to Saudi Arabia the territorial control over Tiran and Sanafir, two Egyptian islands in the Gulf of Aqaba, gave rise to further tension between *waṭan* and *dawla*. Massive demonstrations against the islands transfer were organized in Cairo, mainly in Giza and Dokki, on April 25, a public holiday called “Sinai Liberation Day” (*īd taḥrīr Sīnā*) and commemorating the final withdrawal of Israeli troupes from Sinai in 1982. On the other side, in Talaat Harb square in Downtown, a number of government’s supporters also gathered, bearing Sisi’s portrait alongside with the Saudi Arabian flag. Among them, a lady declared: “The islands are Egyptian and we will give them to King Salman and if he asked for the pyramids, we would give them too”.²⁶

22 The documentary movie *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs* (2015/2016) by Jihan El-Tahri explores the construction of the figure of the Egyptian leader as a Pharaoh-like ruler: GUTH 2016b. Sisi places himself in this lineage, as a new Nasser: EL-ARISS 2014.

23 ANDEEL 2014.

24 For an overview of the youth reactions to Sisi’s appropriation of *Taḥyā Maṣr*, see HOFHEINZ 2016.

25 For the definition of *waṭan* as “chosen country”, see al-MARSAFĪ 1881. A French translation is available: DELANOUE 1963. For an analysis in English, see GUTH 2016.

26 “Sīnā’ sa‘ūdiyya fī ‘īdihā”, *Zaḥma*, April 25, 2016.

Some days later, on website *za2ed18*, an Egyptian human rights activist and former soldier wrote:

It seems that the ruling regime does not realize what it does by playing with the concept of patriotism (*waṭaniyya*). If part of what we witness now in Egypt is the result of a patriotic revival, in other circumstances and under another regime, it would have been labeled as high treason. When the cession of a portion of homeland is turned into a patriotic act, requiring public celebration, and a huge effort is made to certify that the land does not belong to Egypt, simply to refuse the idea that the regime could sell it out or cede it, we are faced with a rare phenomenon, that is probably unparalleled in past or present history. (...) For someone like me, who served in the Egyptian army with the borders guards and was responsible for the distribution of weapons amongst Egyptian units in Sinai, seeing a piece of land that I regarded as Egyptian, becoming a portion of a foreign state, without any war or act of resistance, bears an indescribable bitterness.²⁷

Time (Present as Dystopia)

The estrangement of life in the homeland is widely depicted in current Egyptian literature²⁸. One of its major and commercially more successful trends²⁹, labeled as dystopia, is generally presented as a mixture between science fiction and noir, by which a frightening future is created as a sort of negative model of the actual society. One of the most prominent Egyptian novels of the last few years, *Uṭārid* by Muḥammad Rabī³⁰, was categorized as such. Published in 2014, it was shortlisted by the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2016, and this recognition rapidly opened the way to an English translation, already available.³¹ *Uṭārid* is a vision of Egypt from 2011 to 2025: from the revolution to its failure, through the success of a counter-revolution and the establishment of a military regime that lasts until 2023, not to be replaced by any democratic government, but to be overthrown by an external authoritarian power. In this near future, the Egyptian homeland is not only a foreignizing reality, dominated by violence and distress, but an actual portion of a foreign country. Invaded by the “Knights of Malta” in 2023, it becomes part of their “Republic”, without any form of rebellion from the majority of the Egyptians, who adjust to the occupiers’ presence until it becomes a routine:

Things were still pretty much stable. Of course, Cairo was full of the checkpoints set up by the Knights. Their soldiers spoke Arabic like Tunisians, and English in many different dialects, and they and the inhabitants got by one way or another. As I saw

27 ‘ĀZIR 2016 (my translation).

28 The same is true for Egyptian cinema: see GUTH 2016b.

29 See JACQUEMOND 2016.

30 RABĪ 2014.

31 RABĪE 2016.

it, we had sunk as low as it gets, content with a bunch of mercenaries as our occupiers and with no hope of getting rid of them. Just shy of half a million men from various countries, all of them now citizens of the Republic of the Knights of Malta, and we, all pride set aside, were welcoming them as guests into our country.³²

If future Egyptians lack patriotism, their invaders are no more patriotic than them. A mirror effect seems to unit occupiers and occupied. The “Republic of the Knights of Malta” can be read as a gloomy parody of a strong military regime, which has no civil representatives but a ruling leadership; no territory but conquered Egypt; no citizens but mercenaries from all over the world, with no affective bond to the state they fight for:

The republic was a state without a political or administrative system, just two vast, highly trained armies drawn from a range of ethnicities and nationalities. Land pirates, to use a choicer term, and landless, so patriotism never featured in their thoughts: they’d chosen to leave their countries behind them and settled here.³³

The difference between the “Republic of the Knights of Malta” and Egypt is the gap itself between victory and defeat, between a successful subjugation and a failed emancipation. In 2024, the day chosen by the “Knights of Malta” to invite Egyptians to go back to work, acknowledging in this way their occupation, is January 25:³⁴ the anniversary of the beginning of Tahrir revolution in 2011, which is now remembered as the Police Day, as it was during Mubarak’s era. While international critique focuses on the science-fictional character of *Otared*, praising its imaginary plot and defining it as a fantasy,³⁵ Egyptian analyses seem to privilege its perfect plausibility. *Mada Masr*’s culture journalist compared the reading to “watching a train-crash happening in slow motion”, before recommending the book “to anyone who has a faint sense that something has gone terribly wrong with our lives, our morality and our city, particularly over the past five years”.³⁶ This is also the author’s viewpoint: when asked to disclose his sources of inspiration to build up the dark future of the novel, he simply replied: “I live in Egypt.”³⁷

Even operations such as revising and reprinting, as the publication in 2016 of the renewed edition of a 2009 book by Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq³⁸, seem to be driven by a deeper attention to the realistic dimension of dystopia. Tawfīq’s novel, previously entitled *Uṣṭūrāt arḍ al-ẓalām*³⁹ (“The legend of the land of darkness”), was originally included in the collection *Mā warā’ al-ṭabī’a* (“Supernatural”) of the publisher al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya al-

32 *Ibid.*: 32.

33 *Ibidem*.

34 *Ibid.*: 31.

35 See IPAF’s presentation: <<http://www.arabicfiction.org/shortlist.html>>.

36 EL GIBALY 2016.

37 Muhammad Rabī, personal communication, April 2016.

38 Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq is an Egyptian best-selling author of science fiction: see JACQUEMOND 2016. His novel *Yūūbiyā* (2008) was acclaimed as the first Arabic dystopia.

39 KHĀLID TAWFĪQ 2009.

ḥadītha, specialized in young adult literature. It is now released by a general publisher under a new title: *Fī mamarr al-fi'rān*⁴⁰ (“In the rats corridor”), in which the reference to darkness is coupled with the one to the narrowness and insalubrity of the place, immediately recalling prison imagery, and the term “legend” disappears. From supernatural to realistic, the shift in the book’s presentation is considerable: formerly labeled as a series of “wonder travels” (*riḥalāt ‘ajība*), it is proposed in 2016 as a work capable of shedding light into the Middle Eastern present. Although its qualification as “dystopian novel” (*riwāya dīstūbiyya*) remains, the author’s introduction reads: “What pushed me to its revision is, perhaps, the fact that the idea seemed to me, in its symbolic character, an approach to the political reality currently lived by our Arab populations in their labor of forging freedom and universal human values”.⁴¹

The perception of a dystopian character of everyday present may also explain the commercial success and wide availability, in Egypt, of several editions of the classic dystopian novel *1984* by George Orwell. Its visible presence, both in English and in various Arabic translations, in bookstores as in the displays of street-vendors, has been widely observed in the last few years.⁴² In April 2015, a bookdealer in Cairo Downtown, whom I asked to give me an advice on recent Egyptian novels, recommended me instead to read *1984*, for a better understanding of present-day Egyptian society,⁴³ and a colleague had a similar experience at the end of 2014. As surprising as it may seem, this invitation to consider a foreign novel written in 1949 and setting a dark Western future in 1984, as a genuine restitution of 2015 Egypt, is in line with the perception of a foreignizing aspect in being an Egyptian living in Egypt nowadays.

This distancing effect is applied both to space and time. As Sarah Awad points out observing Cairo urban space,⁴⁴ the recent, repeated political changes Egypt went through generated a rupture for its inhabitants. Some of them experienced a major shift in their social status, from leading groups to marginalized categories: the youth who was celebrated as the agent of revolution in 2011 was prosecuted in 2013; the Muslim Brotherhood who ruled the country in 2012 was declared a terrorist group in 2013. The authorities’ reconstruction of recent past, by turning nationalistic symbols into a partisan heritage, excludes from the national narrative millions of Egyptians who took the streets in 2011. Awad mentions a graffiti that reads: “Remember the tomorrow that never came?”⁴⁵ (*Fakkir fī bukra illi mā gāsh?*) It suggests the possibility of another post-2011 present, a sort of parallel, alternative dimension that did not materialize.

40 KHĀLID TAWFĪQ 2016.

41 *Ibid.*: 5 (my translation).

42 This is the reason why the cover of an Arabic edition of *1984* is among the pictures that illustrate the description of *In 2016* project, <<https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/the-arab-world-five-years-after-the-arab-spring/>>.

43 Downtown Cairo bookdealer, personal communication, April 2015.

44 AWAD forthcoming.

45 *Ibid.*: 15.

The perception of the present as a wrong future emerging from a promising past, set back in 2011, may explain the non-linearity of time as it is construed in several Egyptian novels written after the revolution.⁴⁶ Often choosing 2011 as the threshold year, the plots move onward and backward, jumping ahead into the future and moving back to the past, without following a chronological order. A broken timeline, with its challenge to sequentiality, is not the only distortion impressed to time by Egyptian authors. A novel entitled *Aghustus* (“August”), published in 2016 by Usāma al-Shādhli,⁴⁷ even plays with calendar time, highlighting the gap between time as institutional convention and time as human perception. Without setting his novel in the future, al-Shādhli gives it a distancing effect by building up a month of August which does not end when it should. It lasts instead sixty-three days, naturally accompanying the high temperature that keeps rising in Egypt and causing health problems as well as economic issues, linked to high consumption of electricity for air-conditioning and food shortages. On August 33, the government spokesperson addresses the citizens as follows:

Egyptians, I missed you. We haven’t talked with each other for three whole days and now I’m coming to address you again in the open air, where saboteurs and terrorists are spreading the rumor that the temperature of our good country has reached fifty degrees Celsius. Yet, I stand in front of you without a single drop of sweat. I save the drops of my sweat for work, not for the hot weather. Indeed, the date today is August 33. We waited, yesterday, to see if there was a mistake, but the month went on, until today. In any case, what would be wrong for us, if September does not come? If September does not come, then “we are all September” (*fa-kullī-nā sibtimbir*).⁴⁸

Even if contrary to common sense, the extension of the month of August is perfectly in line with the inner logic of the plot, in which the never-ending summer, with its high temperature, explains the numerous problems that shake Egypt: from child diseases to growing inflation, with basic crops as tomatoes or fruits that become unaffordable for the majority of Egyptians. A group of thieves, the heroes of the novel, dream of living abroad and keep robbing a post-office to make money enough to realize it. Successful in cheating the police, they are cheated by inflation, since the money they gather becomes quickly valueless and expatriation impracticable. The only travels they make are the ones underlined in the subtitle: *asfār al-‘abath*: “travels of absurdity”, but also “of futility”. This is the way the author presents his book in an ironic initial warning: “All you read in this novel comes from imagination and absurdity to an extent that it is true”.⁴⁹ In parallel, the publisher emphasizes it is

46 Along with *Uṭārid* by Rabīʿ, see Nāʿil al-Ṭūkhī’s *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* (2013); Aḥmad Nāǧī’s *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh* (2014); Rakhā’s *Bāwlū* (2016); just to name a few. The same pattern can be found in recent non-Egyptian novels (see the ones long-listed by the International Prize for Arabic Fiction).

47 al-SHĀDHLI 2016.

48 *Ibid.*:157, my translation.

49 *Ibid.*: 6.

‘abath, not science fiction (*al-khayāl al-‘ilmī*),⁵⁰ and states on the cover: “After reading this novel, we accept reality with more irony”.

Everyday Life (Ordinary Citizen as Hero)

When ordinary life is perceived as dystopia, the ordinary citizen who simply adjusts to it, accepting reality with irony, may be perceived as a hero⁵¹. In 1990, geographer Olivier Dollfus depicted the situation of Cairo as emblematic of the challenges the world will be faced with. In his own words, Cairo provided a foretaste of the difficulties that future had in store: a huge annual demographic growth; an extraordinarily high population density at the heart of the agglomeration, with 46% of housing with no water and 53% with no sanitation facilities; catastrophic conditions of roads and transportations; oldness of water and electricity supplies networks. Nevertheless, he added, “the worst is not always certain and the capacity of adaptation remains considerable”.⁵² Present-day Egyptian cultural productions, both fictional and non-fictional, emphasize the many difficulties Egyptians encounter on a daily basis, particularly in Cairo, as well as their capacity of adaptation. Simple activities as using public infrastructures, asking for a document or dealing with health services are depicted as hard challenges, which can easily turn into battles between the individual and the public sector. The latter, representing the state involvement in the society, appears once more as a “blind octopus”⁵³ hitting the people who have the infortune to come across it. On 26 May 2016, an Egyptian citizen posted on his Facebook page the following statement: “I love Egypt, because you can do anything in this country. I was renewing my driving license today and the employee said we didn’t get the folder yet, so we’ll give you a temporary permit. I got angry and he told me I’ll make it for a long period of time and he made it for one thousand years and six months.”⁵⁴ A picture shows a temporary permit issued in the name of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Cairo Traffic, released on 26 May 2016 and lasting until 26 November 3016.

Dealing with public services or public space may require both tolerance and defiance. In January 2016, an article portrayed this twofold attitude of ordinary citizens who manage to bear apparently unbearable situations, but also, at the same time, to force the rules and the circumstances until they find a way out.⁵⁵ This creative resistance to daily life is accompanied, according to the article author, by an ambivalent feeling, in which sense of adventure is mixed up with fear. The train passengers who are unable, or unwilling, to pay

50 Editorial board of Bayt al-Yāsīmīn publishing house, personal communication, October 2016.

51 On enduring life in Cairo today, see also ABAZA 2016.

52 BRUNET & DOLLFUS 1990: 496. See also MADŒUF & PAGÈS EL-KAROUÏ 2016.

53 The expression is taken from the article quoted above (note 21).

54 See the Facebook post <[55 ZAKARIYYĀ 2016.](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=272042269850384&id=100011338381203&set=a.254036661650945.1073741828.100011338381203&source=48&refid=28&ft_=qid.6297019208070492300%3A%2Fstory_key.-3833563195238999426&__tn__=E>.</p>
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the ticket and find smart ways to avoid controls are both adjusting to the system and defying it. And this is also the attitude of government employees in Downtown Cairo, exhausted by the many barbed wires surrounding huge portions of the neighborhood since 2012 and making them walk for much longer than needed:

Some of them opened a gap in the fence of an abandoned palace in Simon Bolivar Square and passed through this shortcut, rather than circumnavigating the globe! Not only that; a woman came to sell napkins, sitting next to the gap, because the respectable short-cutters work for governmental organizations or embassies or prestigious press institutes and cannot have their shoes and suits dirty after fleeing from the magic hole!⁵⁶

The individual resourcefulness of private citizens is sometimes celebrated as if it were an artistic performance. In November 2015, while the city of Alexandria was hit by violent floods, a video went viral on social media. It showed a man trying to reach his car, parked in a flooded street. Instead of waiting for the help of authorities, the man took two chairs and used them to build a movable bridge: standing on a chair, he put the other in front of him, passed to it and moved ahead the rear chair and so on, until he was able to cross the street. A number of newspapers and social media emphasized the show-like character of the act, comparing it to the game of musical chairs⁵⁷ or even to circus.⁵⁸ At the same time, praising the creativity of a single citizen in the middle of difficulties is also acknowledging the lack of institutional help to face them. While admiring the Alexandrian man walking on water, social media and newspapers highlighted the absence of public involvement in dealing with the natural catastrophe and the video was labeled with the hashtag *kūmīdiyā saw-dā'* (“dark comedy”).⁵⁹

Literature also sees a dark comedy in the relationship between ordinary citizens and the state, its infrastructures and its representatives in the public sector. Journalist Muḥammad Munīr recently published a collection of short stories, linked together through the presence of a main character named Masrūq ibn Masrūq.⁶⁰ The literal translation of the Arabic reads “Robbed, son of Robbed”, or “Dispossessed, son of Dispossessed”, and it is more than a simple name. As the character says:

My name and characteristic and condition is being Dispossessed, son of Dispossessed. I belong to the oldest and most deep-rooted family in Egypt, since my father and grand-father and grand-father’s ancestors were all dispossessed. I will tell you

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, my translation.

⁵⁷ “Bi’l-fīdiyū wa’l-ṣuwar”. *Al-Yawm al-Sābi‘*, November 4, 2015.

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdL8c0dL_KA>.

⁵⁹ Cf. for instance *Akhbār al-Iskandariyya* Facebook page: <<https://www.facebook.com/a5bar.alex/videos/1112548432089496/>>.

⁶⁰ MUNIR 2016.

the daily incidents I live, bearing the experience of the centuries-long patience with which a dispossessed faces his destiny.⁶¹

Symbol of an average Egyptian of the lower class, Masrūq ibn Masrūq is deprived of financial resources but rich in individual resourcefulness when dealing with a state that keeps dispossessing him. As his daughter gets sick and needs to be hospitalized, he discovers the cruelty of a health insurance which does not cover the expenses. Penniless, he talks to his wife and they both decide to leave the girl at the hospital as a pledge: she will be raised there, becoming a nurse or even a doctor, and her future will be safe. This naïve wisdom of the poor, who finds paradoxical solutions highlighting in this way paradoxical problems, makes Masrūq similar to Goha: the Egyptian version of the idiot-brilliant guy, hero of popular tales spread in the Mediterranean basin, from Sicily to Turkey.

Without calling the political system into question, Goha, as Masrūq, represents a living amendment of its injustices on an individual scale. He is not an opponent, but an “unaware avenger”:⁶² someone who wants justice for himself, trying to improve his own life conditions. In the words of sociologist Asef Bayat, he/she is a citizen who resists through the “art of presence”: by making himself/herself visible when condemned to invisibility, by actively using public spaces when supposed to live them passively.⁶³ This everyday practice of single individuals, outside of collective frameworks of representation, is a creative response to authoritarian rule. It requires, at once, acceptance and defiance: in acknowledging the limitation of political freedoms, while negotiating new spaces for social autonomy.

This twofold attitude may lead to opposite moral appraisals. If most of international observers attribute to it the failure of 2011 revolution, emerged from fragmented actors incapable of gathering in a structured movement, many Egyptian cultural productions seem to approach it, nowadays, under a positive light. The capacity of adaptation of ordinary citizens is often described as an essential Egyptian feature. In a country that desperately lacks collective resources, individual resourcefulness is seen as a sort of compensation and even a reason for national pride. In February 2016, website *cairoscene* praised a man for his creativity in recycling old tires, by turning them into nice and useful items such as chairs or tables. His work was appreciated for both its artistic vein and its positive impact on the environment, in a field, such as rubber recycling, which is in need of institutional involvement:

Just when we thought Egyptians couldn't get any more inventive, a man out of Daqahliyah's Mansoura is proving us all wrong. (...) Hundreds of toxic components are released in the process of burning tires, and this country doesn't need any more pollution. Instead of exposing us to further pollution, Ahmad Hameed of Mansoura puts used tires to good use.⁶⁴

61 *Ibid.*: 5.

62 “Unaware avenger” (*vendicatore ignaro*) is how Leonardo Sciascia defines Giufà, the Sicilian version of Goha, in the introduction to CORRAO 1991.

63 BAYAT 2010.

64 “Creative Mansoura Man Transforms Used Tires into Eclectic Art”, *Cairoscene*, February 2, 2016.

The article emphasized the collective value of his individual action, as well as its intrinsic Egyptian character: “We’ve always known that our demographic (*sic*) of Egyptians is a creative one”. This leitmotiv appears in numerous cultural productions, as a self-evident truth that does not need to be verified. At the bottom of the page, a comment reads: “This guy isn’t from Mansoura city, he is from Iraq”.

Yet, the axiom seems to keep all its validity, as a logical consequence of a simple remark: since it takes a lot of inventiveness to get by in life in Egypt, ordinary Egyptians had to be, or to become, inventive. In a book entitled *Kull al-ṭuruq tu’addī li-sittīn dāhiyah* (“All the roads lead to catastrophe”), in Egyptian dialect, young author Muṣṭafā Shuhayyib plays with the register of dark comedy to ultimately recommend his readers to keep a positive attitude in life. The assertion that “Egyptians get by” (*il-maṣrī byiṣarraḥ*) is at the very core of the lesson of optimism he wants to teach: “If each of us is looking for something in his life to be proud of and doesn’t find anything, he must be proud to be Egyptian and have the capacity of adaptation (*byiṣarraḥ*), being the spiritual father of the proverb *necessity is the mother of invention*.”⁶⁵ This call for national pride formulated as an injunction – “must be proud” (*lāzim yiftakhir*) – sounds like an involuntary parody of its spontaneous expression, erupting during 2011 revolution and particularly after Mubarak’s resignation. At that time, before a reality perceived as a materialized utopia, revolutionary euphoria naturally fueled Egyptian pride. Today, Egyptian pride seems to be mentioned as the solution to carry on, adjusting to a post-revolutionary reality perceived as a materialized dystopia.

The passage from high revolutionary hopes to deep post-revolutionary disappointment⁶⁶ also impacts the perception of the average Egyptian. While the ordinary 2011 citizen was heroified as an aware promoter of political change, its 2016 correspondent is heroified as an unaware, Goha-like champion of social resistance. The opening of a so-called “scream room” – a soundproof room in a bookstore and café in 6th of October district, in which customers can vent their frustration by screaming for ten minutes each – is greeted, with bitter irony, as a national improvement:

You know how living in Egypt can sometimes be the very definition of screwed? How your *bawab* gives you the I-am-judging-you-in-my-head-but-I-am-not-saying-anything look every morning and things like human dignity and basic citizenship rights can seem like luxuries you can’t afford? So you cry yourself to sleep and you weep in the shower. It doesn’t have to be like that anymore. The government isn’t exactly being replaced by the rebel alliance, but Egypt just got itself a scream room which may prove just as effective as a regime change!⁶⁷

May you be an upper-class English-educated young person, as the target reader of this article, or a middle age man from the urban lower class, as Masrūq character, the Egyptian present can have in both cases, for different reasons, the taste of a dark comedy.

65 SHUHAYYIB 2016: 63.

66 For an insight into the passage from euphoria to disillusionment, see ABAZA 2015; AWAD forthcoming.

67 “Egypt gets its first and only scream room”, *Cairoscene*, October 12, 2016.

Conclusion

Overcoming the traditional distinction between fictional and non-fictional sources enables a more comprehensive look at present-day Egyptian cultural productions. This is particularly significant for analyzing the representations of time and space, as the frameworks within which everyday life takes place and the present is given a meaning, becoming readable. This first approach to the theme seems to reveal the perception of a fiction-like character of Egyptian reality nowadays, in its twofold, ambivalent aspect of “dark comedy”.

The post-revolutionary boom of two pre-revolution literary genres, such as dystopian novels and “ironic literature” (*adab sākhir*), may be seen in this broader context. The depiction of a hopeless upcoming time, in its most tragic and violent aspects, already unveils a view of the Egyptian present as the wrong post-2011 future. Considered as an alteration of a linear, progressive evolution, reality itself can appear as fiction: an ironic reversal of the authentic reality that should have followed the end of Mubarak’s regime. In this sense, both dystopian and ironic literature may claim to realism. They are not far, in their willingness to be representative, from the realistic paradigm that characterized Egyptian literature for decades, since the *Nahḍa*.⁶⁸ Seamlessly, the definition of the Egyptian present as “dark comedy” is spread in non-fictional productions, from newspapers to social media. The hashtag *kūmīdiyā sawdā*,⁶⁹ employed to label ordinary life in flooded Alexandria in November 2015,⁶⁹ has similar correspondents in other hashtags, such as *Maṣr bitqūllikum* (“Egypt tells you”), often used to portray Egypt as a reversed world, a reign of absurdity that challenges the very distinction between reality and fiction. Ordinary life in such an extraordinary homeland is presented in itself as an act of heroism. Before the lack of belonging to a collective representation, may it be cultural⁷⁰ or political,⁷¹ the fragmented, atomized “art of presence”⁷² of Egyptian citizens is celebrated as a national redemption.

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68 See JACQUEMOND 2003 and MEHREZ 1994: 1-16.

69 “Ta’līqāt al-nushatā’ ‘alā amṭār al-Iskandariyya... Kūmīdiyā sawdā”, *Dūt Misr*, November 4, 2015.

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The Construction of “Tunisianity” through Sociolinguistic Practices from the Tunisian Independence to 2016

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Abstract

In the period following the revolutionary events in Tunisia, several linguistic issues were put at the core of political life. While some conservative political activists called for the institutionalisation of the Arabic standard language, others highlighted the importance of the Tunisian dialect as a mother tongue, while Berber activists fought for a broader recognition of the Tamazight language. As they are connected with identity and belonging, these linguistic issues raise the following questions: What language does a Tunisian have to speak in order to be considered a Tunisian? How do sociolinguistic practices contribute to the construction of “Tunisianity”?

Introduction

After the 2011 revolutionary movements in Tunisia, debates within the media and civil society highlighted the issue of “Tunisianity”. Some slogans such as “Be proud you are Tunisian” or “I am Tunisian and let them say I am crazy” or “Be happy you are a Tunisian” circulated in the media and were used in political discourse. “Tunisianity” emerged as a new central concept in a period of democratic transition. People seemed to reflect on the meaning of being a Tunisian, and linguistic issues were put at the core of political life. While some conservative political activists called for the institutionalisation of the Arabic standard language, others stressed the importance of the Tunisian dialect as a mother tongue, while Berber activists fought for a broader recognition of Tamazight. In political debates, some deputies were strongly criticized because of their use of French. Social media users mocked the linguistic mistakes made by the politicians. As they are connected with identity and belonging, these linguistic issues raise the following questions: What language does a Tunisian have to speak in order to be considered a Tunisian? Why is it that the most emblematic word of the Tunisian revolution was the French word “dégagé”? How can we define “Tunisianity” linguistically? What is the place of French in the political debate?

These questions have their roots in Tunisian history. After the independence of March 20th, 1956, linguistic issues were part of the political and social debates about the construction of a national identity. In his speech of July 29th, 1968, President Bourguiba announced to Tunisian citizens: “[...] Arabic is not the language of the Tunisian people”. Starting from this statement, Tunisia has a long history of linguistic and political confrontation since its independence (RIGUET 1984). This also marks a linguistic contradiction which I am going to analyze in this article. It is important in this respect to go back to the linguistic policies that were widely undertaken during the French colonial period (1881-1956) in order to study their role in the construction of “Tunisianity”. As for 2016, the target year of the *In 2016* project,

educational reforms, Arabization, the teaching of the Koran and the debate on the use of French in political speeches were the main linguistic issues observed in Tunisia during this year. They highlight the connection between social hierarchization, language practices and the nation-state (HELLER 2008). Before exploring these linguistic conflicts and their links to identity struggle, I would like to recall the linguistic issues that Tunisia witnessed before and after the 2011 revolution. I will focus on the way these linguistic issues contribute to construct the image of “Tunisianness” or “Tunisianity”. What is the link between linguistic issues and cultural codes regarding the construction of “Tunisianity” in 2016? How do language practices contribute to construct an image of “Tunisianity”? To answer these questions, we have to go back to the linguistic policies undertaken before the Tunisian revolution.

1. Sociolinguistic issues in Tunisia

Language practices in Tunisia should be analyzed as taking place in a battlefield that is linked to constitutional and political agendas. Indeed, language is not a homogeneous entity, but a practice connected with social cleavages, such as class, education and ideology. I will rely on Monica Heller’s reflections on “identity” and “community” (HELLER 2008). I will also reconsider the construction of linguistic “Tunisianity” on the basis of Heller’s theoretical perspective. In this context, Heller states:

I suggest that in the ideas of ‘processes’ and ‘practices’ we may find a conceptual basis for developing the tools we need to overcome the problems associated with traditional ideas of ‘communities’ and ‘identities,’ which require a focus on uniformized and relatively stable entities that are no longer of such concern to us today as they have been in the past. (HELLER 2008: 56)

After the colonial period, a feeling of national and Arab “pride” contributed to the consolidation of Standard Arabic as the language of the new Tunisian nation. The language of post-colonial “pride” was followed by that of “profit” and the consolidation of French as the language of openness towards Western countries, most notably France which is the main economic partner of Tunisia. The two notions of “pride” and “profit” have been developed and elaborated upon in several studies (HELLER & DUCHÊNE 2012; GAL 2012).

It is important to recall that the first article of the 1959 Tunisian constitution declared Arabic as the official language of the country. The Tunisian constitution of 2014 retained this article, but specified that the official language is “classical Arabic”. Nevertheless, according to Daoud 2011, what we call “Arabic” is a combination of linguistic uses of five main varieties: classical Arabic, literary Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, educated Arabic and Tunisian Arabic¹. Tunisian Arabic is the language of daily use in Tunisia. Modern Standard Arabic has a powerful position compared to Tunisian Arabic. According to Lotfi Sayahi,

the delicate position of Berber, the diglossic situation of Arabic and the increasing efforts for Arabization, the regional and social variation in Tunisian Arabic, the pres-

¹ According to DAOUD 2011: 13, classical Arabic is the language of Qur’an. Literary Arabic refers to Arabic literature. Modern standard Arabic is an intermediate functional register.

ence of French language and the gradual spread of English among other closely-related topics, constitute the core themes of research for Tunisian sociolinguistics. (SAYAH 2011: 1)

It goes without saying that we cannot only reduce the analysis of this dilemma to the strict opposition between prestige and depreciation. We should rather study the diglossic situation between standard Arabic and Tunisian on the basis of more complex power relationships. The use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or French situates the speaker in a certain position compared to other languages. These two languages require an important level of education and are only mastered by certain social classes in Tunisian society. Tunisian Arabic is not officially recognized as a national language and attitudes towards it may vary, ranging from a dream of authenticity (it would be the language of Tunisianity) to an elitist rejection (a dialect cannot be recognized as a language). In the Tunisian case, Berber is almost absent and the opposition lies between French and Arabic. These linguistic alliances and oppositions are linked to identity struggles.

Tunisian President Bourguiba (1957-1987) used a combination of Standard Arabic, Tunisian dialect and French in his public speeches. In 1961, he stated:

It is the French language that served me as a weapon to fight against French colonialism and bring it outside the Tunisian territory. The French language will still serve Tunisia to get rid of its underdevelopment and to catch up with modern countries.²

The quotation demonstrates two major points. First, the new Tunisian national movement held ambiguous attitudes towards the French language. President Bourguiba and other bilingual ruling elites of that period revealed this contradiction through their preference for the new bilingual educational system of college *Ṣaddīqiyya* over the old Arabic-based educational system of *Zaytūna* University (NAFFATI & QUEFFÉLEC 2004). The Tunisian elites were convinced that mastering French was part of the colonial fight against France. The second issue lies in the fact that President Bourguiba himself underlined the importance of speaking French in the construction of a modern country. In this way, modernity, progress, science and technology seemed to be and to remain linked to the French language.

Francophony was a constitutive part of the modernist political project supported by Bourguiba and the members of his government. In this context, the set of sources presented in the present contribution is very useful in order to highlight the speaker's representation of the language, or what Houdebine calls *l'imaginaire linguistique* (HOUDEBINE 2002). This "linguistic imagery" is embodied in the subjective relationship between the speaker and the language he/she uses. In fact, bilingual or multilingual situations have always been linked to political events in the history of Tunisia (LAROUSI 1997). For example, after the arrest in France of President Ben Ali's brother for drug trafficking in 1999, the Tunisian government reacted very harshly, announcing an Arabization reform in all administrative fields. Francophony in Tunisia can be defined as a linguistic capital, in the sense Bourdieu has given to this concept (BOURDIEU 1982). This linguistic capital can, of course, have a higher or lower value, depending on the diplomatic relations with France. Essentially, as Gal points out,

2 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8xArsDS1J8&t=304s>>.

the current phase of capitalism has important, specific effects. Indeed, the changing and expanding logic of capitalism and its encounters with political forms like ratio-state transform all aspects of the social world, including linguistic practices. (GAL 2012: 40)

Identity is at the core of this “linguistic market”. Indeed, when political speeches call for a broader use and recognition of French, they focus on the fact that Tunisia has always been a country open to the world. They also highlight that, throughout history, several civilizations enriched Tunisia and that this makes French a determinant part of “Tunisianity”. In contrast, when French is out of fashion, political speeches tend to highlight the primacy of Arab-Muslim identity in Tunisia. According to Daoud,

Considering the modernist, pro-western/French socio-cultural model that Tunisian elites sought to build, it is clear that this elite considered the French language as an asset and a kind of war/colonization booty. This war will be entirely adopted as an ancillary communicative resource and a contributing element to build the country’s identity. (DAOUD 2011: 19)

In fact, under repressive political regimes, linguistic Tunisianity was a fluctuant construction, depending on economic, political and diplomatic factors. The process of Arabization before the 2011 revolution has always been strongly linked to a violent repressive and dictatorial context. Since the independence in 1956, Tunisia has been torn between, on the one hand, a desire for the assertion of a post-colonial national identity and a modernist political project on the other. Ministers of Education played a decisive role in the policies of Arabization. In the 1970s, M. Mzali, the Minister of Education at that time, was a fervent supporter of an Arabization reform. He imposed the use of Arabic for natural sciences in secondary education, and this reform was followed by the Arabization of Humanities. This decision raised a wave of indignation and led to the massive resignation of philosophy teachers, who considered Arabic to be incompatible with the teaching of philosophy.

It is also important to notice that the Arabization of Humanities took place at the same time as the first political trials of young Marxist students. In this context, Arabization was a weapon of state control over leftist opponents. Mohamed Daoud holds that in Tunisia,

The Arabization process was poorly planned, hesitant and indeterminate, and still remains highly controversial. At the linguistic level, Arabization promoted the use of Arabic which involved some successful, though haphazard, corpus planning and positively impacted Arabic literacy. At the ideological level, Arabization helped reassert the country’s Arab-Muslim identity. However, Arabization reforms were not well-received by everyone. (DAOUD 2011: 18)

In the political speeches of the ruling elites, some linguistic representations seem to bear a sharp division between languages: Arabic is presented as the language connected with Arab-Muslim identity, while French as an expression of modernity. The socio-political context reveals that linguistic representations are linked to identity constructions that serve the nation-state. The stereotypical representations of languages are tools exploited by the propaganda.

2. Linguistic issues since the revolution

In 2012, former president Marzouki used the expression “linguistic harissa” (a Tunisian sauce made of a mix of hot spices) to define the so-called “Arabizi”³ (GONZALEZ-QUIJANO 2012). The latter is a new form of digital writing Arabic used in digital networks, involving code-switching and lexical/syntactical borrowing. Marzouki saw code-switching as a threat for the speaker, since code-switching would hinder any mastering of a language in use.

Yet, the Arabic language has to comply with the demands of new technologies. The analysis of tweets during the Tunisian revolution showed how Twitter has become a space of construction of a digital plurilingual citizenship, which invites sociolinguists to rethink their frameworks of analysis (GUELLOUZ 2017).⁴

The first linguistic issue after the 2011 revolution dates back to the very first days of the Constituent Assembly. The incident involved Karima Souid, a bi-national deputy belonging to the third generation of Tunisian immigrants in France, where she had grown up. Arriving in Tunisia right after the revolution, she spoke French. Her speech in the Assembly was met with a hostile response from conservative deputies. Omar Chattoui, one of them, harshly declared: “[...] no to Francophony. This is an insult to our parliament”. Karima Souid reacted: “You are a racist, there is no law forbidding the use of French in this assembly and just to annoy you, I will always speak French”.⁵ In this linguistic fight, Karima Souid succeeded in imposing the idea of multilingualism as a part of “Tunisianity”. She spoke French and Tunisian dialect as the representative languages of the Tunisian diaspora. She highlighted that, although linked to colonialization, French is also the language of Tunisian immigrants in Francophone countries as well as the scientific and academic language of Tunisian scholars and intellectuals. The conflict between French and Standard Arabic represents not only an opposition between two visions of the society, but also a quarrel between elites (GUELLOUZ 2017). French and Arabic are the languages of the highly educated elites who are struggling for power. With regard to the education system, article 39 of the Tunisian constitution of 2014 states:

The State shall ensure the consolidation of Arab-Muslim identity and national belonging to younger generations, the strengthening of Arabic language, the promotion of the latter and the generalization of its use.⁶

This also highlights the link between the strengthening of Arab-Muslim identity and the teaching of Arabic. As was the case in all previous Arabization reforms, Arabic is once more linked to Arab-Muslim identity and presented as a homogeneous, static entity. The political agenda, itself influenced by economic and ideological concerns, tried to orient linguistic practices. Several Tunisian intellectuals and academics sharply reacted to the adoption of article 39. Yet, they protested against Arabization while supporting the use of French, which

3 Digital writing has given rise to hybrid forms, where Arabic is written in Latin characters and some figures are added to replace the phonemes which do not exist in European languages.

4 See Myriam Achour Kallel’s article in this volume (ACHOUR-KALLEL 2016).

5 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y73hAeLgsDo>>.

6 <<https://issafrica.org/ctafrika/uploads/TunisiaConstitution2014Eng.pdf>>.

is only mastered by highly educated Tunisians. The Francophone elite mirrored in this attitude the defenders of Arabization, seeking to establish a dominant language without taking daily linguistic practices into account.

3. Linguistic issues in 2016

2016 is a flourishing year for linguistic debates. On April 29, 2016, Fawzia Zouari, a Tunisian writer, published an article in *Jeune Afrique* magazine entitled “Francophony or Daesh”. As the title suggests, F. Zouari regrets the decline of the French language in Tunisia, connecting it with two aspects: fundamentalist Islam and Arabization. The writer holds that the decline of French in Tunisia is related to the ascension of religious extremism. With this attitude, Zouari’s linguistic analysis mirrors the linguistic imagery of Tunisian Francophone elites. For them, to be modern is synonymous with speaking French. They put aside all the economic and social issues and the disparity of access to education. The old Bourguibian idea that the French language guarantees access to modernity and progress seems to have persisted up to our epoch. These ideas are related to both pride and profit and they are economically determined because, on the one hand, speaking foreign languages is often an advantage for accessing the job market; on the other hand, learning languages is often a privilege of higher social classes. Gal explains how the axis of differentiation between national pride and economic profit is also linked to other factors, such as the dichotomy modernity/tradition or reason/passion (GAL 2012).

Nevertheless, no later than May 2016, Education Minister Naji Jalloul announced a new education reform based on the teaching of the Koran in primary schools during the summer holidays. This political decision aroused a wave of protests from the intellectuals, particularly the modernist francophone elite. One of the most important arguments presented by the education Minister to defend his reform was to mention that learning Koran is the best way to enhance Arabic language learning. He declared:

Tunisian students are no longer able to express themselves correctly either in Arabic or in foreign languages. I want to strengthen the learning of Arabic during the first three years of primary school. I also want to postpone the learning of foreign languages [French and English] until the fourth year. This aims to strengthen the implantation of Arab-Muslim identity. I shall submit this proposition within the national dialogue on education.⁷

The relation between Arabization and Arab-Muslim identity is always emphasized in political speeches. Article 38 of the 2014 Tunisian constitution reads:

The State shall ensure the anchoring of Arab-Muslim identity and the Arabic language in order to promote it and generalize its use.⁸

Some Francophone cultural elites claimed the day of the promulgation of this article was a black day for “Tunisianity”. In their protest against the use of Arabic, Tunisian intellectuals

7 <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/234897/societe/arabisation-en-tunisie-la-guerre-des-langues-aura-t-elle-lieu/>>.

8 <<https://issafrica.org/ctafrika/uploads/TunisiaConstitution2014Eng.pdf>>.

regret the decline of French. However, none of them deals with the position of the Tunisian dialect. None of them asks for an institutionalization of this dialect or its recognition as an official language, and thus as a language taught at school. The linguistic conflict is embodied in the contradiction of its speakers. This contradiction reveals a certain relation to power. In fact, who does speak French today in Tunisia? Francophony is a socioeconomic issue. In Tunisia, French is the language of the educated elite. The use of French almost equals one's affiliation to the socio-cultural category "bourgeois" and "westernized". The linguistic policies undertaken by the political power encourage the dominant bourgeoisie to create a new standard language. However, who does create the norm and for whom is such a norm created? Speaking French is a "bourgeois" practice, as well as a tool of discrimination. It is a way to differentiate between the members of an elite who think they have the control over modernity and the "others" who do not have access to it. In Morocco, for example, the government decided to bury Arabic and to enhance French learning in the educational system. This political decision was positively welcomed by the intellectual elites in Tunisia. They called for an application of the Moroccan system without reflecting upon the degree to which this system is unfair. In fact, illiteracy in Morocco is more widespread than in Tunisia. However, "Tunisianity" is torn between the limit of the Arab-Muslim identity and the fantasy of Francophony. In this gap between identities, the Tunisian dialect is more vulnerable. But it is also diverse. There are several regional varieties, but the one recognized as standard is the dialect of the capital city which "has always been playing the role of the national model as it holds the highest degree of prestige even outside the capital" (SAYAH 2011: 3).

One of the main features connected with this dialect, observed and analyzed by sociolinguists, lies in code-switching. Some linguistic analyses show that code-switching can occur both between French and Tunisian and between Modern Standard Arabic and Tunisian. For Walters, code-switching is an essential characteristic of the Tunisian dialect (WALTERS 2011). Moreover, one could even argue that code-switching is an essential characteristic of "Tunisianity". However, what is then the language of "Tunisianity"? From a prescriptive and normative point of view on languages, there can of course never be a perfect bilingualism. The only way to save French in Tunisia is probably to accept the use of a hybrid French, "contaminated" by Standard Arabic and Tunisian linguistic structures. As we have seen, linguistic Tunisianity essentially means also multilingualism and code-switching. Arabization is also part of "Tunisification" as French and Tunisian dialect. For Walters (WALTERS 2011), the French-Arabic code switching is a main characteristic of Tunisia itself. In other terms, it seems that code-switching is a sort of dialectical resolution of the linguistic conflict between French and Arabic. It would also be a sign of a dynamic, fluid, heterogeneous and hybrid identity. In this way, being linguistically Tunisian is surely defined by fragmentation and hybridity. It is time to deconstruct the concept of "Tunisianity" as a homogeneous identity or as a "community". "Tunisianity" does not exist as a practice; it is the product of a political construction linked to the desire for a standard homogenous language.

Another event marked the end of the year 2016 in Tunisia. The Minister of Education decided to prioritize English, instead of French, as the first foreign language learned at school. The Tunisian section of the British Council announced on its website on September 17, 2016:

Two agreements between the Ministry of Education and the British Council were signed on Friday, September 16, 2016, at the headquarters of the Ministry of Education. His excellence Mr. Neji Jalloul, Minister of Education, and Mr Robert Ness, the country Director of the British Council in Tunis, signed the first agreement, related to

the reactivation of the project ‘Connecting Classrooms’, which is to establish partnerships between Tunisian and British educational institutions in pedagogical fields of culture and activation [sic]. The project aims also to contribute to the development of skills of pupils and secondary school teachers.⁹

Indeed, the project “Connecting Classrooms” intends to connect the United Kingdom with Tunisia by promoting English linguistic skills. Considered as a tool for social promotion, English is presented in a second project, entitled “English for Employability”. These initiatives were not well received by the defenders of Francophony, who highlighted the long friendship and cultural alliance between France and Tunisia, as well as bilateral economic interests linking the countries. The future will show whether or not this linguistic reform can be applied. In any case, the opponents of Arabization fight for the sake of another dominant language, which is French. Very few intellectuals and/or members of Tunisian elites defend the languages of the minorities. The Berber language is forgotten. Except for minor actions of young activists, “Berberity” is excluded from the debate on “Tunisianity”. As for the Tunisian dialect, it is marginalized, stuck between self-denigration and a fantasy of authenticity.

Conclusion

The current linguistic conflict in Tunisia stages a fight between two dominant languages: Standard Arabic and French. Each serves the construction of a static, uniform and homogeneous identity. French and Standard Arabic are both languages of the elites, used by a relatively small group of educated people in a country which still suffers from a significantly high illiteracy. Access to multilingualism is still, even today, in 2016, the privilege of a dominant urban class. The linguistic struggle after the 2011 Tunisian revolution is a conflict between the languages of urban elites.

As for minor languages, any attempt to instigate a real debate about them is denied. In the present article, I have tried to move beyond the notions of diglossia or code-switching in order to rethink the contacts between languages as a linguistic practice which reveals the relations of power between the speakers themselves, but also between the speakers and the institutions. From the point of view of linguistic conflicts, 2016 has been a year of very important yet very controversial educational reforms. The return to standardization of Arabic through teaching, the noticeable decline of the use of French and the emergence of English as a new alternative indicate linguistic policies in which multilingualism is becoming the new norm. Tunisian Arabic and Berber are perhaps the forgotten languages in these elite debates. Tunisian Arabic continues to survive in everyday practice, artistic productions and cultural heritage, with the risk of being limited to a romantic perception of national pride or to an artificially constructed sense of belonging. The coming years will allow us to depart from this romantic perspective, very often evident in the speeches of pro-Tunisian language activists, in order to reflect on the possibility of giving Tunisian Arabic an institutional framework. I would like to end this paper by making reference to the most emblematic term of the Tunisian

9 <<https://www.britishcouncil.tn/en/about/press/signature-two-agreements>>.

revolution: “dégage”. Although it is a French word, “dégage” has been exported to the rest of the Arab world as a Tunisian statement, particularly because of its phonetic alteration (“digage”). In this context, Mabrouka Mbarek, member of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, asked to insert the term “dégage” in the introduction of the new constitution of 2014 on the basis of its stylistic and poetic endorsements. She declared: “the word “dégage” was the voice of the Tunisian revolution in the world” (GUELLOUZ 2017). “Tunisianity” would be defined by a language which would escape the political and economic agendas of the nation-state, admitting heterogeneity in its status of subversive and minor language: a language which entails, in 2016 and forever, the poetics of revolution.

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Twenty-Three Recent Arabic Films Impressions from two film festivals (Oslo and Tübingen, 2016)

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In this article, a preliminary attempt is made to describe my first impressions about a number of films that were shown at two Arabic film festivals I attended this year (2016), the first in April (Oslo/Norway) and the other in October (Tübingen/Germany).

In line with the focus of the *In 2016* project to which this study is catering,¹ most of the films that will be treated below are from Egypt and Tunisia (supplemented with a few productions from other Arab countries), and most of them have been released only recently, during the current year; some came out in 2014 or 2015, but they will nevertheless be included in my survey, given that they were screened in 2016, either abroad or in the respective countries themselves.

Most of the films are co-productions realised by Arab producers together with non-Arab (European) companies. This, as well as the fact that they evidently also were made, though probably not exclusively, for a non-Arab public, will have to be given due attention at a later stage, when the *In 2016* project will have completed the collection of material in the countries themselves and will have proceeded to the analysis and assessment of the respective data. At the present stage, the operations will remain on a more descriptive level.

In what follows I will treat the documentaries first, then the fiction films, with Magdy Saber's (semi)autobiographical *La Vallée du Sel* and Tamer el Said's largely autobiographical (but also fictionalised) *In the last days of the city* situated somewhere in between. Within the two main categories, I will proceed chronologically, starting with films that were first released before 2016 but are now shown again, then moving on to the "2016 proper" works. My approach will be little structured, impressionist-essayistic rather than analytically systematic. As a consequence, an idea of recurring themes and structures will emerge only in the course of reading, with each new film triggering new observations and associations. I will however highlight in **bold** from the beginning those elements that seem to have the potential of becoming relevant for the *In 2016* project, either because they are dealt with in several of the films I watched, or because I feel I can 'link them up' to elements that I found to be prominent in novels that have been on the long- and shortlists of the International Prize of Arabic Fiction (IPAF), as analysed in another study.²

1 Cf. my own Introduction to this special dossier of *J AIS*.

2 Cf. GUTH *2017, in preparation.

Documentaries

Among the documentaries presented at the Arabic Film Festival (AFF) Tübingen was a selection, made by a prize committee, of the best five shorts (18-25 mins.) that had emerged from two workshops organised in 2014 and 2015 by the German Goethe-Institut in cooperation with the Institut Français de Tunisie. The workshops were meant to encourage especially young filmmakers and were held under the motto *Ensemble* (“Together”).

#1 *Shūf / Chouf*

Shūf / Chouf (“Look!”, 2014) by Imen Dellil portrays the everyday life of a poor blind couple in Testour (N Tunisia). The couple has two children: a little boy (2,5 years) and a daughter (still a baby in the cradle). The film not only presents the couple as being capable of surviving despite difficult living conditions, and of mastering the challenges of everyday life despite their handicap, but is also eager to show their modesty and contentment with the little they have, perhaps even a kind of happiness. The viewers learn from the protagonists themselves how they found each other and had a romantic affair, and that they still love each other. They are also shown laughing a lot, and as tender, patient parents of their children. – In this documentary we can already observe a number of features that we will meet quite often below when discussing other productions, fiction and non-fiction alike: the focus on **everyday life**, the description of **dire living conditions / poverty**, the affirmation of **humanity** (love, laughing, tenderness); the overall message of the film—which I think is exactly this affirmation of the possibility of a life in dignity against all odds—is profiled by way of an (implicit) **contrast** between the **handicapped protagonists** and what they actually manage to achieve in spite of an underprivileged position (cf. the title “Look!” given to a film about a blind couple). The **impotence** that a viewing public presumes in blind protagonists (cf. also the opening scene which shows nothing but a black screen, putting the audience in the position of the blind man who has to find his way with the help of his cane) makes them into ‘heroes’ with whom spectators who themselves feel **powerless** can easily identify.

#2 *Condamné à l'espoir*

Condamné à l'espoir (“Doomed to hope”, 2014), a short film by Yūsuf Bin ‘Ammār (Youssef Ben Ammar), takes up another prominent topic of our times: the **radicalisation** and subsequent sudden ‘**disappearance**’ of young men (*shabāb*) who **drop out** and join the forces of the **ISIL**. Doomed to hope—a rather **desperate hope**—are the **bereaved parents**, a couple belonging to the **less well-off** in Tunisian society. In this film, like in many others (see below) as well as in much of contemporary Arabic print fiction,³ we can observe a forced effort to **explore the past**, with the aim of **finding explanations for what has happened** and caused the **present tragedy**. The fact that the son one day simply was gone, probably to join the **jihadists** in Syria, hits the parents like a bolt out of the blue and continues to paralyse them throughout the film, which makes them similar in their **powerlessness** to the blind couple of *Shūf* (cf. also the title “Doomed to...”). Like the latter, the

3 Ibid.

parents here, too, are the focalisers whose perspective the viewer is made to share and with whom a broader viewing public will be able to identify—not only because of their **feeling of impotence**, but also because of their belonging to a large group of Tunisian society: those living on the verge of **poverty** (the father is a secondhand dealer, trading in all kinds of used commodities and rummage; when the film shows him in his shop there are never any clients; the mother is a housewife), struggling to **survive in dignity**. Now, both go back with their memories to the son's childhood, his school years, etc., trying to understand when and why the son mutated from a 'normally' religious-minded boy to a radical extremist and whether they could possibly have foreseen and prevented it. As in *Shūf*, the author of this short film too is eager to portray the protagonists' **daily routine**, stressing the fact that everyday life must go on despite the fatal incision suffered and the loss of meaning. The epilogue provides the audience with a table stating how many young people per country have joined the ISIL jihadists so far, with "Tunisia: 3000" topping the list.⁴ In one of the last scenes the film accompanies the couple on their trip to a gathering of other parents who too have lost their children to ISIL and do not know anything about their whereabouts and further destiny. The women hold up pictures of their sons, and on a banner we read: "Give us our children back!"

#3 *Les commerçantes*

With *Les commerçantes* ("The tradeswomen", 2015) by Noussaiba Msallem we return to productions that, like *Shūf*, end on a more positive note. The film portrays a group of women from the **Tunisian South** who regularly cross the border to buy and sell commodities, mostly clothes, on public markets in neighbouring Algeria. It shares with the two films discussed so far the authors' eagerness to show **ordinary people in everyday life** contexts, highlighting their efforts/struggle to cope with the challenges of the present (how to **survive** and live a life in **dignity**). As is clear already from the documentary's title, the focus here is on **economy** (a key issue in post-revolutionary Arab countries) and on **women** running their own business. The latter can probably be interpreted as a focus on one of the many facets of **emancipation** from the traditional authoritarian-patriarchal system as well as, perhaps, as in line with the previous two films' choice of **underprivileged**, **handicapped** protagonists (women as the allegedly 'weaker sex'). At the same time, what also seems to have made this specific group of women into attractive subjects for a documentary filmmaker was probably their **inventiveness** and **creativity** (a key quality in the daily struggle for survival) combined with **courage** and **self-confidence**. It is with these qualities that the protagonists manage to have a rather positive outlook on life, reflected not only in their colourful dresses, but also in the merry atmosphere on the little van that takes them to Algeria in the middle of the night, hours before sunrise (the film's opening scene); it does not take long until the viewer witnesses them singing, clapping, engaging in lively conversation, laughing (again expressions of **humanity**).

The fact that the author turned her interest to the Tunisian South has certainly to do with the inner-Tunisian discussion about the discrimination of this region as compared to

4 The distribution shown in this list (without indicating a source) conforms roughly to the one to be found in articles like KIRK 2016. Given that statistics, for obvious reasons, vary considerably, the data provided in the film should not be taken as incontestable objective facts but rather as an expression of the author's wish to underline the relevance of the addressed phenomenon for Tunisian society.

the capital, a discussion that, as we shall see below, is going on likewise in other countries (**capital vs. provinces, centre vs. periphery**)⁵ and can, or should, in its turn be seen as expression of an **anti-authoritarian drive**: the underprivileged, discriminated, marginalised raising their voice against the dominant ruler, master, exploiter, etc.

#4 *Travesties*

Enjoying life and feeling like a human being is also the topic of Safoin Ben Abdelali's *Travesties* (2015). The film accompanies three young cross-dressers who, after having bought the outfits they need to spend a formidable night in a disco, take the train from Gabès to Sousse, where they start, in a hotel (?) room, preparations for the night. This includes discussing their shopping, (**whole body**) **shaving/depilation**, hair-dressing / putting on their wigs and make-up, testing the newly acquired high-heels, and excitedly anticipating how good it will feel to go out in this dress and dance. Larger parts of the 21-minute film are then dedicated to the evening/night at the disco. While the sections before and after consist to a large extent of dialogues, in the disco scenes music and close-ups of the almost ecstatically dancing bodies take over completely, underlining **emotional** intensity, the **physical** experience, and the jolly, frolic atmosphere (**pleasure**) all this gives room to.

Like the films discussed above, this production too sheds light on a **marginalised** social group. The fact that the three men have to travel from one city in Tunisia to another may serve the function of underlining that transvestites cannot live their **identity** openly at home; in order to be truly themselves they have to **translocate** to a place where **anonymity** allows for a larger degree of **freedom**. The film can serve as an example of productions that describe the emancipation from **taboos** and '**being yourself**' as a great physical experience, whence the strong focus on the **bodily** (it is probably therefore that the camera often does not show the protagonists' faces but only their bodies, or some details of these). Not untypical is also the fact that the film perhaps has an **autobiographical** component: in a scene on the train to Sousse we hear one protagonist (= the author/director?) say that it was here that "I started to write my 'autobiography'".⁶

5 Cf. a similar predilection recognizable in IPAF-listed novels like *'Azāzīl* (winner 2008) by Yūsuf ZAY-DĀN (moving between the Egyptian South, Alexandria, Jerusalem and a remote monastery in northern Syria), *Iṣṭāsiyyah* (longlisted 2011) by Khayrī SHALABĪ (events unfolding in the Egyptian Delta), *Tawq al-ḥamām* (winner 2011) by Rajā' 'Ālam (Mecca), *al-Iskandariyyah fī ghaymah* (longlisted 2014) by Ibrāhīm 'ABD AL-MAGĪD (Alexandria), *Ahl al-nakhīl* (longlisted 2016) by Janān Jāsim ḤALĀWĪ (Iraqi marshlands), etc. – The idea of promoting the cultural production of the peripheries and support the (inner-Egyptian, for that matter) *'adab al-'aḳālīm* was also discussed on several occasions at the Cairo bookfair in Jan./Feb. 2016. For some time, it received support from the then director of the Hay'at quṣūr al-thaqāfah, Prof. Muḥammad Badrān (dismissed from office shortly after that). – The tension between capital and countryside is as old as the beginnings of modernisation and has, as an 'eternal' topic, of course also found its way into modern Arabic literature all from the mid-19th century onwards, as elaborated on by SELIM 2004 and already dealt with in detail by many others; cf., e.g., my own monography on the Turkish and Arabic novel, GUTH 2003, esp. § 100e, with further references.

6 It may, however, also simply be a statement by the speaker meaning "it was here that I started to be myself".

#5 *Un cercle autour d'une danse*

Self-realisation through **dancing** is also the topic of *Un cercle autour d'une danse* (“A circle round a dance”, 2015) by Mouna Louhichi. The protagonists are even younger here than in *Travesties*: a group of teen-age (*shabāb*) **hip-hop** enthusiasts. Like in *Travesties*, dancing means “**life**” for them. In addition, the film problematises **prevailing gender inequality** even in such free-spirited ‘**dropout**’ circles (highlighting a certain inconsistency in their thinking and perhaps also the limitedness or **incompleteness of the revolution?**): although a male group of quasi-professional dancers show some openness for talented girls who would like to join them, and therefore let them perform in front of them, in the end the girls are not accepted into the group. The title of the film expresses both the interest the boys show in the girls dancing in their midst *and* the ‘encircling’ of the girls: it is as if they were imprisoned, despite their own emancipation and despite also the boys’ ‘progressiveness’. – The wish to **feel/be yourself** and to come close to such an experience via dancing is, by the way, not peculiar to ‘western-looking’ girls: the author also shows a girl wearing a **hijab** dancing in front of the male hip-hoppers (who, in their turn, obviously are open-minded enough to at least give her a chance to prove her talent to them; later on, however, she too is not accepted into the male group...).

#6 *Tahar Cheriaa: Taht zilāl al-bāwbāb / A l'ombre du baobab*

Not among the short documentaries that emerged from the above-mentioned workshops, but an independent (and also much longer: 70-minute) production is Muḥammad Shallūf (Mohamed Chalouf)’s documentary about the founder of the **Carthage Film Festival** (JCC, Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage), al-Ṭāhar (al-)Sharī’a: *Tahar Cheriaa: Taht zilāl al-bāwbāb / A l'ombre du baobab* (“In the baobab’s shadow”, 2015). It is produced on the occasion of the celebration, in 2016, of the fiftieth^h anniversary of JCC and as such certainly expresses some **pride** of the achievements of the past (**past as treasure box**). With this, the film is without doubt an expression of the wish to preserve the country’s **cultural heritage** and make it bear fruits in the present or future. As underlined by one interviewee, it is important to know history “because history gives a sense of **continuity**”—a statement that comes towards the end of the documentary and therefore can be seen as a kind of conclusion. As the film highlights Cheriaa’s capacity to attract many filmmakers from the Arab World, especially Egypt, and from Africa, his prominent role in the propagation of **pan-Africanism** and the **cultural emancipation of “the South”**—for many, he was a “father” and “shepherd”—, it implicitly also celebrates *Tunisia*’s important contribution to the Third World movement (**national pride**); Egyptian and Tunisian viewers will perhaps also frame it as a statement related to the notorious **Egyptian-Tunisian competition** about cultural leadership in the Arab World. Seen from a present that is searching for a new cultural orientation, Cheriaa, whom the film praises as the big inspirer, can probably also be seen as a model of Tunisian **inventiveness and creativity** that once helped the country to recover from humiliation and regain national pride and **dignity**. With the celebration of the JCC founder comes also an affirmation of other ideas and values he represented, like **anti-colonialism**, **independence**, cultural **self-determination**, **authenticity**, the necessity of **freedom of expression** (motto: “Free the screens!”). The film concludes with what the viewers have to take as Tahar Cheriaa’s ‘message to the world’: what mattered for him and his colleagues, and what made his generation successful, was (a) their

strong **belief** that “**only culture** can be the foundation of **progress**”, (b) their belief in the possibility to realise their project(s), and (3) their **commitment** to the cause of the **nation**.

#7 *Yallah! Underground*

Farid Eslam’s *Yallah! Underground* (2015) is an 85-minute documentary about political underground music in the Arab World (Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon). With its discussion of the **freedom of expression** vs. **taboos** and its stressing of the **importance of cultural production**, it parallels some of the major topics of the homage to Tahar Cheriaa just discussed in the previous paragraph (#6). The importance of **dancing** and **music** was stressed already in (#4) *Travesties* and (#5) *Un cercle autour d’une danse*; in *Yallah! Underground*, however, they function less as a means to help the *body* ‘be itself’ than as a *politically subversive* tool. Moreover, the film displays a feature that we will meet again on several occasions in the following: the eagerness, on the side of the author, to produce an **assessment of the ‘Arab Spring’** by covering three periods: the time before the uprisings, the euphoria of the ‘revolutionary’ moment itself, and its aftermath.

#8 *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs*

A focus on the **political** and on **history** is also seen in Jihān al-Ṭāhirī (Jihan El-Tahri)’s documentary trilogy entitled *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs* (2015/2016; 3 x 58 minutes: I. Nasser, II. Sadat, III. Mubarak). The production is probably not particularly relevant as an *In 2016* text since it seems to be made to serve the didactic purpose of a three-part series on pre-‘Arab Spring’ history that is to be shown *outside* Egypt. Nevertheless, we can register it as a film that shares with other documentaries, and also much fiction, the **wish to understand** and/or **explain the present** or, in this case, the **recent past** of the uprisings via an **assessment of the deeper past**. The story is told in a neutral tone, reminding of the ‘dry’ factualness of history textbooks, with probably no controversial statements, not even by the contemporary witnesses (interviews with whom enliven the narrative). Yet, the film is not completely uninteresting for the *In 2016* project: first, because it documents a wish, on the side of an Arab author, to provide an English-speaking public with an illustrated **explanation of the Ṭahrīr events**, and, second, because the **assessment** concludes—as the series title shows—with the idea of **continuity**, uninterrupted by the ideological, political and economic reorientations that each new president brought about, of a god-king-like, ‘Pharaonic’ ruling style (**authoritarianism**).

#9 *ʿAbadan lam nakun ʿatfālan*

While the **social conditions/poverty** of the masses appear only sporadically in *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs*, they are the main topic of *ʿAbadan lam nakun ʿatfālan* (“We have never been kids”, 2016) by Maḥmūd Sulaymān (Mahmood Soliman). In this long (99-minute!) documentary, the author portrays an Egyptian family living on the breadline in one of the *ʿashwāʿiyyāt*, the mushrooming ‘informal’ quarters of the capital. The conditions shown are even worse than those we met in *Shūf* (#1): while the Tunisian blind couple’s home was relatively spacious and had a direct connection to the public **water supply** (own tap), the inhabitants of the Cairene slum live in rather **cramped confines** and have to get their water from outside, **hygiene** becoming problematic/precarious. The mother, Nādiyāh, is separated

from her husband whom she had married at an early age (**arranged marriages**) but then left because he had turned out to be too brutal (**domestic violence**) and did not provide for her and the children (**idle man vs. hard-working woman**). She tries to make a living from grinding knives and scissors, carrying the heavy equipment (grindstone etc.) along on her back. (Later on we learn that she had to give up this job because of **health problems**.) Although Nādiyāh struggles hard to uphold a certain level of **dignity** and is also eager to send her four children to school (**importance of education**), her income alone is too meagre to **survive** and meet the challenges of **everyday life** (which the film is eager to **document** in some detail⁷); so all the children leave school after only a few years. The boys start to have some jobs at an early age (**child labour**), and although Nādiyāh, remembering her own destiny, does not want to force her eldest daughter into a marriage, the latter marries nevertheless, fifteen years old.

The film is however not only a synchronic snapshot but has also a diachronic dimension: like *Yallah! Underground* (#7) it is eager to follow the protagonists from the period before the Taḥrīr uprisings up to the present. With this, it aims at a **critical assessment** of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the subsequent developments. It is based on an earlier documentary M. Sulaymān had shot in 2003 about Nādiyāh’s family (entitled “Living among us”), then resumes in 2011, to continue until the present. As the program leaflet aptly describes it, the film “shows the **decaying** social, political and economic situation during the last decade of the **Mubarak regime**,” then “highlights the moment of **dazzling hope**” during the January 2011 uprisings (in which the family participates), to continue with a documentation of “the **chaos** and **disillusionment** that have had a firm lock on the country ever since” (AFF: 5, my translation). The assessment is achieved by a **comparison**, made also in many other productions (see below), **of the ‘Before’ with the ‘After’**, from which the viewer retains the impression of an **alarming worsening** of the living conditions, despite (or perhaps as a sad consequence of) the “Revolution”. It also shows, first, a hope in the possibility of **political participation** (Nādiyāh is on Taḥrīr Square in January 2011 and a voter also in the **elections** that are held in the following years), but then, since Sīṣī’s takeover, she does not care about elections any more: “I don’t know the candidates any longer,” and “we are back to the situation as it was under Mubārak: we are **no longer part of the game**.”

As is clear from the title (“We have never been kids”), the author’s major concern are the children who are **deprived of their childhood**. This is why Sulaymān dedicates large parts of his film to the documentation of the life trajectories of the three eldest who are forced to contribute to the family’s living from an early age. While the daughter obviously feels forced to relieve the family of the burden she represents as an additional eater and therefore agrees to marry at an early age (see above), the author shows the two sons working from the age of 10–11 in several places every day from early morning to late evening (Khalīl as a drummer in a wedding band, a casual worker at building places, a parking attendant (*sāyīs*), etc.; Nūr as a cook’s assistant in a *kosharī* restaurant and as a *tuk-tuk* driver), hardly enjoying what they do, but mostly concerned about assembling the money the family needs to survive. The hard work and responsibility weighing on them makes them prone to **drugs**, incl. heavy smoking,

7 The narrative starts on an average morning, then continues for some time through an average day: waking up, bringing the children to school, grinding knives in public places, later having sandwiches together on the street, on a piece of cartridge, drinking from a public water jug (*qullah*) or a tap in a *sabīl*, etc.

or falling prey to the temptation to earn a few piasters/pounds in an “easier” way: by **prostitution**. From the interviews with the younger son, Nūr, it becomes clear that he serves a blind man, himself a beggar, as a mate, and later remains/becomes **homosexual** himself—which makes life even more difficult for him, given the **persistence of society’s discrimination** of homosexuality as “abnormal” (*shādhah*) sexual orientation. The psychological pressure upon him becomes all the more difficult to bear as his mother and elder brother condemn his leanings, Khalīl being beside himself with rage because he thinks Nūr is dragging his and the **family’s honour** in the mud; at the end of the film, the boy has disappeared, with nobody knowing anything about his whereabouts.⁸

The persistence of traditional attitudes in these destitute milieus is also highlighted in a scene in which the daughter (11 years), asked if she prays regularly like her brothers, replies, “No, I don’t, because, as mum told me, my prayer wouldn’t be heard anyway because I’m using **nail polish**.” And when she marries at the age of 15, we learn that her mother was not convinced that this was right, less however on account of her own history, but more so because the signs of the future couple did not seem to match (**horoscope**)!

The film is highly significant in the context of our *In 2016* project on account of yet three other features:

Parallel to the narrative of a deterioration of the living conditions runs a thread showing the **dying of human emotions**: not only is Khalīl ready to kill his brother on account of the alleged maculation of the family honour, but also Nādiyah, on seeing her ex-husband lying clinically dead in a **hospital** after an accident, states that she has no feelings at all left for this man.

The film closes on yet another **alarming** note: While the screen is black, we hear Khalīl telling the author on the phone (in a recorded call) that he, too, is leaving now—to join the **ISIL** forces—because he has come to a point where he either has to die himself or kill others (cf. #2, *Condamné à l’espoir*, above).

Like many other productions, Sulaymān’s film too often **contrasts** (by way of un-commented **juxtaposition**) **reality and official discourse**. In the very opening scene, for instance, the viewer not only gets an impression of the poverty at the family’s home but at the same time we are made to hear a **voice from the radio** talking about the government’s successful promotion of job opportunities, good-quality education, etc. In a similar vein, the miserable conditions prevailing at the elementary school that Nādiyah makes her children attend are accompanied by patriotic slogans shouted and the national anthem sung mechanically by the pupils standing at attention during the morning muster. Also, when Nādiyah, in 2012, casts her vote in the elections, the camera swings to zoom on the name of the primary school that serves as a polling station: “Madrasat ‘Abd al-Nāṣir al-Ibtidā’iyyah”, in this way evoking a feeling of contrast between the present condition and all the sublime values the name of the legendary president stood for.

8 In the public discussion following the presentation of the film, with the author being present himself (October 9, 2016, at *d.a.i.*, Tübingen), a viewer (obviously with Egyptian background herself) raised the question whether M. SULAYMĀN’s insisting on getting answers from the boy about his sexual orientation may possibly have contributed to Nūr’s decision to drop out and leave, knowing that the film would be shown to a larger public. The author replied that the family had been asked their consent beforehand and that sensitive sequences had been cut out for the screening *in Egypt* (at the Luxor festival).

Between autobiography and fiction

#10 *al-Ṣalāt wa'l-ma'rakah / La vallée du sel*

The last documentary I will treat here shares with the next one a certain 'in-betweenness': in both of them, the author himself (#10) or his representative (#11) form part of the reality that he sets off to document (**outsider = insider**). However, while all characters in *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah* (#11) bear fictitious names (despite the movie's evidently **auto-documentary** function) and are played by professional actors, the author of *al-Ṣalāt wa'l-ma'rakah / La vallée du sel* ("Prayer and battle / The Valley of Salt", 2016), Christophe Majdī Ṣābir (Magdy Saber), and his parents are 'real life' persons. While *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah* has its main focus on the young filmmaker (Tāmīr al-Sa'īd alias "Khālid") himself, Christophe M. Ṣābir reserves for himself the role of an observer and makes his parents the main protagonists. He is drawn into the events because he happens to be the son of an Egyptian-Swiss **Christian** couple. The parents are exposed to **death threats** reaching them via cell phone, probably from somewhere in the neighbourhood (**the treacherous neighbour**). The period covered spans over two-three weeks, from Christophe's arrival in Cairo (he studies abroad) in December 2012 until his departure in January 2013. The Egyptian father characterises it as a period of post-revolutionary **anarchy** in which there is **no security** any longer and some youth groups (*shabāb*) with Islamist leanings feel encouraged by the religiously-oriented Mursī government to take advantage of the lack of police control and exercise **terror** on **non-Muslim minorities**, also with the aim of pressing money out of them (**blackmail**). The film shows how the death threats affect the couple's **everyday life** (esp. their running a Christian conference centre in the Wādī Naṭrūn, on the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria) and plans for the future as well as, of course, the relation to their son: In one of the first scenes the viewers witness the mother reminding her husband that they should get a power of attorney for Christophe, to provide him with the documents he would need in case they are killed and he would have to sort out the estate.

The main 'events' after Christophe's arrival and the scene just mentioned are (a) the family's trip from Cairo to the Wādī Naṭrūn where an international conference with c. 400 participants is held over Christmas, in spite of the dangerous situation,⁹ and then, back in Cairo after the event that the mother had feared might be their last; (b) the family's waiting for, and, when it eventually comes after two long days, the father's courageous answering the next call of the anonymous blackmailer (blocked caller ID). The latter legitimises the group's 'death sentence' on the couple saying that they have proof that the father has forced innocent Muslims to adopt Christianity (**conversions**). The father keeps calm, but also absolutely unyielding, eager not to let the other achieve discursive hegemony. He does not engage with the caller's allegations, steadily insisting that they are completely baseless and unprovable. He does not stop talking in order not to let the caller get a chance to repeat

9 The centre is called *Agape*, i.e. with the Greek (New Testament) term for "love: the highest form of love, charity; the love of God for man and of man for God" (LIDDELL/SCOTT, *Greek-English Lexicon*), a name that, together with the friendly merry atmosphere inside, is in striking **contrast** to what the Christians experience from their Muslim neighbourhood. The centre also seems to be able, to a certain degree at least, to protect itself: like a **fortress**, it is surrounded by thick walls, has a massive metal door with a small peephole, and a guard (cf. **gated communities**, below).

his demands, accusations and threats, addressing the guy like a father who is talking to his adolescent son or one of the son's friends. While the mother, feeling **powerless and desperate**, is often shown in **tears**, the father remains **determined** throughout to prevent the **terrorists** from getting the upper hand (**male vs. female, resistance vs. terror, courage vs. timidity**).¹⁰ In addition, the actions and reactions of the parents' are framed as a challenge to their trust in God (**temptation of faith**) and as relevant to the project of the nation: asked by Christophe why or for what he was praying, the Father thinks for moment, then replies: "Hmm... – for Egypt! True belief helps!" (**patriotism**). As for Christophe, the events challenge his previous support of the uprisings: on the one hand, the young man was very positive about them; on the other, he now also sees the consequences (**freedom = anarchy: the ambivalent revolution**).

Among the structural features of this 62-minute documentary the most noteworthy are probably: (a) the fact that it is filmed free-hand (which underlines the personal engagement of the author while it may also be read as corresponding to the '**shaken**' status of the country); and (b) a focus on **narrow spaces** (e.g. the kitchen in the parents' Cairo flat) and a perspective from within **closed rooms** (the kitchen, the walled conference centre, the car, etc.), which can be taken as an expression of the **restriction of freedom** on account of terrorism (inside–private–security/safety vs. outside–public–danger).

#11 *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah*

As already mentioned above, *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah* ("In the last days of the city", 2016) can be classified as a fictionalised autobiographical documentary. The object of the author's documentation however is not only his own, Tāmīr al-Sa'īd (Tamer el Said)'s alias "Khālid"'s self, but also the character of the Egyptian **metropolis** in the winter days of the year 2009. With these features the film is not only indicative of the wish, already observed several times so far in the present article (#6–#10), to **re-assess the past** (we may assume: with the idea to understand both the 2011 uprisings and the present, 2016, situation better); it is also a representative of the genre in which the destiny of an autobiographer merges with, and consequently is also narrated as dependent on, that of society at large (**individual = collective: pre-Taḥrīr conditions**, late Mubārak era). The author's/Khālid's own **existential and creativity crisis** become a part, and in many aspects also a *pars-pro-toto*, of the situation in the country. Quite significantly, the film's events all take place in **down-town Cairo**, i.e., *the* symbol of the project of a modernisation of Egypt along Western lines. While the author shows his alter ego embedded in family relations (Khālid goes to see his mother, sister, etc.) and as part of a group of colleagues-friends (filmmakers like himself), he and the others are always also moving through the "universe" (AFF: 4) of the city. The many details and snapshot scenes from **everyday life** that we are presented with are meant to add up to a quasi-**holistic portrayal** of this cosmos: the dust (**pollution**); an old Schindler elevator (**remains from the colonial past; modern architecture**); a shabby toothless woman in the street (**poverty**); demonstrating Muslim brothers, armoured police vans, a cordon (**religious-political activism, state violence, clashes**); people following enthusiastically a **soccer** match on the TV screens in the windows of big shops (**neo-liberal**

10 From the film's epilogue we learn that the parents are still alive, but also that the death threats have not stopped yet.

commodities); hospital scenes (**health system**); a display window with naked mannequins by which Khālid and his guests pass at night, to find the window covered with newspapers the next morning to prevent a view on the uncovered bodies (**puritanism**); men **discussing politics** in a **street café**; the ubiquitous **ruin** and **decay** (car wrecks, garbage, the condition of the flats Khālid is shown by a broker, etc., all this shown **unvarnished**, often in **close-up** and **slow-motion**, in an almost **contemplative** mood, accompanied by calm music); check-points everywhere (precarious **security** situation); green prayer carpets/mats rolled out in the streets or the corridors of a TV studio (**Islamism occupying public spaces**); a man beating his wife up (**domestic violence**); a group of men—thugs or *mukhābarāt*?—running after another man and beating him up (**state violence**); etc. etc. Very often (e.g., when in a taxi or a café), the scenes are accompanied by an underlying audio-track reproducing voices from the radio or TV that fill the space with the authorities' official discourse, creating the type of **contrast (official narrative vs. visual evidence)** that we are already familiar with from Maḥmūd Sulaymān's "We have never been kids" (#9) and that we will still encounter on a number of other occasions. – The variety and simultaneous co-existence of phenomena and **contrasting/contradicting** impressions leaves the filmmaker-protagonist entirely baffled and undecided: What shall he make out of all that? What kind of film should he produce (**search for meaning, metafictional reflection**)? His colleagues-friends, all from abroad, offer three models, which however all are different from his own case and therefore hardly applicable to his situation: an Iraqi who has left Baghdad and is now living as a refugee in Berlin; another Iraqi who has stayed in the country; and a Beirut who enjoys the vibrant atmosphere in his hometown and envies Khālid the even more lively world, rich in fascinating contradictions, of the Egyptian megalopolis. In contrast, Khālid, in addition to the **loss of home** (symbolised in his search for a new flat), is struggling also with losses on a private level (father dead, girlfriend about to emigrate, mother in hospital, the friends leaving...). Facing the **disintegration** of 'his' Cairo (**alienation / ghurbah**)¹¹ as well as of his dreams and private environment, the only thing he, for the time being, can decide on is to **observe, register, document**. The result of this process, however, is a portrayal of Cairo not only (though perhaps mainly) as a collapsing universe (cf. the film's quasi-**apocalyptic** title¹²), but also as a "lively organism" and a "site of desires and dreams" (AFF: 4, my translation). With this, the film also shows an affirmation of **humanity** that is similar to the one we have already come across above in our discussion of some Tunisian shorts (#1, #3, #4). It seems to be a remainder from a macro-structure, to be found as early as in 'Alā' al-'Aswānī's *Yacoubian Building* (*Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*, 2002), in which individuals struggle to survive in what is perceived as an almighty inhumane 'system', but somehow manage to discover and preserve, or recreate, essentially human(e) traits in life.¹³

11 Cf. Elena CHITI's contribution to the present dossier, esp. section "Space (Homeland as Exile)".

12 Cf. *ibid.*, section "Time (Present as Dystopia)".

13 Cf. GUTH 2009 and 2014.

Fiction

#12 *Ḥārr jāff ṣayfan*

Like in #11, **humanity** emerging from encounters of people in the universe of the Egyptian **megacity**, in spite of its **dehumanising** atmosphere, is also the topic of the first ‘purely fictional’ production treated in the present article, the short (30-minute) film *Ḥārr jāff ṣayfan* (“Dry hot summers”, 2015) by Sharīf al-Bandarī (Sherif Elbendary). The story is constructed as a **crossing of the paths**, and an unintended and ephemeral, yet ‘necessary’ and mutually accepted union, of an old man (Shawqī) and a young woman (Du‘ā’), against all odds: the traffic chaos (congestion, *zaḥmah*); the suffocating **heat** (44°C!) and overall **dust**; the **hectic pace and routine of modern life** where Shawqī’s busy son, a lawyer, has no time to accompany his frail father to the doctor (**private clinic**) and Du‘ā’’s fiancé is too busy to accompany her on some urgent pre-**wedding errands**; the difference in age and sex (He: aged, frail, pitiable, helpless, soon to die from cancer / She: in her mid-twenties, a future bride full of life and energy). Quite significantly, the initial encounter takes place in a **taxi**,¹⁴ i.e., a site that forms part of the public space while at the same time creating a certain privacy/intimacy (Shawqī and Du‘ā’ sitting together in the rear seats), and the scene later moves on to places of a similar character: the bride’s **tailor**, her **hairstylist**, the **photographer** where the wedding photos will be taken. Unlike all other productions discussed so far, and despite the quasi-**asphyxia** evoked in the title, this film is full of **humour** and slapstick-like comedy (one of the many aspects of the emerging genre of *adab sākhir*¹⁵): the important plastic bag containing Shawqī’s **medical report (health)** that Du‘ā’’s friend erroneously takes with her when the women leave the car and that Shawqī then has to get back; the **mobile phone** that is in the wrong place at the wrong time (**empty battery**); many drivers passing by the taxi blowing their horns to congratulate Shawqī and Du‘ā’ whom they take for a newly-wed couple; etc. It is as if the humorous distance allows for the thinking of what otherwise might be considered unthinkable: the reunification of the **fragmented society**. Anticipated by the merrily horn-blowing taxi drivers, the ‘marriage’ of the unlike couple is soon made still more ‘imaginable’ when the wedding pictures are taken, in absence of the true bridegroom, with Shawqī posing in his place.¹⁶ Although both protagonists belong to the (upper?) middle class, their (temporary) union can probably still

14 Ever since (at the latest) Khālid al-KHAMĪSĪ’s semi-fictional collection of an author’s conversations with a taxi driver (*Tāksī: ḥawādīt al-mashāwīr*, 2006), the Cairo cab has become a site of “urban sociology”, “ethnography” and “oral history” where “Herculean tales of the struggle for survival and dignity” are told (from the internet ad for the book’s English translation, <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Taxi-English-Khaled-Al-Khamissi/dp/999217871X>>, as of 05 Nov 2016). – For an early predecessor in modern Arabic fiction cf. Muḥammad TAYMŪR’s famous short story *Fī ‘l-qiṭār* (1917), set in a compartment “On the train”; on it, cf. Werner ENDE’s study “Sollen Fellachen lesen lernen?”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 28 (1988): 112-125.

15 Cf. Richard JACQUEMOND’s contribution to the present special dossier; see also there for further references on the emerging genre.

16 The photographer says that thanks to **Adobe Photoshop**, it’ll be no problem to replace Shawqī later with the true groom’s pictures—another **slapstick comedy**-like feature. – An aspect that perhaps also is noteworthy in this context is that Shawqī and Du‘ā’, when posing for the pictures, also come closer **physically**, their **bodies** touching each other (cf. H. U. GUMBRECHT’s definition of *arrays* as ways in which “artifacts, roles, and activities influence bodies,” see my Introduction to the *In 2016* project, in the present volume).

be interpreted in the more general framework of the obsolescent model of the **nation state**. While others often consider the fragmentation of society as already too advanced to not treat ‘the nation’ other than as a phased-out idea of the past, al-Bandarī seems to follow in al-ʿAswānī’s footsteps, whose *Yacoubian Building* ended with the wedding, against all odds, of the old and (after a cardiac infarction) rather frail Zakī Beġ with the young Buthaynah—the couple Shawqī-Buthaynah may even be read as direct ‘quotation’, an intertextual reference to, and/or reverence towards, al-ʿAswānī’s idea. However, the followership goes only to a certain degree: While al-ʿAswānī presents the new beginning as a concrete event, al-Bandarī only stages it as a posing ‘as if’—a symbol of the possibility, yes, of mutual rapprochement and the emergence of humanity out of chaos and fragmentation; but also a hope that is not devoid of tragedy: the protagonists as well as the viewers know too well that the photo is, after all, nothing but fiction, and the German oncologist who sees Shawqī’s X-rays and medical report (**foreign experts/specialists**) makes clear that the man does not have more than a few days left of his life. So, al-Bandarī’s viewers are supposed to be content with less than al-ʿAswānī’s readers: with the mere fact that something very human(e), a kind of friendship, understanding, sympathy between the protagonists, actually *was* able to develop in a short time, despite the disparity of their individual characters, needs and life projects.

#13 *Šbābik al-jannah / Les frontières du ciel*

With *Šbābik*¹⁷ *al-jannah / Les frontières du ciel* (“Borders of heaven”, 2015) we are back to the sadder sides of life. Unlike all other films discussed above, however, this work by the Tunisian director Fāris Naʿnāʿ (Farès Naanaa) does not (on the surface, at least) refer to a current political or social situation. According to some observers, it was exactly this abstinence from references to the troublesome present that contributed to the huge success of the film in its home country: after the ‘Arab Spring’ and the difficult post-revolutionary years, people seemed to have been grateful for cultural production that did not remind them of their politicised everyday life.

As the Oslo program leaflet has it, the film is “a moving drama about how we react in face of **loss** and **grief**. [...] We follow Sārah and Sāmī, an upper middle-class couple who [...] have lost their daughter, Yāsmīn, at the age of five. Instead of portraying this loss with the artistic devices of melodrama, the director has chosen to focus on Sārah’s and Sāmī’s **inner struggle** and their **feelings of guilt**” (AFD: 11, my translation, SG). This makes clear: the film shows an evident interest in **psychology** and the ways a **trauma** (in this case: a traumatic loss) is ‘processed’ and how **lives may be rebuilt** after a **collapse** (cf. the many close-ups on the actors’ faces with which camera technique makes the viewers observe the protagonists’ facial expressions and in this way ‘look into their souls’). In the absence of any direct reference to politics it may be too far-fetched to re-introduce a political reading, interpreting the parents’ loss of their beloved (five year-old) Yasmīn as the Tunisian people’s loss of the dreams and hopes they had put into the (five year-old) ‘Jasmine Revolution’ and to re-translate the couple’s reactions (despair > mutual accusations > severe and sometimes violent marital dispute > temporary separation > slow rapprochement) as a

17 Tunisian Arabic, corresponding to *shabābik* in *fushhā*. The meaning here is more like ‘fences’.

representation of the ways Tunisians had dealt with the collapse and the need to rebuild the country and re-organise their lives. Yet, whatever the author's intentions may have been, a *structural* parallel to political realities can hardly be denied, a fact that, consciously or unconsciously, may have contributed to its success: the many events and discussions, arranged everywhere in the country, on the psychology of trauma and *always* considered relevant in a *societal-political* framework,¹⁸ seem to corroborate such an assumption quite clearly. A reading that does not see the film as exceptional and 'timeless' as many saw it, may also be substantiated by the fact that the film is essentially built on a bipolar structure that is very common in contemporary Arabic fiction: the **oscillation** of thought between past and present, the individual's mind being constantly occupied with a **comparison** between both, and an **assessment** of both in the light of each other (**past vs. present**). This feature is prominent in many IPAF-listed novels,¹⁹ and we have also already come across it on several occasions above (#6–#11). In *Les frontières du ciel*, the 'interwovenness' of past and present is marked by a steady alteration of scenes from both time layers. Quite significantly, the past is coloured while the present is in shades of grey. Equally significant is the fact that the woman is quicker than the man in coming to terms with the loss of their child (**male vs. female**). For Sāmī, the crisis seems to be over when Sāmī no longer has visions of Yāsmīn sitting in the rear of his car. This is the case only after he has paid a visit to the **dying father** (whom he had hardly known but who had wished to see him and with whom he can tacitly reconcile before his, the father's, death) and attended his funeral. In a non-political reading, the father is just the father and does not have any additional 'meaning'. But what if we also try a political reading? Who would be the dying father then?

#14 *'Alà ḥallat 'aynī / À peine j'ouvre les yeux*

With *'Alà ḥallat 'aynī / À peine j'ouvre les yeux* ("As I open my eyes", 2015) we are back again to the more 'typical' productions, that is, those which have clearer, if not direct references to the **political**. The 102-minute film by Laylā Bū Zayd (Leyla Bouzid) is of the type, encountered already several times above (#7–#9, #11), that aims to (document and) **explain recent/contemporary history**; in its focus on the summer preceding the winter 2010/11 uprisings it is closest to *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah* (#11), which also portrays the **pre-'Arab Spring'** atmosphere as characterised by **fear** and **mistrust**, as somehow **pending**, as if arrived at a **dead end** (cf. #11's apocalyptic title), and like the latter (and others) it features as its protagonist an **artist** (cf. #5–#7; cf. also the importance of dancing in #4). Although 18 year-old Farah's medical school application has just been accepted, her "passion is for **music**, and her **underground** band [cf. the **political rock** bands portrayed in #7] is just beginning to get noticed. Their music blends rock with daring lyrics that have the raw poetry of spoken word"²⁰ (**challenging/breaking taboos, poetry, originality/authenticity**,

18 Cf., in this context, for instance the "colloque du Comité Freud [!]", held 23-24 April 2016 at the Institut français de Tunisie on *Les 'printemps arabes' entre effacement et inscription*, with the aim of discussing "Regards croisés franco-tunisiens entre psychanalystes [!], artistes et chercheurs en sciences sociales" (<<https://www.institutfrancais-tunisie.com/?q=node/11579>>, last accessed 16 Dec 2016).

19 See above, fn. 2.

20 <https://www.trigon-film.org/en/movies/A_peine_les_yeux>.

‘ammīyyah). In the director’s own words, the young generation’s (*shabāb*)’s **desire** “**to live a life to the full**” is opposed here to “**family pressure** and an omnipresent **police state**”²¹ (Faraḥ’s **anti-authoritarian revolt** is against both).²² With these features, *‘Alā ḥallat ‘aynī*, like many other productions from the same period, is eager to stage a clash between the individual’s basically **human** impulses, wishes, desires, passions, etc., and a whole **system** that prevents the unfolding of humanity (cf. particularly #11, above, which also is eager to cover a large variety of scenes from **everyday life**, breadth equalling the ‘almightiness’ of the system). A recurring motif in this context is also the fact that in order for the *shabāb* to live this human life, they have to do it in **secret (double life, open vs. secret)**. The secret, however, cannot be concealed from the System’s spies, and both the members of her group and Faraḥ herself have to endure **detention** and **torture**. The **oppression** they experience is essentially the same as the one their parents had been exposed to in their youth or are still undergoing (**continuity, stagnation**)—“the father works and lives in another city because he refuses to join the president’s party” (**silent resistance**), and the reason for the mother’s **timidity** is that she has been a rebel herself in the past and only knows all too well what the consequences can be (AFD: 9). – The film demonstrates how effective the System’s brutal and inhuman techniques of silencing were at the time: when Faraḥ eventually is released she returns broken, unable to speak anymore. But the narrative also ends on cautiously optimistic note (**hope, confidence**): The mother succeeds in making her daughter recover and begin to express herself again—through singing (!) and, even more significantly, on the text of the rebellious song she used to sing in the bars, the song “Blādī” that comes with harsh criticism of the political and social conditions prevailing in the country (framework: the **nation**). The last words of the film are the mother’s encouraging *Kammil! kammil!*²³ ‘Go on, continue, complete!’

#15 *Ma révolution*

Ramzī Bin Sulaymān (Ramzi Ben Sliman)’s *Ma révolution* (“My revolution”, 2015) starts out in Paris in a Tunisian **expat/immigrant milieu**. The ‘**Arab Spring**’ is celebrated on the streets, as it is also received with great enthusiasm in 15 year-old Marwān’s family. The parents follow the reports on the radio and TV with excitement, and the grandfather feels reminded of his own ‘revolutionary’ youth. But Marwān, who has never seen Tunisia himself and to whom, as a teenager, politics doesn’t say much, is busy with other things: how to be accepted among his peers and, still more important, how to win his pretty classmate Sygrid’s heart? In this moment, the ‘Arab Spring’ comes to his aid: One evening he swans around in the streets and joins, just for fun, a group of dancing demonstrators; the next morning, a picture showing him under a poster with revolutionary slogans has made it onto the title page of a magazine, and Marwān suddenly, and completely unintentionally, is a hero. This wins him

21 Quoted in: <http://www.venice-days.com/FILM.asp?id=9&id_dettaglio=552&lang=eng>.

22 On the situation of *Egyptian* youth, comparable to that of their Tunisian ‘colleagues’, and their confrontation with the authorities, cf. Albrecht HOFHEINZ’s contribution to the present dossier. – For the “young generation”, or “generation of the youth” (*jīl al-shabāb*), in general, cf. Jacquemond’s brilliant article, JACQUEMOND 2015.

23 Unlike in *fushā* and many dialects where an imperative directed at a woman has to be marked feminine (-ī), in Tunisian Arabic it is not *kammīlī* but *kammil* (like masc.).

indeed Sygrid's affections; but in order not to lose her, but rather pass as a truly revolutionary youth, he has to live up to what the people in his surroundings, and particularly Sygrid, now believe him to be and expect of him as the icon of anti-dictatorial protest. Consequently, Marwān starts to learn more about Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime, and the 'Jasmine Revolution', and eventually even follows his parents (**back to the roots, identity**) who decide to go there for some time in order to live the historic moment and contribute to the reconstruction of the country they had left many years ago. – From this summary it is clear that we are dealing with a film that, like many others, retells **recent history** and which does so in the modus of a story of **coming-of-age/maturation** and **individual appropriation** of the revolution ("my" revolution!).²⁴ With this, it bears some similarity to a *Bildungsroman*, a trait that is not uncommon to find in contemporary Arabic fiction²⁵ and that is, perhaps, to be interpreted as an expression of the wish, on the side of the author, to provide the viewers with an **exemplary story** of an **average apolitical co-citizen** who succeeded in appreciating the revolution and eventually making it his/her own and who therefore can serve as a model to identify with and to be emulated.²⁶ On the side of the viewers, we may assume a wish to find exactly such a pliable personality depicted as an **amiable model**—it is certainly not without significance that the protagonist is a young, naïve galoot whom we laugh about in the beginning, but who nevertheless always has our sympathy and who later in the film even gains our respect. (That he deserves so is expressed with the help of a happy ending: Although Sygrid is very angry with Marwān because he had left for Tunis without telling her, she is soon ready to forgive him and take him back.)

#16 *Insoumise / al-Mutamarridah*

At the centre of *Insoumise / al-Mutamarridah* ("Rebellious girl", 2015) by Jawād Ghālib (Jawad Rhalib) we have again, as in 'Alà ḥallat 'aynī / À peine j'ouvre les yeux (#14), a rebellious **young woman (shabāb)**. Not finding a job at home in the field of her specialisation, internet technology (**academic unemployment**), modern self-confident Laylā leaves Morocco with the aim to earn some money as a seasonal worker on a farm in Belgium (**emigration, migrant labour**²⁷). It does not take long, however, until she becomes aware that she and her likes are being systematically **exploited** by the employing farmer: hard work, low wages, primitive housing conditions, no rights, almost like in prison. When asking the farmer to stick to the laws and pay the workers for many hours of overtime proves to be of no avail, and after some other incidents, Laylā does some research on her laptop (**internet as source of know-how**) and eventually decides to report the case to the authorities (**whistle-blowing**). The situation escalates when the business inspectorate carries out a control and the angry farmer, forced to pay the bill, wants to take revenge on the 'traitor' by punishing the whole group. What follows is a restaging, *en miniature*, of the

24 The process of appropriation is completed only in Tunisia and, significantly, in a scene in a **disco (music, hip-hop, dancing)**: It is here that Marwān merges with the local, revolutionary community/society and in this way becomes a 'real' revolutionary.

25 A prominent example is Yūsuf ZAYDĀN's IPAF winning 'Azāzīl (on which cf. GUTH 2016).

26 For the heroisation of the average citizen in the Egyptian context, cf. section "Everyday Life (Ordinary Citizen as Hero)" in Elena CHITI's contribution to the present dossier.

27 For emigration in Egyptian films, cf. Delphine PAGÈS-EL KAROUÏ's contribution to the present dossier.

‘Arab Spring’: When the **injustice** suffered from the ‘**regime**’ (here: the unjust ‘**despotic**’ farmer=ruler) reaches the limit of the bearable, the group revolts against ‘the **system**’.²⁸ Dismissed from her job, Laylā, in cooperation with a well-informed local NGO, organises **(non-violent) resistance**, occupying, fully legally, a public space that is of crucial importance for the farmer (cf. the occupation of **Tahrīr** Square). **Civil disobedience** eventually pays off: the protesters get support from the ministry, and all their demands are fulfilled. – How to interpret this story? I am inclined to read it less as the type of **remembering/processing history** and studying the **recent past** in search of explanations for what happened, a type of which we’ve already seen several examples above (cf. esp. #7, 9, 11, 14, 15); rather, I would suggest a reading as the director’s attempt to present the rebellion of the Arab youth as something that is of a wider relevance: it’s not only the Arab countries but also the West where injustice is found and change is necessary (and morally absolutely justified). As such, the ‘**Arab Spring**’ can even serve as an ‘**export model**’! A feature that seems to corroborate such a reading is the story of the Thibaut (a Belgian, i.e., a Westerner) that runs parallel to the other events: Working as a foreman on the farm he forms part of the oppressive system in the beginning; later, he falls in love with Laylā and eventually, after some inner quarrels (*Bildungsroman*, cf. #15), even changes sides—the young Arab woman has become a role model for a Westerner to emulate!

#17 *Yā tayr at-tāyir*

With its happy ending, *Yā tayr at-tāyir* (“A song for Nour / The idol”, 2015) by Hānī Abū As‘ad (Hany Abu Assad) shares with the preceding story (and some others in this survey, cf. #1, 12-15, 22) a positive, **hope-inspiring** mood—“a feel-good film”, as it is labelled in a standard announcement.²⁹ It tells the—real—story of the talented young Palestinian singer Muḥammad ‘Asāf from Gaza who, with the help of the popular casting show *Arab Idol*, made it into the charts, won the 2013 contest and thus became a living legend. – The production displays several features that an attentive reader of the preceding descriptions will immediately recognise as something familiar:

- it is all about singing (**music**, as related to feeling/emotion and authenticity/self-finding/identity, cf. #4, #5, #7, #14, #22);
- 23 years old, the hero is a typical young man (*shabāb*, cf. #4, #5, #7, #9, #11, ##14-16, ##20-22);
- growing up as a Palestinian **child**³⁰ in **poverty** in the ‘hermetically sealed’ Gaza

28 For the ‘**Arab Spring**’ as an **export model**, cf. the volume co-edited by OUALDI *et al.* 2014. Thank you, Elena, for drawing my attention to this collection and remarking that the tendency to draw a parallel between Arab countries and Europe with regard to economic crisis and social unrest was probably even stronger in literature/fiction. Cf., e.g., Mathias ÉNARD’s *Rue des voleurs* (2012): “This novel, written in 2011, is set between Morocco and Europe, especially Barcelona, where the Spanish economic and social crisis and the ‘indignados’ are seen in parallel with the crisis that hits Morocco. The hero is Lakhdar, a Moroccan young man in his twenties, trapped in his country and, then, in a hopeless migration. The Arab Springs are a far echo from abroad, both for Morocco and for Spain, where the situation is not better than in the Arab world” (Elena CHITI, e-mail of 12 Dec 2016).

29 <<http://www.filmfraser.no/arabiske-filmdager/afd-filmbase/2016/the-idol>>, AFD2016_program: 11.

30 The first part of the film shows Muḥammad as a child.

strip (comparable to **slums** / the *‘ashwā’iyyāt* in other countries), he is also a representative of those protagonists who start out from an **underprivileged** and/or **marginalised** position and therefore can easily serve for the broad masses as a model to identify with (for children, cf. #9; poverty: #1, #2, #3, #8, #9, #11; *‘ashwā’iyyāt*: #1, #8, #9, #18, #19; blind: #1, #22; weak woman: #3, #5, #9, #14, #16, #18, #19, #23), a fact that makes his success all the more miraculous (**contrast**),³¹

- the hero demonstrates an admirable **endurance**³² and **courage**, which, combined with his **resourcefulness**³³ (cf. #1, #3, #19, #27) enable him to **take the challenge** and **defy all odds** (cf. #1, #3, #4, #12, #16, #22).

In Muḥammad’s childhood, these odds consist mainly in the family’s poverty. When he tries to get out of prison-like Gaza to Cairo, however, there is also the **political** reality of almost unsurmountable borders, the difficulty of obtaining a **passport**, etc. An obstacle is also the purist attitude, opposed to ‘wordly’ singing, of Ḥamās officials (**religiosity vs. humanity**).

The **emotionalism** of the film, generated already through the miraculous ‘rags-to-riches’ plot, is further enhanced by the **pity** the viewer is made to feel with the innocent children who, in the first part of the film, try their best to establish a band. The film becomes particularly **moving** when Muḥammad’s sister Nūr who from early childhood has to do regular hemodialysis (**health**), eventually dies (her life could probably have been saved, had it not been for the political circumstances and the family’s poverty). It was she who ‘infected/infused’ the group with her **idealism** and **strong will** and provided them with the **belief** in the possibility of realising their dream against all odds (“In Gaza? Now? You’re crazy!”), and it was she who told Muḥammad that he was able to succeed, an idea that later on is also repeated by a grown-up patron: “Don’t let anyone tell you that your **dreams** won’t come true.”³⁴ When he finally decides to participate in the song contest and “get out of this place before it finishes me” (**emigration, flight**), he does so also in the spirit of **confidence** and **self-confidence** that he had learned from Nūr.³⁵

It goes without saying that all these notions, as well as the high degree of emotionalism,

31 The difference between the world Muḥammad comes from and the glamorous world he meets in Cairo when he participates in the *Arab Idol* contest is enormous. A similarly striking contrast is highlighted particularly in *Nawwārah* (see #19, below) where the heroine commutes between the *‘ashwā’iyyah* she lives in and the gated community where she works. Social inequality is however also mentioned elsewhere, e.g., in the documentary about *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs* (#8). – For other types of **contrast** (as a structural device used to alert the viewer to relations of dramatic **disproportion, disparity, discrepancy, inadequacy, inequality**, etc.), cf. #1, #22 (blindness/powerlessness/ill-equippedness vs. actual challenge); #9, #11, #19 (official discourse vs. reality); #10 (love/peacefulness vs. death threats, see fn. 9); #18 (inside vs. outside).

32 The hero does not give up his childhood dream although in the meanwhile he has to subsist by something as unrelated to his talents as driving a taxi.

33 Without any means, Muḥammad and his friends are forced from early childhood to use all resources, so also when it comes to provide their band with musical instruments. Although the money they are able to collect, “wouldn’t buy you a string in a flea market” (as one of the persons they approach has it), they eventually get some instruments, etc.

34 English as in the subtitles. Literally, the speaker says: “... that your dreams don’t matter/aren’t important” (*‘innī ‘aḥlāmak mish muhimmah*).

35 This is the reason why the film’s German title is “Ein Lied für Nour” (a song for Nour).

belong to the larger thematic complex of **hope** (vs. despair, realism, sobriety, etc.) that we have already come across on several occasions (#4, 6-7, 9, 11-16) and will meet again quite often also in the following. It seems, however, that the most recent productions are more reluctant to tell stories that give reason for optimism. If this is true, then the screening, in 2016, of earlier productions like *Yā tayr at-ṭāyir* would have to be read as an effort to uphold the spirit of hope against an overall movement towards more sceptical or pessimistic attitudes. An example of the latter is

#18 *Ishtibāk*

Ishtibāk (“Clash”, 2016) by Muḥammad Diyāb (Mohamed Diab). It is not completely devoid of hope, but it is definitely no longer the idealistic hope of *Yā tayr at-ṭāyir* that speaks out of this film. In the world that it takes us back to, the Cairo of summer 2013, shortly after the removal of Egyptian president Muḥammad Mursī, a world full of **violence**, social **fragmentation** and religious-political **confrontation** (cf. the title, “Clash”), incidents that could give reason to hope are much rarer, more difficult to detect, and perhaps also only ephemeral—although there are no explicit statements about how the viewer should imagine the future: the open ending seems to point in the direction of a renewal of violence and the destruction of the germs of hope that may have started to show first sprouts in the course of the events. Significantly, the space in which the ‘clash(es)’, announced in the title, take place, is the prison cell-like interior of a police van.³⁶ During demonstrations outside (remininding of the disastrous Rabaa [Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya] massacre of August 2013), the van steadily fills up with all kinds of people, representing a cross section of Egyptian society (**panoramic/holistic approach**, cf. esp. #7, #11, #12, #19). No question, the van is intended as a symbol of that time’s Egypt (the **nation**):³⁷ full to the brim (*zaḥmah*, cf. ##9-12, #17, #19), the atmosphere inside relentlessly **heating up**, with people almost suffocating (**asphyxia**, cf. #12), many in need of medical care (**health**, cf. #1, #9, ##11-12, #17, #19), etc. The film lets the quarrelling of the adverse parties (mostly adherents of the **Muslim Brotherhood** on the one hand, and **secularists**/supporters of the **army** on the other) who have been fighting each other outside, continue also inside the van for some time. But being squeezed into a ‘black box’ and having to **endure** the situation without any clue of what is going to happen next (**uncertainty**), also means sharing a **common destiny** and having to **collaborate** in order to survive into an unknown future. Thus, the film also tells the story of a chance, and concrete opportunity—here they are, the germs of **hope** mentioned above—to overcome mutual **mistrust** and **suspicion**³⁸ and find a way back to national **solidarity** ‘thanks’ to the necessity to fulfill a number of basic human needs (**New Humanism**, cf. #1, #4, ##9-12, ##16-17, ##19-20): to get one’s share of fresh air and water, but also the possibility to urinate (a problem particularly for the women—the film shows

36 With this feature, the film can be seen as joining in the well-known tradition of *‘adab al-sujūn* ‘prison fiction’. For some early examples of the genre, cf. ALLEN 1995: 109 (with further references); cf. also ASHOUR 2015/16 (written 2008).

37 For other spaces symbolising the nation, cf. GUTH 2011.

38 Who is a Muslim Brother [MB]? Who a journalist? Who a snitch or the agent of some foreign power?

that it is easier for men to preserve their **dignity**).³⁹ But also discussions about **soccer** create a certain sense of community; two people even get closer after having found out that they both love dogs; a (presumably Muslim) nurse covers the cross (**religious symbols**) on the arms of an injured **Copt** (cf. #10) to save him from the trouble he might get into if his Christian identity was detected; in order to help the same nurse dress the wound of another prisoner, a young Muslim Sister, until then a strict defender of a dogmatic interpretation of Islam, lends the nurse the safety pins of her hijab, in this way **unveiling** herself (**sacrificing** an important symbol of her dignity for the higher cause of helping a fellow human being); this brings out fine long hair the **beauty** of which completely dazzles a (non-MB) boy of her age; when one of the prisoners, a kind of fat figure of fun (**humour**, cf. esp. #12, but also #1, #3, #7, #15), eventually starts singing and drumming (**music**, cf. ##4-5, #7, #14, #17, #22) on the salad strainer he had worn as a helmet, everybody even starts laughing, many falling in a mode of remembering, by association, beautiful moments in the past. However, when the ‘re-humanisation’ of this sample group has just started to bear fruit and a new type of community is beginning to take shape, somebody, in the turmoil outside, manages to hijack the van and drive it to some no-man’s land. Before the door can be opened the hijacker has to flee again from the police who have tracked the missing car. Trying to escape, the car gets stuck in a demonstration—we don’t know whether pro- or anti-MB—seething with rage. The infuriated mob turns the van over, and the door bursts open. The last scene shows a group of protestors dragging some prisoners outside, where, as the viewer can assume, some **lynching** will take place: we are back to the blind violence with which the film started.⁴⁰ The camera fades out, leaving behind a scene of nightly chaos, with the beams of green laser pointers criss-crossing the darkness, accompanied by **melancholic** tones from a *nāy*. – Seen as a whole, the film should probably be interpreted as another example of a **critical assessment of the recent past** with the aim of **learning a lesson** for the present and future: The chance to find a way back to a form of **human togetherness** is always there, it was even there in summer 2013; it fell prey to blind violence then, so let’s stop this, and find a way back to the values of humanity.

#19 *Nawwārah*

Hālah Khalīl (Hala Khalil)’s drama *Nawwārah* (“Nawara”, 2015), too, takes the viewer back to the **recent past**—the days of the **January 2011 uprisings**—and in this way, like many others, makes an attempt to **reassess** this crucial period (cf. ##7-11, #14-15). Unlike the pre-

39 In this context, the MB are portrayed as being experienced in organising themselves, but also as rather **egoistic** and mechanically **bureaucratic**: as soon as a group enters the van, they find a group leader, who immediately starts to divide the prisoners into MB and non-MB, and the MB into those who are registered members and those who aren’t, making clear that only the registered MB will get group support. The viewer must conclude: for the MB, not the **human being** as such is what counts. – Another egoist is a young DJ: hiding his mobile from the rest of the group, he simply listens to some hip-hop music, in this way using up the battery (**empty battery**, cf. #12) of the phone that could be used to get contact to the outside world.

40 In the beginning, acts of violence not only committed by the protestors in the street but also by the police: When they get hold of a sniper they beat him up and let him die from the kicks (in revenge for the colleague *he* had shot), and an ambulance (which perhaps could have helped) drives away. When the MB girl in the van needs a toilet and one of the policemen wants to help, he is sent to jail by his superior.

vious and other films that have a similar objective, however, there are no sparks of hope left here. The film closes on highly **pessimistic** prospects:⁴¹ an innocent, brave, hardworking, poor woman who has sacrificed herself for the cause of a super-rich family, is accused of being a thief and will probably be punished as a criminal—a **dramatic** ending that serves the task of underlining the striking **injustice** and **social inequality** prevailing in the country. As such, the ending is in line with the main structural principle the film operates with: the highlighting of **contrasts** (presumably with the aim of **emotional mobilisation**), which in this case means: the tremendous gap between the rich and the poor in Egypt. The contrast is also carved out in spatial terms: the heroine Nawwārah commutes regularly between her home in one of the *‘ashwā’iyyāt* and the place where she works as a housemaid, a villa in one of the **gated communities** of New Cairo (al-Qāhirah al-Jadīdah);⁴² the distance between the two spaces (and classes) is underlined also by following the protagonist on her daily way to work, a trip that takes hours and involves changing the means of transport several times: first a **tuk-tuk**, then a public bus, then a *mīnī-bāṣ*, then another bus (inside the compound). Contrasting the two worlds of poverty and luxury in spatial terms is however only one aspect of a technique of **systematic alteration** put into operation throughout (evidently intended to cover the manifold aspects of one **system, holistic approach**). For instance,

- after showing the heroine toiling to carry **water** to her house in large cans from a central tap in the quarter, there is a shift of scenery to the rich villa where the bikini-wearing daughter slips into a private swimming pool full of precious water that is ‘just there’, serving no other purpose than to grant the rich the opportunity of a quick refreshment in the **heat**;
- while Nawwārah’s family has to work hard to be able to buy some meat (**affordable food**), the rich family’s **dog** (named “Butch”) gets kilos of the best meat every day;
- while the heroine and her husband have not yet ‘consummated their marriage’ because they still do not have a flat of their own (lack of **affordable housing**) due to the husband’s **unemployment** (which in turn seems to be due to, among other things, his low social status as a Nubian [the **underprivileged, marginalised**]), the villa has plenty of rooms, a garden, etc., and the family members don’t even have to work;
- the amount of money Nawwārah’s father-in-law, suffering from cancer, would need to have a necessary operation done on him and get adequate **medical treatment** in a **hospital** has always been lying ‘just there’, in a drawer of a desk in the villa;
- while the villa’s toilets are spacious, modern and clean, those at Nawwārah’s home and in the hospital are in a deplorable condition (**hygiene**);
- concerns like that of Nawwārah’s grandmother about whether she one day will be able to afford a suitable shroud to be buried in **dignity** are completely alien to the rich family; etc.

Other occasions where the director applies a contrasting technique include **dichotomies** like

- **official discourse vs. lived reality**: Deplorable conditions are often depicted with a

41 On the lack of perspectives, particularly for the youth, cf. Albrecht HOFHEINZ’s contribution to the present *dossier special*, esp. section “Generation Stuck”.

42 “one of the new cities which have been built in and around Cairo to alleviate the congestion in downtown Cairo”, “established in the year 2000 by presidential decree” – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Cairo>.

voice from the radio, already familiar to us from other films (cf. #1, #9, ##11-12), in the background, spreading the latest news; the voice is present, for instance, when Nawwārah is cleaning a toilet, or when she is on a bus, or when another housemaid one day brings along her daughter whom she has taken out of school so that she can help earn the family's living (**education** falling prey to economic needs);

- **false appearance vs. true being:** The 'almighty' nurse in the hospital where the father-in-law is waiting to be treated bears the promising name of Mu'mina ("Believer"), but instead of doing her job and caring about the patients she is always on the phone discussing non-related trivialities with a friend or relative (cf. also **false Islam**);

Another example of the dichotomy between official discourse and lived reality are the promises the SCAF interim 'government' spreads in the media, saying that the assets of the presidential family will probably be redistributed to the people so that each citizen could reckon with c. £E 200,000 in the not too distant future, a promise that injects new hope in Nawwārah and lets her remain confident that after the Revolution things will take a turn for the better.

The two-hour film is very rich in details and all kinds of allusions that cannot be treated in the present survey due to limitations of space, although they are recurrent in other productions as well: cf., e.g., the notorious traffic chaos / *zaḥmah*; the constant **time pressure** / **hectic rush** resulting from the need to commute between home and two or three jobs and leading to an **exhaustion** of the body; the **resoluteness** and **courage** needed to meet the challenges of everyday life, a feature often shown especially in young women; the **lack of security**; the frequent **protest marches** in the streets demanding bread, freedom and social justice, etc. Before going over to the next film, however, I would like to draw attention to two more features that seem to me particularly noteworthy:

- Nawwārah's husband 'Alī suffers from a feeling of **emasculat**⁴³ because he is unable to provide housing and a living for his wife and help his sick father. Although, in its essence, nothing but a variant of the feeling of powerlessness/im-potence that we have met on several occasions already above (#1-2, 10), the direct topicalisation, in this film, of a well-known phenomenon seems to me rather unusual. It still seems to be a taboo, and perhaps needed a female director like Hālah Khalīl to address it.
- No doubt, the film bears many traits that are typical of the melodramatic genre (particularly its closure with Nawwārah's arrest and her being driven away in a police van, behind bars, under the false accusation of theft). And it seems also clear that the heroine's **modesty**, unshakeable **honesty (steadfastness)**, **loyalty** towards her employers without any feeling of envy, as well as her **sense of duty**, upheld even under the most difficult circumstances, are a slightly idealistic construction (necessary perhaps in order to let her, the icon of the **innocent average citizen**, appear as upright and immaculate as possible). The film does however not forgo staging temptation, moments when the poor cannot resist taking something from the rich. This role, however, is assigned to the heroine's husband, 'Alī. While the rich employers' **affluence** is clearly shown as **immoral**, and the theft of a precious clock that 'Alī commits when the house is empty, is thus made understandable, he nevertheless

43 We hope to read more on this topic in general in a doctoral thesis on "Passionate Publics: Emotions & Events through Media in the #Jan25 Revolution", currently prepared by Yasmeen MEKAWY, PhD student in Political Science at the University of Chicago.

feels remorse and brings the clock back, so that the honour of the average citizen is restituted and the rich remain the only real object of criticism.

#20 *ʿĀkhir wāḥid fīnā*

ʿĀkhir wāḥid fīnā (“The last of us”, 2016) by ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Salīm (Ala Eddine Slim) seems, at first sight, to be completely different from all the productions we have described so far. This impression owes itself, in the first place, to the fact that the film does without any dialogue at all; that socio-political topics are absent; that the protagonist as well as the regions he crosses and the places he passes by all remain nameless; and that the main part takes place in a kind of primeval forest, with the protagonist and his senior ‘mentor’ living almost like Stone Age men—features that lend the film the character of “philosophical science-fiction” (as the AFD2016 leaflet has it).⁴⁴ On closer analysis, however, we find that, despite its different appearance on the surface and high degree of **symbolic-mythical abstraction**,⁴⁵ the film nevertheless shares a number of traits with other productions of the present survey. Among these is the fact that we are dealing with a kind of *Bildungsroman*⁴⁶ (cf. #15-16, to a certain extent also #17-18; see also #21-22, below). It tells the story of a young (*shabāb*) **refugee**⁴⁷ (from some North African country, as it seems) who **leaves everything behind**, makes his way to the coast, captures a boat and, in spite of being shipwrecked (on the Mediterranean?), manages to reach a safe (European?) shore and, recovered, starts his way into the jungle-forest mentioned above (**journey**⁴⁸). It doesn’t take long until he falls into a deep pit trap and is seriously injured, but then also rescued and medically treated by an old hermit. The latter soon becomes his teacher and guide in the New World.⁴⁹ However, when he just has learned enough—about the New World and himself⁵⁰—to be able to survive on his own the ‘mentor’ one day is injured (by a wolf?) and dies. Now our young hero ‘takes over’ from the old man, and the final scene shows him, completely naked, in front of a beautiful little lake under a waterfall, ready to start into a new life, relying only on himself. – While the quasi-**apocalyptic** title “The last of us” is reminding of Tāmīr al-Saʿīd’s “In the last days of the city” (#11) that evokes similar visions of an end time in the spectator, the meaning of the final, **cautiously hope-inspiring** scene

44 Cf. also the interruption of the narrative, in the middle of the movie, by a black screen showing only some poetry verses and an art design composed of smaller and larger circles, on the bottom right of the screen.

45 In our sample of 23 movies, there is only *Qindīl al-baḥr* (#23) using non-realistic elements from the mythical heritage.

46 The AFF2016 leaflet calls it “eine ungläubliche Reise zum eigenen Ich” (an unbelievable journey to the self).

47 Perhaps in search of a living, like the migrant worker of #16. – Cf. also note 27, above.

48 The organisation of a *Bildungsroman* as a journey is a typical feature of the genre since its very emergence. Not surprisingly, we find a similar structure also in other movies from our survey: e.g., there is a lot of walking/driving through the streets in *ʿĀkhir ʿayyām al-madīnah* (#11) where Khālīd is searching for ‘the meaning of all this’; in *Ma révolution* (#15), the young Marwān has to travel to Tunisia in order to really come of age; as we shall see soon, the protagonist Hādī in *Nḥibbik, Hādī* (#21) lives his true self in another place; and the young blind protagonist in *Rabīʿ / Tramontane* (#22) finds out who he really is via a journey through his country, Lebanon.

49 After the hero’s compass had run riot in the New World, the hermit provided him with a new orientation.

50 Cf. previous note.

rather seems to be similar to the note on which a film like “As I open my eyes” (#14) leaves us: the hero/ine has gone through great hardship, yes, and given these difficulties, the future will certainly not be easy; however, what is more important is that the hero/ine actually *has* survived all this, learned a lesson, and that his/her **will to life** is unbroken—the AFF leaflet speaks of a “rebirth”.⁵¹ At the same time, this rebirth also means a victory of the **human** over what perhaps can be described as ‘**posthuman**’:⁵² the movie opens with showing the hero in a deserted wilderness, at night in a cold windy wasteland; then, when the refugee comes closer to civilisation, there are mainly motorways; then he is **alone** on the sea, exposed to the freaks of nature (**powerlessness**), which he also is after arrival on the safe shore and when he starts to move further uphill through the jungle; in this seemingly depopulated world, the protagonist indeed looks as if he was “the last of us”, the last surviving member of the human species, constantly **threatened by extinction** (the film underlines the **danger, fear**, difficulty of survival). It is significant, however, that his way almost always leads **uphill** (indicating ascent to higher levels) and that, after the death of the mentor, he is always accompanied by a brightly shining full moon—as if the spirit of old man was continuing to illuminate his way. (Should we interpret this as the author’s vision of how the *shabāb* can profit from the experience of the older generation?) Thus, the naked youth of the final scene who is at the beginning of a new life characterised by **independence, self-reliance, authenticity, and freedom**, but also by the **vulnerability** of the naked, can always also feel guided and, in a way, protected by the spirit of the Old Man.

#21 *Nḥibbik, Hādī / Hédi*

Another Tunisian movie from the current year, *Nḥibbik, Hādī / Hédi* (“I love you, Hedi”, 2016) by Muḥammad Bin ‘Aṭīyyah (Mohamed Ben Attia), re-enacts a plot that is familiar to any historian of modern Arabic fiction ever since the so-called ‘first Egyptian novel’,⁵³ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal’s *Zaynab* of 1913: a **young male** protagonist⁵⁴ **torn between two women**, one of whom representing **Tradition**, the other **Freedom**. While *Zaynab* belongs to the period of early nation-building, *Hédi* can without doubt be watched as a document of **nation-rebuilding**. The two options are still coded very similarly: Tradition is what the **older generation**/parents want and arranges for the youth; what seems to be a **safe** and comfortable way to go; but which at the same time is quite **boring**, limiting the individual’s longing for **naturalness** and **authenticity**, something that does not correspond to the **true self** any longer and that therefore also is unwanted, mainly a fulfilment of **duty**; Freedom, on the other hand, is the more **appealing** and **exciting** option, but it is also more **risky** and **adventurous**, and therefore more **demanding**. Judging from his way of thinking and feeling, Bin ‘Aṭīyyah’s Hādī is, like Haykal’s Ḥāmid, essentially a **drop-out** of society already: he doesn’t really care any longer, either about the arrangements and decisions his parents make for him, or about his job: he feels as **alienated** (*ghurbah*) from the logics of

51 Cf. the discussions about a ‘new *Nahḍah*’ in the Arab World.

52 Cf. the title of the 12th meeting of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature in Oslo earlier this year (May/June 2016): “Upholding Humanity in a Post-Human World? Arabic Literature after the ‘Arab Spring’”, see <<https://euramal12th.wordpress.com/>>.

53 On this label cf. COLLA 2009.

54 Hādī is 25 years old.

Tradition (**arranged marriages**) as from those of the **neo-liberal market economy**. But—he is **too weak** to take a stand; he prefers to lead a **double life**, torn and **undecided** between his **unauthentic/false** and his **true identities**. He knows and feels what would be the right thing to do, but he doesn't. Thus, in the end, he passes up the chance to begin a new life with beautiful, self-confident, independent Rīm, a **dancer** and entertainer at a **tourist resort** (freedom away from home, cf. #4) whom he had met and fallen in love with far away from his home town and with whom he later on agreed to leave for France (**spatial distance, contrast**); instead, he decides to stay, so the viewer can assume that he will soon marry, as planned by the parents (and, in particular, by his eager **mother**), Khadījah,⁵⁵ the girl “they” have selected for him; whom he has met and talked to only a few times before; and whom he has never kissed even once (while he has enjoyed sex with Rīm)...

#22 *Rabīʿ / Tramontane*

Treating the Lebanese production *Rabīʿ / Tramontane* (“Rabih”, 2016) by Vatche Boulghourjian after *ʿĀkhir wāḥid fīnā* (#20) and *Hédi* (#21) will reinforce our impression that the present conditions in the Arab world give room for both, cautious optimism and despair. While *Hédi* closed on a pessimistic note (perhaps deliberately so, in order to mobilise the spectators, make them revolt against weak acceptance of the ‘old way’ and, with it, also a certain authoritarianism), *Rabīʿ* joins *ʿĀkhir wāḥid fīnā* in the confidence that the **youth does** have the **potential** to find their **true identity** and in the future will manage, despite all obstacles and own **vulnerability**, a life as they **themselves**. *Rabīʿ* tells the story of a **blind young man** (**powerlessness, shabāb**) with a beautiful voice (**singing**) who one day discovers that he is not the person he has always believed himself to be (**uncertainty, identity**). His ‘mother’ and her brother, “uncle Hishām”, had made him believe that he was an orphan who had been handed over to them after the death of his real parents in a village in Southern Lebanon. *Rabīʿ* senses that something is wrong here, and sets off (**journey**) to find out what actually happened (**official discourse vs. hidden truth**). His investigations into the hidden **secret past** lead him, like a **detective**, through his country and eventually **reveal the truth** to him: During the Civil War, Hishām, then head of a militia squadron, had raided a village and killed *Rabīʿ*’s parents (**war crime, violence**); their baby, a little boy, became blind from the heat when the house was burnt down, but was saved from the flames; Hishām then gave him to his sister who had always wanted (but herself been unable) to have a child. But still: although the truth now has been established, it will not be acknowledged by the authorities and *Rabīʿ* will not get the new birth certificate he needs to issue the passport (**bureaucracy**) that would allow him to join the choir whose soloist he is (**music**), and who has been invited to a concert tour through Europe. Stuck between accepting or rejecting Hishām’s offer to help, he lets the ‘uncle’ (who has killed his parents and obscured his crime) use his contacts (“vitamin B”) and provide a new certificate—a decision that the viewer may interpret as a first step on the way to **reconciliation** with the murderers of the past (dealing with **trauma**). Interestingly, the new certificate **only confirms** the data of the earlier, forged document so that “*Rabīʿ*” remains *Rabīʿ* and his ‘mother’ his mother (**keep appearances**). This allows the young man to ‘remain the same’ irrespective of his ‘rebirth’, and the older generation to save face in spite of

55 Cf. also the ‘telling’ names: Rīm = the ‘gazelle’ (beauty, freedom, life in nature), Khadījah = traditional Islamic name in reverence for the Prophet’s first wife (tradition, Islam, conforming to norms).

having committed a crime, which makes it easier for the ‘mother’/mother to ask Rabīʿ to **pardon** her. The final scene shows Rabīʿ singing, in a public performance together with the choir, the famous Ṣabāḥ Fakhūrī song with the telling first line: *Ibʿat-lī gawāb wi-ṭammin-nī...* “Send me a letter/an answer and assure me that everything is all right...”⁵⁶ While the ‘mother’/mother is sitting in the first ranks, extremely proud of her ‘son’/son, ‘uncle’ Hishām joins the concert only later (out of bad conscience, but signalling interest/acknowledgment?) and remains in the background.

#23 *Qindīl al-baḥr / Kindil*

The last movie to be presented here, *Qindīl al-baḥr / Kindil* (“Kindil / The jellyfish”, 2016) by the Algerian director Damien Ounouri, is the only one in this survey to use elements of the **fantastic** to a larger extent. (The lantern-like full moon following the protagonist in #20, *ʿĀkhīr wāḥīd fīnā*, is the only comparable element, but it is far from being so central there.) The description of the (rather short: 40-minute) film on the website of the Hamburg Film festival where it was shown in Sept./Oct. starts like this: “Nfissa [Nafisah] is enjoying an outing to the seaside [**sea, freedom, be yourself, feel your body**]⁵⁷ with her family when she is surrounded by a group of men, who harass and abuse the young mother [**sexual harassment, helplessness**] so much that she ends up drowning. [...] Nfissa’s husband calls the police, but her body is never found [**bureaucratic routine, powerlessness**]. Then, one by one, a mysterious series of deaths begins, and male bathers are the victims.”⁵⁸ The killer is, of course, Nafisah who in the meantime has mysteriously transformed (**metamorphosis / transfiguration**) into a Medusa and is now taking ruthless **revenge** (the scenes showing the attacking fish-woman-monster remind of horror films like Spielberg’s *Jaws* and its white shark). Obviously, the film draws on ancient mythology, in this way neglecting Islamic imagery in favour of the **pre-Islamic cultural heritage** as a source of inspiration; however, the Greek Medusa’s lethal gazes are accompanied by a kind of electric shock in the modern Algerian adaptation. In addition, the AFF leaflet draws our attention to what may be yet another intertextual correspondence: Nafisah-Qindīl, it says, makes use of the sea in the same way as resistance fighters use the forests for their acts of subversion and revolt (AFF: 9). Apart from highlighting the brutality of sexual harassment, the film is also eager to show what it actually destroys, how terrible it is for those who remain behind, and in this way, **contrast** it with the **love** between the married couple, a love that, on Nafisah’s side, is even so strong that she lets her husband lure her from the safe sea into the trap that the police has put up for her. Once she is on the beach the policemen surround and kill her with harpoons—a scene that parallels the initial harassment and in this way points to the similarity between the security forces and the harassers: the same brutality, the same disrespect for the violated female human being.

56 Text by Ḥusām al-Dīn al-KHAṬĪB, music by Bakrī al-KURDĪ.

57 It is noteworthy how close the camera gets to the female body in the scene when Nafisah starts to enjoy swimming in the sea. She still has her clothes on, but in the water the dress hardly conceals the details of her body. In its quasi-nakedness, the scene is therefore comparable to the final scene of *ʿĀkhīr wāḥīd fīnā* (young man standing naked at a lake, ready to meet the future—vulnerable, but free and he-himself; see above, #20).

58 <<http://www.filmfesthamburg.de/en/programm/Film/27321/kindil>> (accessed 16 Nov 2016).

The films

- #1 *Shūf / Chouf* (“Look!”), short film by Imen Dellil; Tunisia 2014, 25 min.
- #2 *Condamné à l'espoir* (Doomed to hope), short film by Youssef Ben Ammar; Tunisia 2014, 25 min.
- #3 *Les commerçantes* (“The tradeswomen”), short film by Noussaiba Msallem; Tunisia 2015, 24 min.
- #4 *Travesties*, short film by Safoin Ben Abdelali; Tunisia 2015, 21 min.
- #5 *Un cercle autour d'une danse* (“A circle round a dance”), short film by Mouna Louhichi; Tunisia 2015, 18 min.
- #6 *Tahar Cheriaa: Taht zilāl al-bāwbāb/ A l'ombre du baobab* (“At the baobab's shadow”), documentary by Muḥammad Shallūf (Mohamed Challof); Tunisia 2015, 70 min.
- #7 *Yallah! Underground*, documentary by Farid Eslam; Egypt, Czechia, Germany, UK, Canada, USA 2015, 85 min.
- #8 *Egypt's Modern Pharaohs*, documentary trilogy by Jihān al-Tāhirī (Jihan El-Tahri); Egypt, France, USA, Qatar 2015/2016, 3 x 58 min. (Arabic, English voice-over)
- #9 *'Abadan lam nakun 'atfālan* (“We have never been kids”), documentary by Maḥmūd Sulaymān (Mahmood Soliman); Egypt, U.A.E., Qatar, Lebanon 2016, 99 min.
- #10 *al-Ṣalāt wa'l-ma'arakah / La Vallée du Sel* (“Prayer and Battle / The Valley of Salt”), documentary by Christophe Majdī Ṣābir (Magdy Saber); Egypt, Switzerland 2016, 62 min.
- #11 *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīnah* (“In the last days of the city”), by Tāmir al-Sa'īd (Tamer el Said); Egypt, Germany, UK, U.A.E. 2016, 118 min.
- #12 *Hārr jāff ṣayfan* (“Dry hot summers”), short film by Sharīf al-Bandarī (Sherif Elbendary); Egypt, Germany 2015, 30 min.
- #13 *Ṣabābik [sic!] al-jannah / Les frontières du ciel* (“Borders of Heaven”), by Fāris Na'nā' (Farès Naanaa); Tunisia, U.A.E. 2015, 95 min.
- #14 *À peine j'ouvre les yeux* (“As I Open My Eyes”), by Leyla Bouzid; Tunisia, France, Belgium 2015, 102 min.
- #15 *Ma révolution* (“My revolution”), by Ramzī Bin Sulaymān (Ramzi Ben Sliman); France, Tunisia 2015, 80 min., (French, Arabic)
- #16 *Insoumise / al-Mutamarridah* (“Rebellious girl”), by Jawād Ghālīb (Jawad Rhalib); Morocco, Belgium 2015, 75 min., (Arabic, French)
- #17 *Yā tayr al-tāyir* (A Song for Nour), by Hānī Abū As'ad (Hany Abu Assad); Palestine, Qatar, NL, U.A.E., UK 2015, 100 min.
- #18 *Ishtibāk* (“Clash”), by Muḥammad Diyāb (Mohamed Diab); Egypt, Germany, France 2016.
- #19 *Nawwārah* (“Nawara”), by Hālah Khalīl (Hala Khalil); Egypt 2016, 111 min.
- #20 *'Ākhir wāḥid finā* (“The last of us”), by 'Alā' al-Dīn Salīm (Ala Eddine Slim); Tunisia, Qatar, U.A.E., Lebanon 2016, 95 min.
- #21 *Nḥibbik, Hādī / Hedī* (“Hedī”), by Muḥammad Bin 'Aṭīyyah (Mohamed Ben Attia); Tunisia, Belgium, France 2016, 93 min.
- #22 *Rabī' / Tramontane* (“Rabih”), by Vatche Boulghourjian; Libanon 2016, 110 min.
- #23 *Qindīl al-baḥr* (“Kindil”), short film by Damien Ounouri; Algeria, France 2016, 40 min.

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#Sisi_vs_Youth: Who Has a Voice in Egypt?

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Abstract

This article presents voices from Egypt reflecting on the question of who has the right to have a voice in the country in the first half of 2016. In the spirit of the research project “In 2016,” it aims to offer a snapshot of how it “felt to live” in Egypt in 2016 as a member of the young generation (*al-shabāb*) who actively use social media and who position themselves critically towards the state’s official discourse. While the state propagated a strategy focusing on educating and guiding young people towards becoming productive members of a nation united under one leader, popular youth voices on the internet used music and satire to claim their right to resist a retrograde patrimonial system that threatens every opposing voice with extinction. On both sides, a strongly antagonistic ‘you vs. us’ rhetoric is evident.

2016: “The Year of Egyptian Youth” (Sisi style)*

January 9, 2016 was celebrated in Egypt as Youth Day—a tradition with only a brief history. The first Egyptian Youth Day had been marked on February 9, 2009; the date being chosen by participants in the Second Egyptian Youth Conference in commemoration of the martyrs of the famous 1946 student demonstrations that eventually led to the resignation of then Prime Minister Nuqrāshī. Observed in 2009 and 2010 with only low-key events, the carnivalesque “18 days” of revolutionary unrest in January-February 2011 interrupted what

* Rather than a conventional academic paper, this article aims to be a miniature snapshot of how it ‘felt’ to live in Egypt by mid-2016 as a member of the young generation (*al-shabāb*) who have access to social media (ca. 70% of Egyptians aged 10-29 have a Facebook account; my calculation based on eMarketing Egypt: “Facebook in Egypt,” 4th edn., Aug. 2013, and “Demographics of Egypt,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Egypt>, accessed 26 Dec. 2016) and who position themselves as outspoken members of this generation (*gīl*) upholding the tradition of the 25 January 2011 revolution. In this attempt, the article is no more than a first, exploratory step within the “In 2016” research project. It is primarily based on monitoring social media buzz throughout the first part of this year, not least using <BuzzSumo.com> to track popular issues shared via social media. This was supplemented by informal talks with bloggers, journalists, students, and former activists (from the 2011/12 period) in Cairo in January/February 2016. In the aim of providing a ‘snapshot,’ the present tense is used here to refer to observations pertaining to the ‘scene’ during the first half of 2016; while the past tense refers to specific occurrences. For stylistic reasons, I do not transcribe the name of the Egyptian president al-Sīsī, but use the spelling Sisi throughout. Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions and translations in this article are mine.—Audio-visual predecessors of the article were presented at conferences at the University of Oslo (*Five Years after the Arab Spring: Political and Ideological Trends*), 10 June 2016, and the University of Southern Denmark (*Formations of Middle Eastern Subjectivities: Cultural Heritage, Global Structures and Local Practices*), 22 September 2016. I am grateful for the feedback received from the audience as well as from my peer reviewers.

largely had been youth processions preceded by police bands marching through provincial capitals.¹ It was only five years later that Youth Day was revived, and on a different date, perhaps to deflect attention from student demonstrations and those who were killed at the hands of the police, perhaps to advance a government agenda aiming at harnessing young people's energy and dedication.²

Marking this day more prominently than its precursors, the President chose the stately stage of Cairo Opera House for the occasion. Surrounding himself with seventeen carefully selected young men and women—all looking very respectable and respectful—Sisi extolled the devotion of these “children” of his as a model when he declared the “Year of Egyptian Youth” (*ʿĀm al-Shabāb al-Miṣrī*). In unreformed patriarchal style, as if he had never heard the sarcastic reactions to Mubarak's last speeches, he pontificated:



شباب مصر العظيم، أتحدّث إليكم اليوم حديثاً متجدّداً نابعاً من قلب أب يتحدّث إلى أبنائه [...] أبنائي وبناتي! إنّ شبابنا من أبطال القوات المسلّحة والشرطة المدنيّة [...] يضربون أروع الأمثلة في التضحية والفداء لحماية الوطن [تصفيق ١٠ ث] ومقدّساته من أهل الشّرّ اللذين أرادوا أن يزرعوا الفوضىّة والعنف في أرضنا الطيّبة. [...] كان أبنائي وبناتي من شبابنا في الجامعات والمدارس [...] وآخريّن في المصانع والمزارع يصنعون لأمتنا المستقبل ويزرعون لنا سنابل الأمل. أبناء مصر الكرام: إنّ الحديث عن الأمل واقتراجه بالشباب ليس مجرّد كلمة بلاغيّة أقولها في مناسبة رسميّة إنّما هي محاولة لإعادة الأمور إلى نصابها كي يستقيم مصير هذه الأمة وتصحّ خطواتها نحو التقدّم والرفيّه ولذلك فأبنيّ اليوم، في يوم الشباب، ووسط هذه الكوكبة من شبابنا الرائع، مثقّفين ومبدعين ورياضيين وسياسيين، قرّرت أن يكون العام ٢٠١٦ عاماً للشباب المصريّ [تصفيق ٩ ث].

- 1 Muḥammad SHANAḤ, “‘Yawm al-Shabāb al-Miṣrī’...tārīkhuḥu 9 Febrāyir wa-ʿaqarrat-hu al-dawla fi 2008 wa-ḥtufila bihi marratayn,” *al-Waṭan*, 9 Jan. 2016, <<http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/907456>>; Haggai ERLICH, *Students and University in 20th Century Egyptian Politics*, London: Frank Cass, 1989: 152.
- 2 During the event, Sisi officially launched the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (*Bank al-Maʿrifa al-Miṣrī*), an online portal offering free access to a host of international publishers' databases, journals, electronic books and audio-visual media (<<http://www.ekb.eg>>, accessible only from Egyptian IP addresses; <<http://fb.com/EgyptianKnowledgeBank>>). See ElHassan ELSABRY, “Some Thoughts on the ‘Egyptian Knowledge Bank,’” *Backchannels*, 14 Feb. 2016, <http://4sonline.org/blog/post/some_thoughts_on_the_egyptian_knowledge_bank>; Pasha MAGID, “Egyptian Knowledge Bank to Give Free Access to Online Journals, but Will it Fulfill its Promise?,” *Mada Masr*, 16 Nov. 2015, <<http://madamasr.com/en/2015/11/16/feature/society/egyptian-knowledge-bank-to-give-free-access-to-online-journals-but-will-it-fulfill-its-promise>>.

Great Youth of Egypt! I speak to you today straight from the heart of a father addressing his children. [...] My sons and daughters! Our heroic youth in the armed forces and the civilian police [...] provide the most awesome examples of selflessness and sacrifice to protect the nation [*al-waṭan*; 10 sec. *applause*] from the forces of evil who meant to plant chaos and violence in our land of peace (*fī arḍinā al-ṭayyiba*). [...] It is my sons and daughters in schools and universities [...] and those who work in factories and farms who forge the future for our nation (*umma*) and plant for us the seeds of hope. Honourable sons of Egypt: to talk about hope, and to link it to the youth, is not mere rhetoric I employ at an official event—it is an attempt to put things straight again, so that this nation (*umma*) returns to her straight path and takes the right steps to rise and progress. Therefore, today, on the Day of Youth, surrounded by this magnificent youth of ours (*waṣṭa hādhihi 'l-kawkaba min shabābinā al-rā'i*), educated people, creative people, athletes, politicians, I decided to declare this year 2016 a Year of the Egyptian Youth [9 sec. *applause*].³

The networked youth reacted immediately, as in this Facebook post:

السيسي: عام 2016 هو عام الشباب ونعمل بأقصى جهد لاحتواءهم
مصلحة السجون: والله مفيش مكان فاضي يا ريس
#السيسي_vs_الشباب

Sisi: 2016 is the Year of Youth, and We'll do our utmost to include them.

The Prison Authority: There's no room left at all, Mr. President!

#Sisi_vs_Youth⁴

The glaring contrast between Sisi's talk of inclusion and his regime's practice of incarcerating tens of thousands has been pointed out repeatedly during the year and developed into a rhetorical topos used not only by obvious opponents of the regime, but also by people working with it.⁵ It epitomises the tension between the official celebratory discourse of

3 "Kalimat al-Ra'īs al-Sīsī fī ḥafl Yawm al-Shabāb al-Miṣrī," *Akhbār Māspērō*, 9 Jan. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/Ro9VjKx3f8k?t=192>>; "Sisi: 2016 will be the year of Egyptian youth," *Mada Masr*, 9 Jan. 2016, <<http://madamasr.com/news/sisi-2016-will-be-year-egyptian-youth>>.

4 Mahdy KHALED on his Facebook wall, 9 Jan. 2016, <<http://fb.com/mahde.khaled/posts/10208402604039596>>. The hashtag #احتواء_الشباب ("youth inclusion") exploded satirically on Twitter on 9 Feb. 2016, with the same connotation: inclusion=imprisonment.

5 Examples from the Islamist opposition: "[Gamāl] Sulṭān li-l-Sīsī": Kayfa tusammā 2016 'Ām al-Shabāb wa-l-ālāf minhum dākhl al-sugūn?" *Raṣd*, 16 Jan. 2016, <<http://rassd.com/173607.htm>>; Islām RİDĀ, "Ḥuqūqiyūn yugībūn.. 2016.. hal ḥaqqan kān 'ām al-shabāb?" *al-Miṣriyyūn*, 1 Jan. 2017, <<https://is.gd/BwbiHY>>. From the side working with and within the system, note the long and heartfelt applause that the delegates to the First National Youth Conference in Sharm al-Shaykh on 25 October 2016 spontaneously broke into when Sisi announced that he would establish a committee to look into the cases of young people in pre-trial detention ("Ḥaṣad 2016 ... 'ām al-shabāb al-miṣrī," *ON Live*, 28 Dec. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/85vtRvJf44?t=161>>). That this resulted in a meagre 83 people being released was bitterly noted in an end-of-year review on CBC's evening talk-show *Ḥunā 'l-Āsima* ("Hal

“my sons and daughters,” of “our youth” (*shabābunā*) building Egypt, and between the restless, impatient criticism expressed by many of those who self-consciously identify and act as “*shabāb*.”⁶ This tension was a most striking characteristic of the situation of young people in Egypt in 2016, to such an extent that even pro-regime Egyptian media felt the need to address it as an issue. Only three weeks after announcing the Year of Youth, Sisi himself had to acknowledge, in a live TV interview, that he was out of touch with Egyptian youth. The reporter asked him, somewhat timidly:

[الصحفية: ٦٠ في المئة من هذا المجتمع شباب [...] ما عندهم صبر اللي موجود عند أجيال أكبر. حضرتك [...] تتضيق بعض الشيء بانتقادات الشباب [...]؟
[السياسي: بالنسبة للشباب اسمعي.. أنا عندي اولاد.. وعمري ما ضقت بيهم. فليه هاضيق بأبناء مصر؟ أبناء مصر دا جزء كبير منها.. وخللي بالك بقي.... إحنا اللي مش عارفين.. هه.. أنا باقول لك أهو بوضوح وأنا أرجو إنهم يسمعونني: احنا اللي مش عارفين نتواصل معاهم. احنا اللي مش عارفين نوجد مساحات تفاهم.]

Journalist: 60% of Egyptians are youth. [...] They don't, perhaps, have the same, well, patience that you find in older generations. [...] Does your Excellency, how should I say, get annoyed sometimes by this criticism from the youth?

Sisi: As for the youth... listen: I have children—and I never get annoyed with them. So why should I get annoyed by the children of Egypt? Egypt's children are a big part of her. But let me tell you something: We don't know... ehm... I'm speaking to you openly now, and I hope that they hear me: we don't know how to communicate with them. We don't know how to create avenues of mutual understanding.⁷

2016 kān 'ām al-shabāb al-miṣrī?" *CBC Mubāshir*, 25 Dec. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/3Xa9hrljvQk>>. A few days later, on Dream TV's widely watched *al-ʿAshira Masāʿan*, parliamentarian Rāʿif Timrāz of al-Sharqiyya said the government had not followed up (*lam tafī*) on Sisi's promises when declaring 2016 as the Year of Youth, and that instead of being provided with the means to create a livelihood, “all of Egypt is in jail” (“Barlamānī: al-Ḥukūma munʿazila tamāman ʿan mashākil al-fallāḥ al-miṣrī,” talk show, 28 Dec. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/SguqD8O6XmM?t=106>>).

6 As will become evident in this article, the concept of ‘*shabāb*’ is multi-faceted and not easy to pin down; its precise use during 2016 warrants a separate study into who it is applied to and by whom, in what contexts, and with what values attached. Here, I am less thinking of the irreducible diversity of an age group, but of the multitude of cultural constructions of the concept by a variety of social actors, not only among those who sometimes are stylized as the ‘generation’ of the Jan. 2011 revolution (*gīl al-thawra*) (on the latter, cf. Richard JACQUEMOND, “Un mai 68 arabe? La révolution arabe au prisme du culturel,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 138, 2015: 131-46, <<https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.9247>>).

7 “al-Mudākhala al-kāmila li-l-Raʿīs ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī maʿa ʿAmr Adīb wa-taṣrīḥāt hāmma li-shabāb al-Ūlṭrās,” *al-Qāhira al-Yawm*, 1 Feb. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/vqrWKaz9KRY?t=838>>. The interview contains other characteristic elements of Sisi's views: “This country was about to collapse in 2011; since 30 June 2013, things are slowly getting better as “we” are trying to build it up again. No patriotic official will ever harm as much as the fingernail of an Egyptian. I have great hopes for this country;

Indeed. Although jails were filled to the brim with tens of thousands of young people, Sisi's police zealously continued to clamp down on almost every one daring to raise their voice, or even merely perceived to be a regime critic, whatever their political stance.⁸ Under these circumstances, any meaningful dialogue was rendered impossible, and sarcasm often seems the only way out.⁹ Young Egyptians are honing their skills in this art; and they are—often bravely—facing the consequences. Not only, however, is there a glaring gap between the official discourse of 'inclusion' and the actual treatment of the youth—a gap that vastly popular cartoonist Islām Gāwīsh, whose Facebook page has over 2 million likes, captured in the cartoon shown here, with a whole generation being put behind bars.¹⁰ More



striking perhaps is the regime's utter lack of sensibility for how its own acts, its own clumsiness, its own paranoia in the face of critique, helps to provoke ever more

tomorrow you'll see the progress that God is helping us to achieve':

البلد دي كانت تنهار ٢٠١١ .. عارف ايه يعني تنهار؟ يعني بقايا دولة. [...] احنا بنحاول نعيد بناءها. [وكل جهودنا] لتثبيت الدولة ومنع انهيارها. [...] هو النهاردا ظفر أي مصري — أنا باقول ظفر، مش دم، أو روح — أي مصري: على أي إنسان مسؤول بيعت بلده غالي عليه [...] وكلنا مسؤولين عن دماء أي مصري. [...] أنا عندي أمل كبير قوي — في مين؟ في ربنا! في انه هو هيساعدنا [...] بكرة تشوفوا! تشوفوا العجب، وتتشوفوا التقدم اللي ربنا سبحانه وتعالى هيساعدنا عليه. [...]

8 On the unprecedented expansion of the number of prisons since the military takeover in July 2013, see Aḥmad Gamāl ZIYĀDA and Gamāl 'ĪD, "Hunāka muttasa' li-l-gamī': sugūn Miṣr qabla wa-ba'da thawrat Yanāyir," *al-Shabaka al-'Arabiyya li-Ma'lūmāt Ḥuqūq al-Insān*, 5 Sep. 2016, <<https://anhri.net/?p=173465>>.

9 Nadā RASHWĀN: "al-Sukhriyya ākhir manāfidh al-ta'bīr li-l-shabāb al-mu'ayyid li-'25 Yanāyir' fī Miṣr," *BBC 'Arabī*, 24 Jan. 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2016/01/160123_egypt_uprising_anniversary_humour>.

10 *il-Waraqā* – *Islām Gāwīsh*, certified account, <<http://fb.com/Gawish.Elwarka>>; Islām GAWISH, *il-Waraqā Book: al-ḡuz' al-thānī*, Cairo: Dār Tōyā, 2016: 157; "Abraz 10 rusūmāt tasabbabat fī 'l-qabḍ 'alā 'Islām Gāwīsh' 'dawla takhāf min waraqā' (ṣuwar)," *Infirād*, 31 Jan. 2016, <<https://is.gd/mt97MQ>>; "Gawla fī 'Waraqat' Islām Gāwīsh," *Shabābīk*, 31 Jan. 2016, <<http://shabbek.com/SH-43504>>. The cartoon reads: (Line 1): "Who's here from the generation of the eighties and nineties?"—"All of us."—(Line 2-3): "You need somebody to embrace you! Come here..."



sarcasm.¹¹ Islām Gāwīsh was arrested just as he was in the limelight more than ever, with his second cartoon collection to be presented in print at the 2016 Cairo Book Fair; prosecution then wavered in what he should be accused of—insulting the President and the state? Spreading news on Facebook without government permission? Using

pirated software? In the end, and because scorn was pouring in the minute his arrest became known, Gāwīsh was released under the excuse that it was his employer who had deployed the pirated software...¹²

Similarly ‘hilarious’ was the regime’s reaction to the so-called “condom incident” (*wāqī‘at al-wāqī al-dhakarī*). On the fifth anniversary of the January 25 Revolution—heavy-handedly restyled by the authorities as the Police Day (*‘Īd al-Shurṭa*) that it had been before 2011—two young men braved the security clampdown on Taḥrīr Square to distribute condom balloons to unsuspecting police officers, with the message, “From the youth of Egypt to the police” (*min shabāb Maṣr li-l-shurṭa*).¹³ This can be interpreted not only as a note to the police—as in, ‘We don’t want you to produce more of your kind’—but also as a satirical reaction to the omnipresent slogan, *Taḥyā Maṣr* (“Long live Egypt”) that the regime had appropriated for itself. The video that the two young men produced went viral, receiving close to 2 million hits within 48 hours, and soon, images of ‘security condoms’ appeared on Facebook.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the airwaves were filled with endless talk-shows regurgitating ‘public outcry’ over such indecency.¹⁵ Eventually, the interior ministry refrained from arresting the culprits (who were famous due to their involvement in popular

- 11 The cartoon by Ahmed OKASHA shown here reads: “HEEELLP! An enemy of the state... Regime critic... Rejects any change... Contempt of religion... Brotherhood... [Running:] The dignity of the state...” (“Islām Gāwīsh... ‘il-Waraqā’ ṣana‘at baṭal ‘yā dawla bitkhāf min qalam,” *al-Taḥrīr*, 31 Jan. 2016, <<http://is.gd/xIJZR3>>). For further cartoons, see Sūzān ‘ABD AL-GHANĪ: “Rassāmū ‘l-kārikātēr yataḍāmanūn ma‘a Islām Gāwīsh bi-10 rusūmāt: sa-taḍall il-Waraqā bāqīya,” *al-Bidāya*, 1 Feb. 2016, <<http://albedaiha.com/news/2016/02/01/106057>>; “Caricaturistas egipcios se solidarizan con su compañero detenido, Islam Gawish,” *Fundación Al Fanar*, 1 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.fundacionalfanar.com/caricaturistas-egipcios-se-solidarizan-con-su-companero-detenido-islam-gawish>>.
- 12 “Cartoonist Islam Gawish arrested for anti-gov’t comics,” *Mada Masr*, 31 Jan. 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/01/31/news/culture/cartoonist-islam-gawish-arrested-for-anti-govt-comics>>; Sāmī ‘ABD AL-RĀDĪ: “‘Āgil | Mufāga’a... ikhlā’ sabīl Islām Gāwīsh dūna tawgīh ayy ittihāmāt nihā’iyyan,” *al-Waṭan*, 1 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/950155>>.
- 13 The video was published by Shady H. ABUZĀID on his Facebook wall on the evening of 25 Jan. 2015 (<<http://fb.com/shady.h.abuzaid/videos/10156459593545402>>); two days later, it had 1.9 million views there. Numerous copies were also republished on other sites.
- 14 E.g. Sanaa SEIF, 26 Jan. 2016, <<http://fb.com/photo.php?fbid=10153951222971340>>; Ammar ABO BAKR, 26 Jan. 2016, <<http://fb.com/photo.php?fbid=10153913219169645>> and <<http://fb.com/photo.php?fbid=10153913332684645>>.
- 15 Muḥammad ‘ABD AL-RĀZIQ: “Shāhid: Wāqī‘at ‘al-Wāqī ‘l-dhakarī’ tuthīr al-gadal bayn al-i‘lāmiyyīn,” *Bawwābat al-Wafd*, 26 Jan. 2016, <<http://is.gd/SfMzjp>>.

TV series¹⁶), declaring instead: “We left them for society to deal with” (lit., to put them on trial: *taraknāhum kay yuhākimahum al-mugtama*). “What’s that?,” the comedian was quick to react;

تخريص ده ولا اسمه ايه؟ ايوة يعني برضك مش فاهم يحاكمنا ازاي يعني؟ يعني تقولوا علينا في الاعلام
"جواسيس لأمريكا واسرائيل وماسونيين وعملاء للخارج وبلطجية" وفي الاخر تقول "تركناهم كي
يحاكمهم المجتمع" ولا حضرتك ناوي تبعث مخبرين بليس مدني كالعادة وتأذينا وتقول "ده المجتمع"

“Incitement to violence? [...] So your media label us ‘US-Israeli spies’ and ‘Masonics’ and ‘foreign agents’ and ‘thugs’—and after all that you say, ‘we left them to be dealt with by society’? Or does your excellency plan to send over some plain-clothes informants as usual to abuse us and then say, ‘that was society’?”¹⁷

Generation Stuck

Evidently, when Sisi complained that avenues of understanding were lacking, he merely recognized what many young Egyptians were feeling: that there was a wall between the regime on one side, and ‘the youth’ on the other. “We” face “them;” “they” cause problems for “us”: this rhetoric can be found on both sides.¹⁸ While Sisi wondered why so many young people were not amenable to his paternal exhortations, the young, on the other side, were exasperated over being ‘stuck’. As pop star Ḥamza Namira reacted to the arrest of Islām Gāwīsh:

طب المطلوب مننا ايه ك شباب يعني؟ ما نضحكش؟ ما نرسمش؟ ما نغنيش؟ ما نفكرش؟ ما نلحلمش؟
شيينا بدري ونفسنا اتسدت عن الحياة كلها وبرضه مش عاجب

So what do you expect of us, the young? Should we stop laughing, painting, singing, thinking, dreaming? We’ve turned grey before time; we’re stuck with no taste left for life; and still you’re not pleased.¹⁹

An Egyptian activist and blogger I interviewed in Cairo in January 2016 described the situation in similar words. He did, however, indicate that below the political stagnation, this generation was seeking a way out:

16 Shādī Ḥasan Abū Zayd was correspondent to the comedy show “Abla Fāhītā”; Aḥmad Mālik is a successful TV actor.

17 Shady H. ABUZAIID [*sic*] on his Facebook wall, 9 Feb. 2016, <<http://fb.com/shady.h.abuzaid/posts/10156508213150402>>.

18 Examples can be seen in most quotations in this article, beginning with Sisi’s TV interview referred to in footnote 7 above.

19 Hamza NAMIRA’s official Twitter account, 31 Jan. 2016, <<http://twitter.com/hamzanamira/status/693820451357880321>>. On Namira, see further below, p. 335.

We're stuck, he said as his hands moved to illustrate a scene of exuberant energy blocked and stuck. We're stuck—but Cairo has never been as interesting as now. I've lived here for over a decade, and Cairo has never been as interesting as now. There's so much going on, in so many ways, there are so many initiatives, cultural initiatives, social initiatives, neighbourhood projects, moves against gentrification, art cinema clubs where people are watching and debating interesting movies...²⁰ After they took from us the street, blocked us from politics, we went home, but we didn't just go home and sit there; many of us went into another field, work in culture and so on. In a way, it was a good thing that they took the street from us, since we were too engaged in the hot day-to-day fights; we were in a way naïve, many people really believed that we just had to remove Mubarak and everything would be fine. I heard people chanting, 'Yes! Now we can marry!' (*ha-nitgawwiz ha-nitgawwiz!*) on Feb. 11 [2011], can you imagine? They really believed that it was so easy! So therefore there's a good side to that they took the street from us. We forgot that revolutions take time. All revolutions do. [...] Now we're in a phase where there's all this activity on the cultural and the social plan, and that is revolutionary.

But we still are stuck. This generation (*gīl*) is stuck. I'm not optimistic; I'm just observing. And I'm challenging the notion that nothing is happening [after the crackdown following the army takeover in June 2013]. The sense of defeat is misleading. Yes, the defeat was heavy, and yes, there's plenty of depression (*ikti'āb*). But this impression is misleading, given the important dynamics in the cultural and social fields that are noticeable below the political stagnation [and, one might add, the economic crises that increasingly made headlines over the second part of the year].²¹

The same view was offered a few months later by well-known cartoonist Andeel:

A lot of Egyptian culture producers nowadays have zero trust or hope in the government's plans for cultural production, which means more innovative ideas, solutions and possibilities for newer and more liberated arts. This is what has to happen if the government continues making it impossible for people to gather in the streets or public places, or even have access to decent cultural services.

Initiatives like these [independent cultural projects] can grow a generation that believes in freedom and the *right to think and choose* and know

20 For an end-of-year review of some of these alternative cultural undertakings, see "Culture A-Z: Only a Few Shining Moments Punctuated the Gloom in Egypt's Arts this Year," *Mada Masr*, 21 Dec. 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/12/21/feature/culture/a-sad-dangerous-and-somewhat-dull-year-for-arts-in-egypt>>. For an example of a socioeconomic initiative aiming to improve Egyptians' diet and to re-establish local control over seeds, see Dina HUSSEIN, "On the question of food," *Mada Masr*, 11 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/04/11/feature/society/on-the-question-of-food>>.

21 Interview with an Egyptian activist and blogger in his thirties, Cairo, February 2016; my translation.

about the world a lot more than us and our parents. So many years from now, an [extra-ordinary] event like yesterday's [...] can become a usual thing.²²

“The main thing” Andeel identified in these micro-level cultural initiatives “is a sense of independence. These are people who seem to have visions for themselves.” This sense of independence, of claiming the right to think and plan and act “myself” may be most elaborately celebrated in a few relatively privileged, alternative cultural spaces. My impressions from observing Egyptian social media, and the exponential growth of public uttering on social media itself, however, suggest that this wish to express ‘myself’ resonates on a wider scale.

Listen to me! ME!!

Among the most conspicuous attitudes that young Egyptians display on social media is the insistence to be heard, the claim that *Me* and *My Voice* have a right to be uttered and heard, in spite of and right in the face of the “old men” who “live in the past but want to control the present.”²³ This attitude finds its programmatic expression in the song *Ismaʿnī* (“Listen to me!”) that became the most popular hit among Egyptian youth in 2015. It was performed by superstar Ḥamza Namira, the same singer whose frustration over the young generation being ‘stuck’ we have just noted.²⁴ Ḥamza Namira had issued a number of songs that became emblematic for the mood of Egyptian youth over the past few years. His first big hit, back in 2009, was *Iḥlam maʿāyā* where the refrain was “*iḥlam maʿāyā... bi-bukra gāy / wi-law ma-gāsh... iḥnā nʿgīboh bʿnafsinā*” (“Dream with me / of a tomorrow that’s coming / and if it doesn’t come / we’ll bring it on ourselves!”). On the eve of the 25 January 2011 demonstrations, this was the song that was put on the revolutionary Facebook page *Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd* to underscore the call to realize a common dream.²⁵ When the revolution came

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- 22 ANDEEL, “Bread, Salt, and Film,” *MadaMasr*, 16 May 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/05/16/feature/culture/bread-salt-and-film>> (emphasis mine).
- 23 CAIROKEE: “Akher Oghney” (see below, footnote 34). For examples from the Sudan for this demand to be heard, see Albrecht HOFHEINZ, “Broken Walls: Challenges to Patriarchal Authority in the Eyes of Sudanese Social Media Actors,” forthcoming in *Die Welt des Islams*, 2017.
- 24 Ḥamza NAMIRA, “Ismaʿnī,” from the 2014 album *Ismaʿnī*; the official video reached over 6.8 million views on YouTube by June 2016, <<http://youtu.be/38gWv8vozt4>>; cf. Ayman AL-ŞAYYĀD, “Walākinnahu.. «Ām al-Shabāb» !,” *al-Shurūq*, 7 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=06022016&id=ef9bdbe9-66da-42f8-a797-fcb10f86e3d5>>).
- 25 “ElShaheed – *Iḥlam Maʿāyā*,” *Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd*, 25 Jan. 2011, <<http://fb.com/ElShaheed/posts/183815268315700>>. Wāʿil Ghunaym, the admin of this page, used the song repeatedly—first on 2 Sep. 2010—to call Egyptians to “dream of a better tomorrow that we would share in making” (Wael GHONIM, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power*, London: Fourth Estate, 2012: 174; <<http://fb.com/ElShaheed/posts/150668221629621>>; see also AbdElRahman HUSSIEN, “Dream With Me (Ehlam Ma'aya) - 25 Jan Revolution,” *YouTube*, 5 Feb. 2011, <<http://youtu.be/zHZbZm69PCE>>; Ibrahim ELMASRY, “Ḥamza Namira | al-Laḥazāt al-ūlā li-ʿntilāq al-thawra min masjid Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd,” *YouTube*, 16 March 2011, <<http://youtu.be/ltzXrHPRChY>>; Sean FOLEY, “The Artist of the Revolution: Hamza Namira, the Arab Spring, and the Dream of a Free Egypt,” *Middle East Institute*, 10 Apr. 2012, <<http://www.mei.edu/content/artist-revolution-hamza-namira-arab-spring-and-dream-free-egypt#edn4>>.

under siege in summer 2011, Ḥamza Namira encouraged his fellow human beings, his fellow *Insān*, to *Ḥāṣir ḥiṣāarak*, “Besiege what besieges you / Tomorrow you’ll see victory / you’ll fill the heart of darkness with light / as long as your heart beats on.”²⁶ After Sisi’s takeover in June 2013, Ḥamza Namira dared to call this a “coup,” and the regime banned his songs from state radio.²⁷ Immediately after this move to silence Namira’s voice, “Listen to me!” was released; by June 2016, it approached 7 million views on YouTube:

حياتي عمرها ما كانت باختيار	My life has never been one of my own choosing,
غضب عني لقتيتك بتاخذ قراري	You’re the one who’s been forcing me and making my decisions for me.
بتعاملني كأني مجرد خيال	You treat me like I’m just a shadow,
وإن جيلنا ده كله شوية عيال	Like me and my whole generation are just kids.
لا.. احنا ملينا السكوت	No! We’re fed up of staying silent,
لا.. خلاص بقولها بأعلى صوت	No! I’m going to say this at the top of my lungs:
اسمعي..	<i>Listen to me!</i>
انت اللي بتضيعيني.. للماضي بترجعني	<i>You’re the one making me lose everything, taking me back to the past</i>
وعايز تحبسني فيه	<i>and wanting to imprison me in it.</i>
أحلامي.. انت اللي قضيت عليها..	<i>You’re the one who’s destroying my dreams, when you took control of</i>
لما اتحكمت فيها	<i>them.</i>
طب فاضل ليا إيه	<i>So what’s left for me?</i>
احنا جيل اللي شايب وهو شباب	We’re the generation that’s become grey-haired in their youth.
كل حلم بألم كل خطوة بعذاب	Every dream brings more pain, and every footstep more agony.
شيلنا هم الحياة دوقنا مر السنين	We’ve carried the burden of life and tasted its bitterness for many years,
لأ وعايزيننا برضه نعيش مذلولين	And you still want us to live in humiliation
لا.. كلمة واحدة هقولها ليك	No! In one word I say to you:
لا.. مش هبقى نسخة من ماضيك	No! I will not be a clone of your past!
اسمعي.. [..]	<i>Listen to me! [...refrain]</i>
ليه أبقى زيك تمام..	Why should I be a carbon copy of you,
أهو عايش والسلام	just barely alive?
وتتوهني الحياة	And become lost in this life.

26 Ḥamza NAMIRA, “Ḥāṣir ḥiṣāarak,” on Hamza Namira Official, “Albūm Insān,” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqeyfgGgoMdqjOJOEUV1Ax9THS_IC7oR>; my translation. “Ḥāṣir ḥiṣāarak” may be a phrase loaned from Maḥmūd Darwish’s *Madīḥ al-zill al-‘ālī: qaṣīda taṣjīliyya* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Awda, 1983).

27 Dīnā ‘ABD AL-KHĀLIQ: “Ra’īs al-idhā’a al-miṣriyya ba’dā man’ aghānī Ḥamza Namira: yarā anna ‘30 Yūniyū’ inqilāb,” *al-Waṭan*, 19 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/600604>>.

لا.. أنا هختار الطريق.. وهعانداكل شيء No, I will choose my own way, and I will stubbornly resist
ودي أيامي أنا.. This is my time to shine!²⁸

Authority, predictably, is taken aback by this popular claim that ‘My Voice’ be heard, and scrambles to maintain control, in no equivocal terms. “Don’t listen to anybody’s words but me,” Sisi thundered when launching his government’s strategic “Egypt Vision 2030” on 24 February. Speaking in front of a backdrop reading “2016—the Year of Egyptian Youth,” his body language and facial expression played up to his words in betraying a wounded patriarchal attitude on the defense:²⁹

شوفوا: أنا عارف مصر زي ما أنا شايفكم كلكم قدامي كده وعارف علاجها برضو زي ما أنا شايفكم قدامي كده وأنا بقول الكلام ده لكل اللي بيسمعني في مصر: لو سمحتم، متسمعوش كلام حد غيري! [تصفيق ٥ ث] ... احنا ... أنا بتكلم بمنتهى الجدية... متسمعوش كلام حد غيري! أنا راجل لا بكذب ولا بلف وأدور ولا ليا مصلحة غير بلدي! بلدي بس! [تصفيق ٥ ث] ومش بس ليا مصلحة غيرها [sic].. وفاهم أنا بقول ايه! فاهم أنا بقول ايه. البرنامج اللي احنا عاملينه ده كان الهدف منه إن احنا لأول مرة نعزف شبابنا قضية مصر الحقيقية من خلال برنامج مدته ٨ شهور.. بنكتمل دراساته بنكتمل وعيه بنكتمل معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقطع مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسم بكده. خلي بالكم! [تصفيق ٤ ث] خلي بالكوا! أنا مش حاسم بكده! محدش يفكر إن طولة بالي وخلقي الحسن معناه إن البلد دي تقع. قَسَمًا بالله: اللي حيقرب لها لأشيله من فوق وش الأرض! [تصفيق ١٧ ث] أنا بقول لكم كلكم، لكل مصري بيسمعني.. انتوا فاكرين الحكاية ايه؟.. انتوا عايزين ت.. انتوا.. مين؟ انتوا مين؟.. هه!.. لا!.. دول ٩٠ مليون! وأنا مسؤول قدام ربنا اننا أقف قدامه يوم القيامة أقول له: أنا خلّيت بالي منهم. عايزين تخلوا بالكم منهم: معايا؟ أهلا؛ مش عايزين: لو سمحتو، اسكتوا! [تصفيق ١٠ ث] اسكتوا!

Look: I know Egypt, as intimately as I can see all of you before me here, and I also know the remedy for her [sc. Egypt], as well as I can see you before me here. And I say this to everyone listening to me in Egypt: If you please, do not listen to anybody’s words but mine! [5 sec. applause] We... [goes back to emphasize:] I’m utterly serious: don’t listen to anybody’s words but

28 Lyrics and translation as per the subtitles in the official video (see footnote 24); refrain highlighted.

29 Abdelfattah ELSISI, “Kalimat al-raʿīs ‘Abd al-Fattāh al-Sīsī khilāl muʿtamar istrāṭīgiyyat Miṣr li-l-tanmiya | Ruʿyat #Miṣr_2030,” *YouTube*, 24 Feb. 2016, <<http://youtu.be/iht9hEkiAE?t=677>>; the passage translated here can be watched in better quality at the extract posted by Mehwar TV Channel, “al-Sīsī: Ma-tismaʿūsh kalām ḥadd ghērī anā lā akdīb wa-lā aliff wa-ʿadūr ... anā ma-līsh maṣlaḥa ghēr baladī,” *YouTube*, 24 Feb. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/m1LFp5sbHq8>>. See also ?Sh.?, “Biʿl-vīdēō: kalimat al-Sīsī fī ḥafl tadshīn ‘Miṣr 2030’ (naṣṣ kāmil),” *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*, 24 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/898741>>; “Sisi: Don’t listen to anyone but me,” *Mada Masr*, 24 Feb. 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/news/sisi-dont-listen-anyone-me>>. For the “Egypt Vision 2030,” see its official website, <<http://sdsegypt2030.com>> (which has not been updated further between its launch in February 2016 and the end of the year).

mine! I'm a man of my words; I don't waver; and I have no other interest in mind than my country. My country alone! [5 sec. applause] And not only an interest other than her [sic]—I also have the right understanding of what I'm saying. The right understanding of what I'm saying! This programme that we are putting in place here was designed to let our young people (*shabābnā*), for the first time, know what Egypt's true cause is, through an 8-month programme. We're going to finalise the necessary studies and get a good grip on it... [Sisi pauses, and his focus visibly shifts] ... but are we going to rip Egypt to pieces or what? I shall not tolerate this! Watch out! [4 sec. applause] Watch out! I shall not tolerate this! [Sisi's voice and face take on an increasingly stern expression] No-one should think that my patience and my good nature mean that this country can fall. I swear to God: anyone who tries to trespass on her, I'll erase him from the face of the earth! [17 sec. applause] I'm telling this to all of you, to every Egyptian listening to me... what do you think this is all about!? Do you want to... do you... Who are you anyhow? Who are you? ... Ha! ... No! ... Here's 90 million! [He raises his fist] And I am responsible before Our Lord in that I'll stand before Him on Judgment Day to tell Him: 'I took care of them' [makes a gesture of an enclosure]. If you want to take care of them, with me: welcome! If you don't, well, then please: shut up! [makes a decisive cut-off gesture]³⁰

The president positions himself as the omniscient leader who alone knows and can tell his countrymen how to run Egypt; an expert doctor who alone knows how to remedy what's wrong with her. To listen to anybody else would make the country fall. The young are ignorant; they have never before been told what the country needs; now finally, a wise and strong leader comes to the rescue. But—and it is at this point that Sisi's mood visibly darkens—a few nobodies are trying to disrupt this work and ruin the country. This cannot be tolerated. Who are they anyhow to dare to speak up? They must be silenced. They will be eradicated. Ferociously. This is the righteous leader's duty, in fulfilment of his ultimate responsibility before God to take care of his flock.

Egyptians, in the president's vision, fall into two categories. Either they belong to the people—all the 90 million—who stand behind their leader and follow his word. Or else, they have no right to speak. They have no right to exist.³¹

30 The translation and transcription here follow the text as recorded on the video; *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*'s transcription is 'smoothed' a little, replacing a few colloquial expressions with Modern Standard Arabic, and omitting the passage "Who are you anyhow? Who are you? ...Ha! ...No! ...Here's 90 million!"

31 Sisi reproduces here a familiar populist pattern, also expressed by Donald Trump in a campaign speech: "The only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything" ("Full Event: Donald Trump Holds MASSIVE Rally in Eugene, OR (5-6-16)," *Right Side Broadcasting*, 6 May 2016, <<https://youtu.be/ql7hTkZOjKY?t=2529>>). Cf., i.a., Jan-Werner MÜLLER, "Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy," *The Guardian*, 2 Sep. 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>>.

Sisi cares for Egypt. Sisi leads Egypt. Sisi is Egypt. Nothing else can be true. Anyone who disagrees will be mercilessly crushed by the mighty power of the President and His People.

Defiant hope; no illusions, but ire and persistence

It is no wonder that such an attitude makes it difficult to find “avenues of mutual understanding.” What is more striking is that many of the ‘nobodies’ threatened in no vague terms by Egypt’s strongman continue to raise their voice, right in the face of such threats. Two weeks after Sisi spit out his “silence!” (*uskuti*) command, the band Cairokee defiantly retorted: we are “voice when they want everyone to keep silent.” Cairokee’s “Voice of freedom” (“*Šōt il-ḥurriyya*”) had been one of the emblematic songs of the 2011 revolution;³² on 12 March 2016, they released their “*Ākhir ughniyya*,” their “Last song,” which quickly became a super-hit with over 1.2 million views on YouTube during the first three weeks alone.

“As long as there’s fear, we can’t be free,” is their starting point: *lā ḥurriyya ma’ al-khawf*. They have no illusions about the state of the nation. Fear is back in force; fear dominates. But as obstinately as the creator of the condom prank,³³ the group repeats: “Even if this is my last song, I’ll go on to sing for freedom!” The song is worth reading and translating in full; for—as one of the top comments on YouTube put it—“this is not a song, but a revolutionary communiqué speaking for all our generation” (*dī mish ughniyya, dī [...] bayān ṣawrī bi-’ism gīlnā kulluh*):³⁴

اسمع مني المفيد	Let me tell you something useful:
عاهات كثير وتقالييد	[there are] plenty of defects and traditions;
المجتمع اجتمع ضد التجديد	society is united against change;

32 CAIROKEE, “Sout Al Horeya [...],” *YouTube*, 10 Feb. 2011, <http://youtu.be/Fgw_zfLLvh8>.

33 Shady H. ABUZAID on his Facebook wall, 26 Jan. 2016, <<http://fb.com/shady.h.abuzaid/posts/10156462830755402>>:

ايه ؟ قفشتوا ليه ؟ انا بجزر [...] ...
 في ذكرى 25 يناير 2016 بقي في تواجد أمني رهيب في الشوارع مع تهديدات ووعديات لمن ينزل يتظاهر...محدث فعلا نزل وكله مقهور وكله استوعب اننا مش عارفين ننسى...طيب خلاص...انتو فعلا معاكم سلاح ومعاكم السلطة والقانون...بس كل اسلحتكم ديه احنا هنعمل منها نكت , كوميكس او فيديو صغير وكدة كدة انتو تقادرو تحظفوننا من بيوتنا وتقتلوننا في عز الظهر...بس مش هتقدروا تنكروا وجودنا ولا هتقدروا تنكروا انكم نكتة...بس نكتة سخيفة.
 [...] انا خايف ويزداد خوف يوم عن الثاني [...]؛ ممكن اكون كنت بخاف زمان...بس دلوقتي انا مرعوب...بس هفضل بعمل اللي في دماغني حتى وانا مرعوب
 [...] حاسس ان ايامي معدودة برة القفص...ولما ادخله مش هخرج منه قريب بس لو ديه النهاية خلوني اقولكم اني مبسوط بأصدقائي الكثير اللي دوما كانوا بيتقفوا جبي [...] شكرا لمساندة كل واحد...اشوفكم في عالم اخر يا احبائي نكون فيه احرارا نضحك دون أن نُسجن .

34 Cairokee: “Akher Oghneya,” *CairokeeOfficial*, 12 March 2016, <<http://youtu.be/TZu2euuj2GE>>. The comment is by Mohamed Hagag, <<https://is.gd/3TsX7h>>. The Arabic text is taken from the official YouTube site; the translation is mine, adapted from the official subtitles.

فكر الناس تعبنا عيان ومريض ابحث معايا و دور عالمستفيد	the way people think is sick, tired, and weak; come on, let's look together for the one who's benefitting from this!
المستفيد هو المتحكم فيك اللي ممشيك جنب الحيط بيحبيك ويوديك سيطر عليك حابسينك جوه نفوخك قضبان السجن خوفك بتخاف تفكر بحرية لحد يشوفك كلامي مش ضد النظام فقط كلامي ضد العبيد كمان لو ميت الف نظام سقط هنفضل برضه في نفس المكان	The one who's benefitting is the one who controls you, who's moving you around, dictating you where to go, subjugating you. They've imprisoned you inside your own mind, behind the bars of your own fear. You're afraid to think freely 'cause someone might catch you. I speak out not only against the system, I speak out against the slave mentality [lit. 'the slaves'] [since otherwise,] even if the system collapses a thousand times, we'd still be stuck in the same place.
في حاجات وتساؤلات وعادات بقت عاهات وتقاليد محتاجة تجديد والتاريخ عمال يعيد	There are things, problems, there are traditions that turned into defects, there are habits that need to be changed! But history is repeating itself...
في حرب ضد الحرية والحرية دائما ممنوعة كل العقول الرجعية كلمتهم هي المسموعة اتربينا على ان الحيطان ليها ودان طب انزل بالمزيكا سمعهم بالفم المليان لو دي اخر اغنيه ليا هنفضل أغني عن الحرية قولوا معايا بصوت عالي حرية	There's a war against freedom, freedom's always forbidden. All these retrograde minds, they are the ones being listened to. We've been raised to always think that the walls have ears. Alright, turn this music down, I want them to hear my full voice: If this is my last song, I'll be singing about freedom. Come on, sing along loudly: "Freedom!"
حرية يعني تغير يعني حرية في التفكير والتعبير حرية يعني اختيارك مش اختيار الغير صراع اجيال عالمكشوف أصبح عيني عينك عاوزينك تمشي علي خط سيرهم مش خط سيرك الكبير عاوز يعيش في الماضي وعالحاضر يسيطر	Freedom means change. It means freedom of thought and expression. Freedom means your choice, not someone else's. It's a generational conflict, it's so obvious, and we all know it. They want you to walk their path and not yours The old man wants to live in the past and control the present;

يفكرون بياعلان اسكنشايزر	these guys remind me of the “Skenshizer” commercial. ³⁵
مهما اتكلم صوتي مش مسموع	No matter what I say, they never listen to me
كلامي دائما بالنسبة لهم فارغ وممنوع	to them all my words are rubbish and must be banned.
سبني احلم حلم جديد وخارج عن المألوف	Let me have a new dream, an extra-ordinary one:
مش عاوز امشي في قطع زي الخروف	I don’t want to be walking with a herd of sheep!
بلدنا شابه يعني اغلبها من الشباب	Our country is young, its majority are youth;
قتلتوا فيه الولاء وقفلتوا في وشه الابواب	you killed their loyalty, you closed every door in their face.
عندنا احلام كتير اديني فرصه اسوق	We have so many dreams, give me a chance to drive;
انا كل هديني اشوف بلادي فوق	all I want is see my country rising.
رقم سبعة ممكن يقمي تمانيه	The number 7 [٧, in Arabic] can become an 8 [٨]
لو بصيت عليه م الناحية الثانية	if you look at it from the other side.
لو دي اخر اغنيه ليا	If this is my last song,
هفضل أغني عن الحرية	I’ll be singing about freedom.
قولوا معايا بصوت عالي	Come on, sing along loudly:
حرية	“Freedom!”
قال ايه يقولوا عليا خايف	Guess what—they say I’m afraid?!
اركن ياض على جنب و حط احمر شفايف	Get out of the way, put on some lipstick ³⁶ :->
عملت ثورة جوايه ولسه مستمره	I made a revolution inside me and it continues;
الحلم عايش معايا كلمتي لسه حرة	the dream lives on in me, and my voice is still free.
غنيت في كل العهود وكنت الصوت ساعة ما	In every age I’ve been singing; I’ve been voice when they wanted
يجبوا الدنيا سكوت	everyone to keep silent.
الحرية يعني تضحيه و اختبار وانا قد المسئولية	Freedom means sacrifice; it’s a real test, but I’m up to the chal-
وللاخر هكمل المشوار	lenge and I’ll continue until we’ve achieved our goal.
انا مش لوحدي انا فكره زي البزرة هتدفنوها	I’m not alone, I’m an idea, like a seed, if you bury it, it’ll bear
هتطرح بكره	fruit tomorrow.

35 This refers to a promotion video for Nestlé Crunch screened in Ramadan 2015 that plays on the generation gap and that gained great popularity in Egypt. It contrasts Crunch as a cool chocolate bar for the young with ‘Skenshizer,’ an (imaginary) product old men are nostalgically rattling on about. See “Kayfa sāhamat ‘al-social media’ fī nagāḥ ḥamlat ‘iSkenshizer’?,” *DōtMasr*, 24 June 2015, <<https://is.gd/7e3mgo>>. The video itself can be watched at <<http://youtu.be/37NrOj2NCC4>>.

36 Cairokee were criticised for the male chauvinist tone of this line; they were quick to apologise, saying that it was an expression common in the street (*lughat shāri*), but that it was wrong to use it (May AHMAD, “Vidēo: Aḥad a’ḍā’ ‘Cāirokee’ ya’tadhir ‘an ‘ḥuṭṭ aḥmar shafāyif’ fī ughniyyatihim al-akhīra: mumkin titfihim taqlīl min il-mar’a... āsif,” *al-Bidāya*, 13 March 2016, <<http://albedaiha.com/news/2016/03/13/108856>>).

عمرى ما هبيع احلامنا والشهيد اللي سبقنا	Our dreams I'll never sell, nor the martyrs who fell;
خدني على سجنك خليني اشوف شبابنا	take me to your jail so I can see our youth;
الرجالة بحق في السجون ساكنه	real men today live in jail.
لو دي اخر اغنيه ليا	If this is my last song,
هفضل أغنى عن الحرية	I'll be singing about freedom.
قولوا معايا بصوت عالي	Come on, sing along loudly:
حرية	"Freedom!"

Where Sisi poses as the only legitimate voice of Egypt, Cairokee perform as the persistent voice of the young generation. Where Sisi portrays this generation as in need of his expert guidance, they insist that the old man's prescriptions are perpetuating a sick society of sheep subjugated by fear. Imprisoned in their own slave mentality, Sisi's followers are unable to see that this system only serves the dictator in power and his cronies. It is this mindset that needs to change; otherwise, no regime change can bring real progress. Therefore, the energy and enthusiasm of the young generation needs to be set free. Where Sisi imagines that 90 million are standing behind him, in reality, the majority of Egyptians are young people who feel that all doors have been shut in their face. Like Sisi, the young want their country to flourish; but it can only do so if the doors are opened, if freedom and self-responsibility replace sheepish fear and submissiveness. Sisi may threaten to bury the naysayers underground; but the seed of free minds lives on in many a heart, and is bound to bear fruit one day.

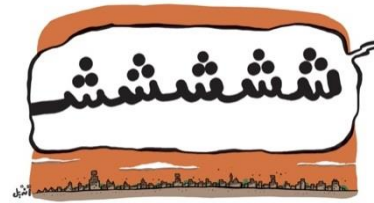
Cairokee filmed their video in selfie style; as commentators on YouTube noted, in the manner of *Aṭfāl Shawāri'* ("Street Children"), a group of six young men who began to release a series of short satirical videos on Facebook in January 2016, all but a few filmed at night in one or other of Cairo's streets, using only their voice and a mobile phone. Visually already, they represent culture from underground, springing up quickly and ready to run if necessary; relying only on themselves after all else has been taken from them. Their first video, "*Barā'im al-Īmān*" ("Buds of Faith") poked fun at the old-fashioned and stagnant performance of religion on the state-run broadcast media.³⁷ The title itself is a satirical comment contrasting the young freshness of the 'buds' promised to the audience with the old-fashioned and sapless reality of the actual performance that "has not changed in five centuries," as one commentator on YouTube put it, and that therefore has lost all attraction for the young generation. The five-minute video strings together commonly used invocations and other religious phrases without making any textual changes, but using vocal exaggeration and facial expression to ridicule the way in which these texts are used by the state's religious institutions. *Aṭfāl Shawāri'* dared to tread treacherous ground here; their mocking of bigotry was denounced as blasphemy by many, as a mocking of religion itself. Undeterred, they continued to caricature the pervasive discourse of social conformism,

37 *Aṭfāl Shawāri'*, "al-Vīdēō al-awwal: Barā'im al-Īmān," *YouTube*, 7 Jan. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/qo2IS1D2ID8>>.

hypocrisy, and media crookedness. Increasingly, they broached political issues as well.³⁸ In May, this proved too much for the regime. They were rounded up and put in custody after they had mocked the mentality of “those who worship the boots of the military” (*‘abadat al-biyāda*); branded the police as thugs (*il-dākhliyya baltaḡiyya*); called on Sisi to show some self-respect and leave (*irḡal*—the emblematic slogan raised against Mubārak in 2011); and affirmed that “the revolution continues”.³⁹ The networked youth reacted by multiplying selfie shots under the hashtag *#كاميرا_التلفون_تتهزك* (“the phone camera makes you tremble?”), a theme taken up by Islām Gāwīsh in a cartoon titled, “No video, no photo, no drawing will make tremble anyone but the feeble and weak.”⁴⁰

Hushing which voice?

Truth be told, not everyone is as combative as the examples mentioned here; there are those who after a long fight feel exhausted and fed-up and just want to get out.⁴¹ And the voice of Sisi continues to loom large—though it is difficult to assess just how many Egyptians really do believe every word he says. But as visible on social media, it is clear that the regime is



- 38 “[L]eurs délires assez potaches ont rencontré de plus en plus de succès, tandis que leurs productions s’éloignaient peu à peu des thématiques *a priori* « culturelles » pour aborder des sujets de plus en plus « politiques »” (Yves GONZALEZ-QUIJANO, “La rue interdite à ses enfants : l’Égypte, de moins en moins drôle...,” *Culture et politique arabes*, 31 May 2016, <<http://cpa.hypotheses.org/5956>>).
- 39 Aṭfāl Shawāri’, “‘Abadat al-biyāda,” *YouTube*, 2 May 2016. In September 2016, the four members of the group still in custody (the youngest one had been released on bail immediately, while the police never got hold of the sixth member) were released with conditions; all six are still awaiting possible trial on charges including the “subversion of the fundamental principles forming the basis of the state” (“Miṣr: al-Ifrāḡ ‘an ‘anāṣir ‘Aṭfāl Shawāri’ alladhīna da‘aw al-Sīsī ‘li-l-istiḡāla,” *France 24*, 13 Sep. 2016, <<https://is.gd/FeGylm>>; Ṭāriq NAGM AL-DĪN, “Miṣr: Ikhlā’ sabīl a’ḡā’ firqat ‘Aṭfāl Shawāri’,” *al-‘Arabī al-Jadīd*, 7 Sep. 2016, <<https://is.gd/AKOOHf>>).
- 40 Islam GAWISH, “Wa’llāhi wa-lā vidēō wa-lā šūra wa-lā rasma bit’hizz illā al-da’if al-‘āḡiz,” *Facebook*, 11 May 2016, <<http://fb.com/photo.php?fbid=1024323607636148>>.
- 41 Witness prominent activist ‘Alā’ ‘ABD AL-FATTĀḤ’s letter from prison at the fifth anniversary of the revolution: “The only words I can write are about losing my words. [...] I have nothing to say: no hopes, no dreams, no fears, no warnings, no insights; nothing, absolutely nothing” (“I was terribly wrong’ – writers look back at the Arab spring five years on,” *The Guardian*, 23 January 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back>>. A similar attitude was also expressed by poet Aḡmad SALĀMA (b. 1985) when I interviewed him in Cairo in January 2016 (cf. his poetry collection *Kāfir bi-ḡubb bilādī*, Ṭanṭā: Ṭanṭā Book House, 2013). At the end of the year, a young social media analyst and former (2011) revolutionary street fighter wrote in a public post, “*Ummiytī al-waḡīda fī 2017 inn’anā u-Maṣr nsīb ba’d*” (“my only wish for 2017 is that Egypt and I part ways”) (Abd El Rahman NADY on his Facebook wall, 31 Dec. 2016, <<http://fb.com/IbNady/posts/1450692274963499>>).



not succeeding in suppressing creative dissent. Cartoonist Andeel had summed up the year following the military takeover by depicting a totally quiet Egyptian scene overshadowed by a huge speech bubble saying, “Shhhhhhhhhhh.”⁴² When asked what he would draw differently at the end of 2015, he reversed the direction of the “Shhhhhhhhhhh.”⁴³ The domain of the citizenry had grown, while the bubble speaker—now visible as the president—had been brought down from the sky. Obviously, he had little to say but a load of crap, but he was still dominating the scene. Only one or two brave souls dared to call a spade a spade (“Nuff crap!”) though their voice remained a whisper rather than a whoop. Most of the audience were going “hush!”—but it was not unambiguous whether they were calling for silence to listen to Sisi (out of respect? or out of fear?), or rather meant to silence Sisi. Things had become a bit less clear and unanimously submissive as Egypt entered the year 2016. As the year progressed, dissent became louder. On 13 April 2016, Andeel republished this cartoon on his Twitter account, now using the straightforward hashtag #*irḥal*, “get out,” after Sisi had shut down a man who wanted to comment on a talk the President had just delivered to what was styled as an “Egyptian family meeting” (*liqā’ al-usra al-miṣriyya*).⁴⁴ Sisi’s “I didn’t give anyone permission to speak” (*anā ma-ddetsh il-iḡn li-ḥadd yitkallim*) made headlines as many Egyptians, even prominent talk show hosts, criticized what was widely perceived as his regime ‘selling’ two Red Sea Islands to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ This ceasing of Egyptian sovereignty provided the rallying cause for the first open street

42 ANDEEL, “Cartoon: Things are a bit...,” *Mada Masr*, 27 Sep. 2014, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/09/27/cartoon/u/cartoon-things-are-a-bit>>.

43 LĪNĀ ‘AṬĀALLĀH, “Miṣr 2015: ‘Kōz il-maḥabba itkharam,’” *Mada Masr*, 31 Dec. 2015, <<https://is.gd/Ukuptn>>.

44 ANDEEL, “#Irḥal,” 13 Apr. 2016, <http://twitter.com/_Andeel_/status/720250938796060674>; “Ghur-fat al-akhbār | Liqā’ al-ra’īs al-Sīsī ma’a ‘adad min mumaththilī ‘l-muḡtama’ taḥta ‘unwān ‘liqā’ al-usra al-miṣriyya’ | kāmila,” *CBC eXtra News*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/V-zbojIGRc8?t=5530>>.

45 Maḥmūd AL-WĀQĪf, “al-Sīsī li-aḥad ḥādirī liqā’ ‘al-Usra al-Miṣriyya’: ‘Anā mā-ddetsh il-iḡn li-ḥadd yitkallim,’” *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/928436>>; “Ṣabāḥ ON: Ḥāyḏī Fārūq: Gazīratay [sic] Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir miṣriyyatān,” *ON Ent*, 9 Apr. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/OjTcnEPeLiE>>; “al-Rāfiḏūn li-tanāzul Miṣr ‘an gazīratay Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir bi-l-Baḥr al-Aḥmar: waqqī’ū li-inqādh gazīratay Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir,” *Avaaz*, 10 Apr. 2016, <<https://is.gd/XKiZih>> (16,000 signatures on the first day); “Li-l-tārīkh wa-qabla tabdīl al-mawāqif: mā qāla-hu al-i’lāmiyyūn ‘an qaḏiyyat Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir,” *al-Mūgaz*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<http://almogaz.com/news/politics/2016/apr/13/2235597>>; Ḥarakat Shabāb 6 Ibrīl, “Bayān min Ḥarakat Shabāb 6 Ibrīl ilā ‘l-Quwwāt al-Musallaḥa al-Miṣriyya,” *6th of April Youth Movement* official Facebook account, 12 Apr. 2016, <<http://fb.com/shabab6april/posts/10154747079573294>>; “Liwā’ sābiq bi-l-ṣā’iqa yuhaddid al-Sīsī li-bay’i-hi guzur Tīrān li-l-Sa’ūdiyya: Tīrān maṣriyya wi-ḥnā mish ha-nuskut yā Sīsī,” broadcast live on ONPlus’ *al-Ṣūra al-Kāmila*, 14 Apr. 2016, many copies on YouTube, e.g. <<https://youtu.be/e8k-LBTeh1Y>>.

protests in the country in over a year.⁴⁶ The April 6 Youth Movement issued a statement saying, “Let today be a new beginning. More important than slogans, parties, political shouting, is that we go down today and say I am here. I am still here and I have an opinion, a voice and worth. The January revolution still lives and its legacy is still within us, despite everything that has happened.”⁴⁷

Sisi’s demand that people should not listen to anyone but him now translated into his warning journalists not to be an echo chamber for social media, but to practice “responsible” journalism.⁴⁸ His regime, however, faced not only the buds of a more assertive public, but also renewed challenges from a judiciary that for a while had been perceived as having fallen fully subservient to the executive, but that now delayed the implementation of the maritime border agreement with Saudi Arabia, and—more importantly—rescinded parts of the controversial protest law enacted by presidential decree in 2013 that had put many of the most outspoken revolutionary activists behind bars.⁴⁹ The struggle for who may raise a voice in Egypt is far from over, and speaking out does not necessarily translate into actual

- 46 Hishām SHA‘BĀN, “Ghadan: masīrāt gum‘at ‘al-Ard hiya al-‘Ird’ li-rafḍ al-tanāzul ‘an ‘Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir,’” *al-Taḥrīr*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<https://is.gd/uIukLS>>; “Protests in Egypt against Red Sea islands deal, more expected on 25 April,” *Ahram Online*, 15 Apr. 2016, <<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/Content/1/64/199636/Egypt/Politics-/Update--Protests-in-Egypt-against-Red-Sea-islands-.aspx>>. The issue flared up again as a focal point for public outcry at the end of 2016, when the government decided to push through the deal without waiting for the final court ruling (Hiba AL-ḤANAFĪ, “Ghaḍab ba‘da muwāfaqat al-ḥukūma ‘alā ‘Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir’: ‘sa-yantaṣir al-sha‘b’ (taqrīr). Intishār iqrār bi-rafḍ al-ittifāqiyya ‘alā al-shabakāt al-igtimā‘iyya: ‘lam amnaḥ al-Sīsī tafwīḍan,’” *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*, 30 Dec. 2016. The hashtag *مصريه_وصنافير_تيران* turned trending again on Twitter on 29 Dec. 2016.—Egypt and Saudi Arabia had left the status of the two islands purposefully open for decades, partly in order to increase manoeuvrability vis-à-vis Israel. Social media buzz, however, made it appear as if the islands always had undisputedly been “Egyptian earth” (cf. Sūzān ‘ABD AL-GHANĪ, “Wathā‘iq gadīda: 22 kharīṭa min muqtanayāt gāmi‘at Stānford tuthbit milkiyyat Miṣr li-‘Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir,’” *al-Bidāya*, 14 Apr. 2016, <<http://albedaiiah.com/news/2016/04/14/111075>>).
- 47 Harakat Shabāb 6 Ibrīl, “Khallū il-nahārdah bidāya gidīda,” *6th of April Youth Movement* official Facebook account, 15 Apr. 2016, <<http://fb.com/shabab6april/posts/10154755168683294>>. The slightly condensed translation is taken from “Update: Prosecution reverses release order for 25 protesters,” *Mada Masr*, 16 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/04/16/news/u/update-prosecution-reverses-release-order-for-25-protesters>>.
- 48 The relevant passage from Sisi’s 13 April speech was republished, i. a., by Al Nahar TV as “al-Ra‘īs al-Sīsī li-l-i‘lāmiyyīn: lā ta‘tamidū ‘alā shabakāt al-tawāṣul al-igtimā‘ī ka-maṣādir lakum,” *AlNahar AlYoum*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<https://youtu.be/oW5soq9AtwE>>. See also Hibā al-ḤANAFĪ and Nevīn al-‘IYĀDĪ, “Kḥiṭāb al-Sīsī fī ‘Liḳā’ al-Uṣra al-Miṣriyya’ (naṣṣ kāmīl): lā nabī‘ arḍanā li-aḥḍad... wa-taḥdhīrāt min shabakāt al-tawāṣul al-igtimā‘ī,” *al-Maṣrī al-Yawm*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/928512>>.
- 49 Saḥar ‘AZIZ, “al-Qaḍā’ al-miṣrī taḥt al-sayṭara,” *Ṣadā*, ed. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 Aug. 2014, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=56427>>; Sāra AL-SHALAQĀNĪ, “Buṭlān ḍamm Tīrān wa-Ṣanāfir ilā ‘l-Sa‘ūdiyya... hal yaṇḍamm al-qaḍā’ ilā mu‘araḍat al-Sīsī?” *Al-Monitor*, 23 June 2016, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2016/06/egypt-court-decision-void-transfer-islands-saudi-arabia.html>>; al-Maḥkama al-Dustūriyya al-‘Ulyā: “Iṣḍār al-ḥukm fī al-qaḍiyya raqm 160 li-sanat 36 qaḍā’iyya ‘dustūriyya’ wa-ḥakamat al-maḥkama : bi-‘adam dustūriyyat naṣṣ al-faḳra al-ūlā min al-mādḍa al-‘āshira min qarār ra‘īs al-gumhūriyya bi-l-qānūn raqm 107 bi-tanzīm al-ḥaqq fī ‘l-igtimā‘āt al-‘amma wa-l-mawākib wa-l-tazāhurāt al-silmiyya [...],” *al-Garīda al-Rasmiyya* 50, 15 Dec. 2016, <<http://www.cc.gov.eg/Images/L/373831.pdf>>.

impact, but at year's end, it appeared that Sisi's insistence on being the only one listened to meets with growing assertiveness on the part of those who defend the right of free speech also for those who don't agree.

In lieu of a conclusion

This article has explored voices on the question of 'who has a voice' in Egypt in 2016. It has stayed relatively close to the 'event' level and not attempted to reduce this snapshot to an in-depth analysis of arrays, codes, and broken codes in the Gumbrechtian spirit.⁵⁰ Such an analysis must remain the subject of a future publication. Nevertheless, in lieu of a conclusion, I would like to offer some ideas on what appear to be organising principles in the material here presented, and draw some parallels to my fellow researchers' work.

You vs. Us is one such principle, dividing a potentially multifaceted community into two polarised camps that end up both using this code, if conversely. It appears in the hashtag #*Sisi_vs_Youth*, in Sisi's "Who are you anyhow? Here's 90 million!" and in most any example quoted in this article. This code—which may be particularly apparent in the social media's filter bubbles—is of course not new; it perpetuates the same attitude of exclusion from legitimate participation that was expressed in pop star 'Alī al-Ḥaggār's 2013 song "We are a people, and you are [another] people" and that provided the moral backdrop for the violent eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹ As we have seen, Sisi is still quick to use the same discourse of eradication and nullification when faced with opposition. Sisi's "we" includes 'his' sons and daughters, 'his' children, those who constitute 'our noble youth': those who follow Sisi's fatherly guidance. The young people who speak out against this attitude, on the other hand, position themselves as spokespeople for 'the youth' in general, for 'our generation,' who valiantly resist the slave mentality keeping society subservient to the tyrant dictator, and claim to be willing to offer their lives for this goal. They do not go so far as to sing of patricide, but they do present a rather one-dimensional image of the 'fathers,' of a retrograde older generation that seeks to perpetuate the past and to kill young people's dreams and their future.

It is interesting to see, however, that this clear-cut "you vs. us," which at first sight has a straightforward correlation with powerful patriarchal rule facing a handful of feeble underdogs, does point to an inverted power dimension, which we may comprehend as a collapsed code where **the Nobody = Omnipotent**. When Sisi warned journalists not to rely on the social media, he explained that this was a "very dangerous" thing since it was possible today, with only one or two 'electronic brigades,' to create a closed circle of false infor-

50 Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT, *In 2016: Living at the Edge of Time*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

51 'Alī al-ḤAGGĀR, "Iḥnā sha'b wi 'intū sha'b," *alīhaggar1*, 5 July 2013, <<http://youtu.be/YJw-miMUOPc>>; cf. Albrecht HOFHEINZ, "#WhyIHateIkhwan: Islamist-Secular Polarisation in Egyptian Social Media," *NewME Report*, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2013, <http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/new-middle-east/publications/2013/6_hofheinz.pdf>. On ways of exploiting—and of trying to challenge—antagonistic divisions in Egypt, see also Elene CHITI, "The Crisis as an Institutional Tool: Challenging Anti-Institutional Challenges in the Egyptian Cultural Field," forthcoming.

mation amplified by ‘irresponsible’ journalists and thereby to spawn an issue out of nothing, undermining people’s sense of security, and splitting the nation.⁵² The ‘nobodies’ have to be crushed all the more relentlessly since they are, despite their small numbers, capable of disrupting all ‘our’ efforts, of destroying what the ‘90 million’ Egyptians are striving to achieve. This collapsed code can also be recognized in the revolutionaries’ self-portrayal as the ‘buds’ of a better future, the tiny ‘seed’ that is buried underground, but that is bound to blossom and bear fruit in the future.

These two pairs appear to me to be the most prominent ‘Gumbrechtian’ organising principles in the material I have presented here; especially so since they are shared across the lines of confrontation. It is tempting, however, to propose a few others as well; and the first one that comes to mind is the idea that **Reality = a Joke (Satire)**, that what happens in Egypt can only be properly understood, and is bearable only, if taken as a form of dark humour.⁵³ In the examples introduced here, this collapsed code appears specific to the ‘youth’ side of the spectrum; it should be interesting, however, to investigate this further by linking it to the proverbial Egyptian humour that is sometimes held to be an essential prerequisite in the ability of the people of this country to survive the relentless challenges of everyday life. In this regard, the view of reality as dark comedy relates to the broken code **Ordinary Citizen = Hero** explored by Elena Chiti.⁵⁴ And this ordinary hero presupposes, one may say, a broken code **Order = Chaos**, which in turn contains the sub-sections **Police = Criminals** (“*il-dākhliyya balṭaḡiyya*”; Shady ABUZAIID’s satirical Facebook comment, “do you plan to send over some plain-clothes informants as usual to abuse us and then say, ‘that was society?’”)⁵⁵ and **Care = Imprisonment**. All this contributes to the **dystopian** view of the **present** that Chiti also describes and that, to close the circle, is only manageable through satire.

These broken codes elicit quite a bit of emotive energy, as broken codes in the Gumbrechtian sense are bound to do. It is, however, also possible to identify some codes that seem to function in a relatively uncontroversial manner, at least in the material I have investigated here. There is **Courage vs. Fear**; all actors claim to be brave, despite being weary of the dangers threatening on all sides (one may explore this as a broken code as well, however, where the open admission and declaration of being afraid is an act of courage).

52 «إوعوا يكون مصادركم شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي! [...] دا خطر جدد! دا انا النهاردا حاقدرا أعمل حكاية جوه (Sisi in his 13 Apr. 2016 speech, see footnote 48; cf. also Nūr RASHWĀN, “al-Sīsī yuḥadhdhir min ḥurūb al-gīl al-rābī‘ wal-khāmis: ‘fī katā’ib elektrōniyya wi-qīṣṣa kibīra bitit‘imil,” *al-Shurūq*, 13 Apr. 2016, <<https://is.gd/Ve90A2>>).

53 This obviously inspires a lot of satirical cultural productions, whether on YouTube (the multitude of successors to Bāsim Yūsuf), on Facebook (*il-Waraqā* is only one example shutdown !!), on stage (*Masraḥ Maṣr*, criticized by some as superficial but hugely successful also via its multiplication via MBC TV [<<https://is.gd/lfnset>>] and social media; cf. Ḥusām KAMĀL, “Masraḥ Maṣr... al-ḏiḥk li-l-ḏiḥk,” *al-‘Arabī al-Jadīd*, 21 Jan. 2016, <<https://is.gd/zGrmZa>>), or in print as *adab sākhir* (cf. Richard JACQUEMOND, “Satiric Literature and Other ‘Popular’ Literary Genres in Egypt Today,” in this dossier special).

54 Elena CHITI, “‘A Dark Comedy’: Perceptions of the Egyptian Present between Reality and Fiction,” in this dossier special.

55 See footnotes 39 and 17.

The old **Male vs. Female** stereotypes not only sneak in through Cairokee's lipstick line. The equation of activeness with the male is positively affirmed in the group's singing the praise of "real men;" it also remains visible in the condom prank. And the reactions to Aṭfāl Shawāri's videos suggest that **Piety vs. Blasphemy** continues to be an influential code also among large sections of the youth.⁵⁶

The most prominent array (an artefact, a role, or an activity that influences bodies) in the material collected here would seem to be **Prison**—the ever-expanding place where Sisi shuts away all elements threatening his nation-building project; the practical joke played on those he purports to embrace; the abode of a whole generation; the realm where "real men" live today. **Thugs** (*balṭagiyya*, see above) play a supportive role in this context. And both the **Screen World** of YouTube and Facebook videos, and **Music** (hip-hop and other) certainly have an effect on Egyptian bodies in 2016, though this is not directly documentable in the present article. Perhaps it is the **Voice**, the activity of **Speaking Up**, of trying to have an impact through sermon or satire, that itself constitutes a characteristic array of this year?

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56 Cf. the comments to Aṭfāl Shawāri's video "Barā'im al-īmān" (see footnote 37), many of which express disgust, often conveying the opinion, 'I used to like your videos, but this blasphemous stuff is not acceptable.'

Satiric Literature and Other “Popular” Literary Genres in Egypt Today

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Abstract

This article starts by describing some characteristics of current Egyptian popular literature, based on field observation at the Cairo 2016 book fair and a survey of the Egyptian authors available on the social network Goodreads, and puts the stress on the spectacular rejuvenation this market experienced in the last ten years. It focuses then on one of this market's main genres, namely, satiric literature, and suggests through the analysis of various authors' trajectories and works that it reveals a tension between reformism and subversion, a tension similar to the one that characterises the predicament of the Egyptian intelligentsia in the post-2011 context.

Keywords: Egypt, readership, bestsellers, satire, youth, reformism, subversion

“In the beginning was the Joke”
Yūsuf Idrīs, *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḏīrī 'l-nūr?*

Since my Ph.D. research on the Egyptian literary field, conducted in the 1990s, I have been fascinated with the question of the limits of the field, in other words, the question of the definition of legitimate literature. Who defines it? How? What gets into the canon and what does not? Egyptian writers often complain that they have a limited audience: “Egyptians don't read literature, they use to lament, implicitly equating between their own, restrictive, definition of literature, and their fellow citizens.” However, there is a much broader readership for literature in Egypt than the few thousand readers of the latest novel by Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm or Ibrāhīm Aṣlān. People did read, but they did not read the books these legitimate writers wanted them to read.¹

Then came the *Yacoubian Building* phenomenon.² A novel by a previously unknown writer became in a few years a real bestseller, locally and then internationally, something unheard of in modern Arabic literature. This prompted heated debates within the Egyptian literary field, between those arguing that the novel added nothing to the Egyptian or Arab

1 For a more detailed discussion of the question, see JACQUEMOND 2008, especially chapter 7.

2 Al-ASWĀNĪ 2002.

novel, and those (among them of course its author) who argued that the readers' acclaim was the best proof of its literary value. Yet, more interesting than this controversy, that was but a repetition of countless debates about the definition of legitimate literature, the success story of *The Yacoubian Building* revealed a general evolution of the Egyptian book market that took place during the last decade of Mubarak's rule, whose most visible characteristic was the emergence of the bestseller. Following the *Yacoubian Building* success, several books, all by newcomers, reached unprecedented levels of sales and audiences. This was made possible by several transformations: growing audiences (made possible by the general raise of enrolment in secondary and higher education, especially among girls—and girls in Egypt as elsewhere are more prone to reading than boys); the rapid growth of Internet access, which generated new reading practices but also new ways of promoting books (online book clubs, blogs, forums, illegal downloading) and a new form of relation between writers and their readers (through social networks); and finally a spectacular modernization of the retail market (notably the emergence of several actors who introduced new marketing techniques and developed a whole network of bookshops within a few years such as Dīwān, Shurūq, and more recently Alef Bookstores).³

The revolutionary turmoil of 2011-2013 badly affected this emerging market. The reading audience turned to newspapers and TV and computer screens at the expense of books and the publishing sector witnessed a general shrink. Things started to get better, if not on the political level, starting from 2014. I had the opportunity to assess this recovery while spending two weeks in Cairo during the 2016 book fair (27 January-10 February). I had not visited the book fair for five years and I was stunned by the sheer quantity of new publishers, new authors and new books. To start with a rough measure: Egyptian books must carry a legal deposit number, which consists of the year of publication followed by a serial number given by the National library according to the date of deposit. This means that one can assess how many books have been published during a given year by looking at the legal deposit number of the books published at the end of the year. This is also the period where the largest amount of books is published, in order to be available at the Book Fair by the end of January. This year, the highest 2015 serial numbers I found were over 25,000, a clearly unprecedented figure (by end of the 1990s the legal deposit number just reached 10,000).

The transformation of the book market was very visible in the way books are marketed. Publishers have developed new strategies to attract readers, the most visible one being to put in front what is presented as **bestsellers**.⁴ Book covers enlarged in poster size, high piles of the same title, mention of the (always high) number of prints on the cover, etc. In my previous research,⁵ I noted that while authors and retailers had done a lot to boost the book market, publishers were lagging behind. Now it seems that they are catching up with the movement. Looking at all these so-called bestsellers (of course, not all books presented

3 JACQUEMOND 2013. See also ROOKE 2011.

4 [Editors' note: Here and in the following, terms emphasized in **bold** indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project's search for Gumbrecht'ian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed (cf. S. GUTH's Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier). The emphasis is the editor's.]

5 *Idem*.

as such actually are), I was amazed to find that most of their authors were **young newcomers**, just as were the crowds of readers (predominantly female) attracted by them. This bestseller market is definitely a “young” market in every meaning of the word. It is also a market dominated by three genres: **horror**, **satire**, and **romance**, each one having its own codes (cover illustration and title), which make it easily identifiable by the consumer.⁶

However, the Egyptian book market has not changed a lot during the last decades in one aspect: its opacity. Publishers never make public sales figures, and would they, it would not help a lot because of the massive amount of book diffusion that is taking place out of their control, either in the form of illegal prints or illegal downloading on the Internet. In my previous research on bestsellers, I built up a tentative chart of the most popular Egyptian authors by tracking the number of pdf versions of their books downloaded on <4share.com>. Back in 2010-2011, it was the downloading platform most widely used by Arab readers, and with every book available for download it indicated the number of previous downloads. While such a survey is no longer possible (<4share> no longer states the number of downloads, and it competes now with countless other downloading platforms), I have made an attempt at updating it through another means, which has proved very useful: the specialized social network **Goodreads**. Launched in the US in 2007, it has developed in a way so attractive for the book market that it has been bought in 2013 by Amazon, and it is used by many authors in the Anglo-Saxon world as a promotion tool for their books. It has become also quite popular in the Arab world. The network boasts some 50 million members worldwide, among them at least several hundreds of thousands Arab readers, if one judges by the number of ratings of the most popular Arab authors (close to 330,000 for Aḥmad Khālid Tawfiq).

The Egyptian authors hit list according to Goodreads

Every book listed in Goodreads is presented with a complete bibliographical record, its average rating (on a scale from 1 to 5), number of ratings and number of reviews, all of which can be read below on the same thread. Goodreads is also a social network whose members can befriend each other, send messages, comment reviews, etc. One can make a research by book title or by author. Authors’ page usually include a short bio (often filled by the author her/himself) and aggregate the statistics of all his books (average rating, number of ratings, number of reviews, number of distinct works), plus a link to “similar authors” who are determined, one can suppose, by some algorithm.

6 For example, the horror novel covers are illustrated with dark colours and resort to gore aesthetics (blood, monsters, tattoos, etc.), while romance novel covers will use pastel colours and often carry a woman’s picture (mostly veiled), and satiric literature covers will rather use plain, bright colours and drawings rather than photomontages. The cover designers will also choose Arabic fonts matching those different styles: large, coarse letters for horror, soft thin ones for romance, hand-written-looking letters (as in a comic book) for satiric literature, etc.

Chart. Two tentative assessments of the most popular Egyptian authors

1. Number of 4share downloads (November 2011)⁷

<i>Author</i>	<i>Downloads</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (1921-2009)	> 500,000	polygraph, 'Islamic writer'
Anīs Maṣṣūr (1925-2011)	> 320,000	polygraph, light journalism
ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād (1889-1964)	> 270,000	polygraph, mostly Islamic themes
Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987)	> 240,000	polygraph, playwright
Nagīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006)	> 200,000	novelist (Nobel price 1988)
Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1917-1996)	> 200,000	Islamic preacher
Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)	> 180,000	polygraph
Muḥ. Ḥasanayn Haykal (1923-2016)	> 180,000	political journalist
Muḥ. M. al-Shaʿrāwī (1911-1998)	> 150,000	Islamic preacher
Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī (1917-1978)	> 120,000	novelist
Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs (1919-1990)	> 110,000	novelist
Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926-)	> 90,000	Islamic preacher
Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)	> 80,000	Islamic thinker and militant
<i>Rajul al-mustaḥīl</i> (Nabīl Fārūq)	> 80,000	detective series for teenagers
Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1928-2010)	> 75,000	satiric writer
ʿAlī Aḥmad Bākathīr (1910-1969)	> 57,000	novelist and playwright
Gamāl al-Ghītānī (1945-2015)	> 55,000	novelist
Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī (1931)	> 50,000	feminist writer and novelist
Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962-)	> 45,000	novelist (esp. for teenagers)
ʿUmar Ṭāhir (1975-)	> 45,000	satiric writer and vernacular poet
Fārūq Guwayda (1945-)	> 40,000	poet and journalist
Yūsuf Zaydān (1958-)	> 34,000	novelist and academic (historian)
Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (1937-)	> 30,000	novelist
ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī (1957-)	> 28,000	novelist
<i>Comparator: selected non-Egyptian Arab authors</i>		
Aḥlām Mustaghānimī (1953-)	> 250,000	novelist (Algeria-Lebanon)
Nizār Qabbānī (1923-1998)	> 150,000	poet (Syria)
Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008)	> 62,000	poet (Palestine)

⁷ Reprinted from JACQUEMOND 2013: 147-148.

2. Goodreads ratings (retrieved on October 22, 2016)

<i>Author</i>	<i>Rank compared to previous chart ↓</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962)	+18	328,528	novelist (esp. for teenagers)
Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (1921-2009)	-1	171,960	polygraph, ‘Islamic writer’
Aḥmad Murād (1978)	new	137,264	novelist (detective, thriller)
Nagīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006)	+1	136,445	novelist (Nobel prize 1988)
Nabīl Fārūq (1956)	+9	120,788	series for teenagers
Yūsuf Zaydān (1957)	+15	89,115	novelist and academic (historian)
Muḥammad Ṣādiq (1987)	new	59,786	novelist (romance)
Anīs Maṣṣūr (1925-2011)	-8	54,268	polygraph, light journalism
Raḍwā ‘Āshūr (1945-2014)	new	52,802	novelist
Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987)	-6	51,855	polygraph, playwright
‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (1957)	+13	50,510	novelist
Ḥasan al-Gindī (197?)	new	47,179	novelist (horror fiction)
‘Umar Ṭāhir (1975)	+7	44,262	satiric writer and vernacular poet
Bahā’ Ṭāhir (1935)	new	36,621	novelist
Yūsuf al-Sibā’ī (1917-1978)	-5	30,849	novelist
‘Abbās M. al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964)	-13	30,694	polygraph, mostly Islamic themes
Khawla Ḥamdī (1984)	new	30,683	novelist (romance)
Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990)	-7	30,053	novelist
Muḥ. al-Mansī Qandīl (1949)	new	28,072	novelist (historical novel)
Ashraf al-‘Ashmāwī (1966)	new	26,048	novelist
‘Iṣām Yūsuf (1965)	new	24,476	novelist
Muḥ. al-Ghazālī (1917-1996)	-16	24,285	Islamic preacher
Tāmir Ibrāhīm (?)	new	24,274	novelist (horror novel)
Bilāl Faḍl (1974)	new	23,707	satiric writer and journalist
Fārūq Guwayda (1945)	-4	23,325	poet and journalist
‘Izz al-Dīn Shukrī Fishīr (1966)	new	22,081	novelist
Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)	-20	21,190	polygraph
Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)	-15	20,521	Islamic thinker and militant
<i>Other writers tested on 4share in 2011</i>			
Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī (1931)		14,857	feminist writer and novelist
Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm (1937)		13,153	novelist
‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr (1910-1969)		10,789	novelist and playwright
M. Ḥasanayn Haykal (1923-2016)		10,285	political journalist

<i>Author</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1928-2010)	8,647	satiric writer
Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926)	8,575	Islamic preacher
Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-2015)	7,625	novelist
Muḥ. M. al-Shaʿrāwī (1911-1998)	7,262	Islamic preacher
<i>Selected non-Egyptian Arab authors</i>		
Aḥlām Mustaghānimī (1953)	121,739	novelist (Algeria-Lebanon)
Athīr al-Nashmī (1984)	72,944	novelist & essayist (Saudi Arabia)
Ghāzī al-Quṣaybī (1940-2010)	46,107	novelist & essayist (Saudi Arabia)
Ghassān Kanafānī (1936-1972)	40,277	novelist (Palestine)
Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī (1981)	38,424	novelist (Kuwait)
ʿĀʿid al-Qarnī (1970)	36,582	Islamic preacher (Saudi Arabia)
Maḥmūd Darwish (1941-2008)	33,581	poet (Palestine)
Nizār Qabbānī (1923-1998)	28,195	poet (Syria)

Goodreads seems to be especially popular among Egyptian readers, if one judges by the relatively lower number of ratings of the most popular non-Egyptian Arab authors compared to their Egyptian peers (the second larger audience of this social network being seemingly located in the Arabian peninsula, if one judges by the strong presence of authors coming from this area in the above list of non-Egyptian writers). Both charts have the same bias, namely, they measure the popularity of Egyptian authors not among Egyptian readers, but among the wider audience of Arab readers and Arabic-language users worldwide. If we make the plausible hypothesis that middlebrow authors tend to have a more local reputation than highbrow, canonical authors, who are prone to have a larger Arab audience, it means that both charts probably overstate the weight of the canonized, legitimate authors and understate that of the middlebrow authors within the Egyptian national market. Another bias is that both charts assess books, not authors: in other words, the more a given author has published books, the more downloads or ratings he will get, which explains the high ranking of such prolific authors as Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq, Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd or Nagīb Maḥfūz.

Conversely, the high ranking of Aḥmad Murād (n° 3) and Muḥammad Ṣādiq (n° 7) in the Goodreads chart (having respectively only five and four books published to date) is quite telling of their resounding success. Aḥmad Murād's *al-Fīl al-azraq* (The Blue Elephant, 2013) and Muḥammad Ṣādiq's *Hībtā* (Hepta, 2014) may have outreached *Yacoubian*, if not in terms of sales, surely in number of readers. Both have also, like *Yacoubian*, been quickly turned into movies as successful as the books (*Hībtā: al-Muḥāḍara al-akhīra* [Hepta: The Last Conference], released on April 20, 2016, has been one of the biggest hits

of the year 2016⁸). While their writings are quite different (Murād made his debut with two detective novels before moving to the psychological thriller *à la* Stephen King, then to the historical novel; Šādiq’s *Hepta* is a romance of sorts on the seven stages of love—hence its title), they market themselves in very similar ways. Other newcomers ranking high in this chart include Ḥasan al-Gindī, the most popular specialist of the Egyptian version of **horror fiction** (*adab al-ruʿb*), who has published some ten books since 2009 (and further down in the chart, his colleague Tāmir Ibrāhīm), and Khawla Ḥamdī (n° 17), a young Tunisian author of three romance novels published in Egypt and therefore having a mainly Egyptian audience, the reason why I included her in this chart.

Overall, the most interesting finding of this chart is the strong showing made by the new kings of the Egyptian bestseller. First come the elder ones, Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (n° 1) and Nabīl Fārūq (n° 5), who gained fame in the 1990s with their immensely popular series for teenagers (they are by far the most prolific writers—almost 1,000 different titles between the two of them). While Fārūq remained stuck in those genres, Tawfīq has been able to conquer other age brackets, especially since *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia, 2007), his biggest hit to date and a political thriller set in the near future, that can be seen as the pioneer of the wave of dystopian novels that appeared in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. Among the bestselling authors who emerged in the first decade of the 2000s, Yūsuf Zaydān (n° 6), ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (n° 11) and ‘Umar Ṭāhir (n° 13) appear to have also gained popularity in the last years, while sticking to the genres that made their initial success: historical novel (Zaydān), realistic, politically committed fiction (al-Aswānī), and satiric writing (Ṭāhir).

Among other interesting findings is the high ranking of elder writers belonging to the consecrated literary avant-garde of the generation of the sixties (Bahā’ Ṭāhir, n° 14) or seventies (Raḍwā ‘Āshūr, n° 9; Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl, n° 19), while other equally or more consecrated writers of these generations are much less popular than they looked in the previous chart (Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm). This might be explained by the fact that, unlike Ghīṭānī and Ibrāhīm, the former have moved towards forms of writing more appealing to a larger audience, especially through the historical novel, a genre that connects middlebrow and highbrow literature and readers, in Egypt as elsewhere. It also indicates that the elder generations of writers benefit from the general improvement of the Egyptian book market. Among the eldest generations, that of the “pioneers” (al-‘Aqqād, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn) seem to have lost much of its appeal, while Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (n° 10) and especially Nagīb Maḥfūz (n° 4) remain quite popular.⁹ As regards the latter, it is noteworthy that his most rated novel on Goodreads is the controversial *Awlād ḥārit-nā*, which was not published in Egypt before 2006, a few months after his death.¹⁰

One of the most striking differences between the two charts is the sharp drop in interest for Islamic authors, whether the more conventional, religious figures (Ghazālī, Qaraḍāwī, Sha‘rāwī) or the more militant (Sayyid Quṭb). Only Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd maintains

8 According to the website elcinema.com, <<http://www.elcinema.com/boxoffice/2016/23>> (retrieved Oct. 21, 2016).

9 It must be noted that Maḥfūz’s total ratings include his numerous translated works. This is also true with ‘Alā’ al-ASWĀNĪ, the only other writer in this chart popular in translation.

10 MAḤFŪZ 1996 [1959].

a strong presence, but although he is commonly dubbed as an “Islamic writer” (*kātib islāmī*), he deals with religion rather from an existential or spiritual point of view, being thus read, especially by the youth, as a Muslim Paolo Coelho of sorts rather than as a *shaykh* or a *dā'iya* (preacher). In this sense, it is noteworthy that his most popular books are *Ḥiwār ma'a ṣadīqī al-mulhid* (Dialogue with My Atheist Friend) and *Riḥlatī min al-shakk ilā 'l-īmān* (My Journey from Doubt to Faith). Also, we remark that the second most popular book by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm on Goodreads, after his classic *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī 'l-aryāf* (Diary of a Country Prosecutor), is *Ari-nī 'llāh* (Show me God), an essay on faith neglected by canonical literary history. In other words, it seems that the social groups active in Goodreads, predominantly young and female, remain strongly interested by religious matters, but in a way rather disconnected with Islamic dogma or with the quest for immediate, worldly guidance often associated with contemporary popular Muslim preachers. Should this shunning be linked with the fading popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood (and other political forces using Islam as a rallying symbol) in post-2013 Egypt? This is a tempting interpretation, but it is safer to leave the question open.

On the whole, this chart is a clear illustration of my starting point. Among the twenty top Egyptian writers of this chart, only five can be dubbed as consecrated by the literary establishment (N. Maḥfūz, R. 'Āshūr, T. al-Ḥakīm, B. Ṭāhir, 'A. al-'Aqqād), another five as being less consecrated but yet widely recognized as “proper” writers (Zaydān, al-Aswānī, al-Sibā'ī, 'Abd al-Quddūs, M. al-M. Qandīl), while the other ten rather represent various forms of middlebrow literature. The Egyptian reading audience exists, but it does not read necessarily what the literary establishment wants it to read—which is, after all, a very trivial observation that can be made in many modern contexts.

Finally, and since we are going to deal more specifically now with satiric literature, this genre does not seem to be as popular as one could have expected given the abundant production it gives rise to in nowadays Egypt. True, its two major exponents, 'Umar Ṭāhir and Bilāl Faḍl, are present in the chart (n° 13 and n° 24), but at a relatively low level. Among the three major genres of “popular” literature I identified at the beginning of this paper as the most thriving in 2016 Egypt—romance, horror, satire—, the latter seems to be the less successful, at least with the Goodreads Arab audience.

The case of satiric literature (*adab sākhir*)

Satire has a deep tradition in Egyptian culture that goes back to ancient times, and its prevalence throughout history has certainly to do with the national political culture, with its characteristic mix of deference and derision towards patriarchal authoritarianism, a mix that seems to have permeated for centuries the social fabric, from the nuclear family to the political system. *Fī 'l-bad' kānat al-nukta*, “In the beginning was the Joke”, writes Yūsuf Idrīs at the incipit of his famous short story *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḍī'ī 'l-nūr* (Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?), pastiching the opening verse of the Gospel of John.¹¹ The oral *nukta*, satiric poetry, comedy as a main genre in both Egyptian cinematic and theatrical output, press caricature, are, along with *adab sākhir*, the main forms of ex-

11 IDRIS 2009 [1971].

pression of this culture of derision the Egyptian people usually associate with the need for *tanfīs*, that is, to *vent* one’s anger or frustration. To this list, the revolutionary moment added a new genre: the satiric talk show invented by Bassem Youssef (**Bāsim Yūsuf**, b. 1974) with the success we know, which made of him the king of Egyptian satirists without contest for the short period during which he was allowed to exert his talents.¹²

During the second half of the 20th century, several authors specialized in *adab sākhir*, and some of them such as Maḥmūd al-Sa‘danī (see charts above), Muḥammad ‘Afifī (1922-1981), Aḥmad Ragab (1928-2014)¹³ or Galāl ‘Āmir (1952-2012), were very popular among readers. However, the decade before the 2011 revolution witnessed a renewal of the genre at the hands of a new generation of writers: Bilāl Faḍl (b. 1974), ‘Umar Ṭāhir (b. 1973), Ghāda ‘Abd al-‘Āl (b. 1978), Aḥmad al-‘Usaylī (b. 1976), Usāma Gharīb, etc. The wave of successful books by these and other authors on the eve of the 2011 revolution became so visible that it was commented both in the local and foreign press,¹⁴ before becoming a topic of interest for a number of researchers in modern Arabic literature. Before dwelling further on the subject, a preliminary reflexion on the category of *adab sākhir* seems necessary.

In Western literary criticism, satire refers both to a specific literary genre, born in Latin poetry (*satira*, a versified medley) and revamped in European Renaissance and Enlightenment literatures, and to a discursive mode (*mode discursif*) that permeates all literary genres, from poetry to fiction, drama, and further.¹⁵ While the latter sense seems more adapted to modern Western literatures, it is noteworthy that it is commonly described as a specific literary genre in modern Arabic culture, especially in Egypt. However, the ambiguity of satire, between a specific meaning and a broader one, is also palpable in the current Egyptian context: precisely because *adab sākhir* is recognised here as a specific genre, the limit between the written production characterised as such and other written works dwelling more or less on satire as a “discursive mode” is all but clear.

A good part of what is usually dubbed *adab sākhir* in current Egyptian written production is labelled as such either by its authors or by its publishers. Several publishers present it in series such as *Min al-adab al-sākhir* (al-Dār al-Miṣriyya al-Lubnāniyya), or

12 Bassem YOUSSEF, a cardiac surgeon, created his first satirical show on Youtube in March 2011. Its success lead major private channels to give him and his team the opportunity to turn it into a highly popular TV talk show, first with ONTV (2011-2012), then with CBC (2012-2013), during the short-lived rule of president Muḥammad Mursī and the Muslim Brotherhood, who became the main target of Bassem Youssef’s humour. After the July 2013 coup and the army’s clampdown on the media, his talk show was suspended, first temporarily (October 2013), then permanently (June 2014). Youssef left the country shortly afterwards.

13 In July 2011, Aḥmad RAGAB was awarded the highest state prize in literature, the Nile Prize (formerly the Mubarak Prize). Several commentators criticized this choice on the ground that it rewarded a satirist who practiced his art without ever being too harsh on the Mubarak regime (and, moreover, only a few months after the latter’s fall, hence the change in the name’s prize). But significantly, these same commentators stressed that this award was also a long overdue recognition, by the literary establishment, of satiric literature.

14 See Marcia Lynx QUALEY’s blog, “The Rise of Egyptian Satiric Literature: Good, Bad, Indifferent?”, *Arabic Literature (in English)*, October 14, 2010, <<https://arablit.org/2010/10/14/the-rise-of-egyptian-satiric-literature-good-bad-indifferent/>> (retrieved Oct. 23, 2016).

15 DUVAL & MARTINEZ 2000.

mention the term in the front cover or in the blurb of the book, such as ‘Umar Ṭāhir’s bestseller *Shaklā-hā bāzīt* (Looks Like it Messed up, 2006), subtitled *Albūm ijtimā’ī sākhir* (Satiric social album). Several writers also present themselves or are presented as *kātib sākhir* (satiric writer) in the press or in the Internet pages (Wikipedia, Goodreads, etc.) dedicated to them. In other instances, a book is not explicitly qualified as *adab sākhir* but readers will connect it with the genre through paratextual elements: title, subtitle, cover illustration, blurb. Unlike highbrow literature where originality is an essential criterion, middlebrow forms of writing imply serialisation, that is, the reproduction of a variety of codes that allow the reader/consumer to identify the book/product as belonging to a given line of products. As regards *adab sākhir*, the reader’s attention will be caught by a humorous title and/or subtitle, a cover illustration using the codes of press caricature, a well-chosen excerpt of the book as blurb, etc.¹⁶ The author and/or publisher often put more care into these paratextual elements than in the text itself and the reader is disappointed by the actual content of the book, just as the filmgoer abused by a trailer that gathers in two of three minutes the best jokes and punch lines of a poor comedy.¹⁷

However, the success of *adab sākhir* in the pre-2011 years seems to have led to an extension of the genre in ways unknown before. Books labelled as *adab sākhir* either by authors and publishers, or by reviewers and readers, only share a common structure that can be characterized as serial. That is, they consist in a series of chapters usually based on the same structure and ending with a punch line of sorts. This serial form is visible whether these books are originally written as such or whether they consist of collections of pieces previously published as press articles or columns (satirists are often journalists) or blogs.¹⁸ Within this serial form, the content of each unit of the series can be very diverse, from short essays pondering religious, moral or social matters¹⁹ to fictional anecdotes very similar to short stories, and sometimes presented as such (for instance, several books by Bilāl Faḍl are presented as collections of *qīṣaṣ qaṣīra*²⁰). Another characteristic of *adab sākhir* is its tendency to use ‘*ammiyya* rather than *fuṣḥā* Arabic, or a mix of both,²¹ which is one of the major reasons of its appeal, but this is not a development specific to this genre – writing in colloquial Egyptian or mixing it with standard written Arabic, a growing trend

16 See Guth’s discussion of some of these titles and other paratextual elements in GUTH *2017 (forthcoming).

17 Goodreads members often vent this kind of disappointment in their reviews of *adab sākhir* books.

18 ‘ABD AL-‘ĀL 2008. – On blogs turned into books, cf., e.g., Teresa PEPE, “From the Blogosphere to the Bookshop: Publishing Literary Blogs in Egypt”, in: *Between Everyday Life and Political Revolution: The Social Web in the Middle East*, special issue of *Oriente Moderno*, Nuova Serie, 91/1 (2011).

19 Al-‘USAYLI 2009.

20 Cristina DOZIO, who currently writes a Ph.D. thesis on satiric literature, mentions to me (email exchange, October 25, 2016) that Bilāl Faḍl characterises some of his books (*Ḍaḥik majrūh* and *al-Sukkān al-aṣliyyūn li-Miṣr*) as collections of “satiric articles” (*maqālāt sākhira*) and others (*Mā fa‘alahu al-‘ayyān bi’l-mayyit*, *Banī Bajam*, *al-Shaykh al-‘ayyil*) as collections of “short stories” (*qīṣaṣ qaṣīra*), a distinction that readers and reviewers do not seem to make.

21 The changing “power relations” between the formal and informal varieties are the topic of a Ph.D. thesis by Eva Marie HÅLAND (Univ. of Oslo, supervised by G. MEJDELL), to be defended in summer 2017.

since the 1990s at least, seems to have gained momentum in the post-2011 context. For all these reasons, trying to assess the amount of books published since 2011 that one can file under the category of *adab sākhir* appears to be an impossible task, and it would be presumptuous, in the limited scope of this paper, to give an overall appreciation of their content, tendencies or social function. While the phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers,²² very few academic literature, if any, has been published to date on the subject of Egyptian current satiric literature. The one piece I have been acquainted with is the one Stephan Guth kindly extended to me before publication,²³ and I will use it as a starting point to my own take on the subject.

In this article where he deals with a cluster of young (*shabāb*) authors of *adab sākhir*, Guth suggests that “the most adequate rendering of [this term] is perhaps ‘carnavalesque literature’ or ‘subversive literature’”,²⁴ implicitly discarding its more common translation, that is, “satiric (or satirical) literature”. He contrasts their writings with those of their earlier (in the 1920s) counterparts of *al-madrassa al-ḥadītha*, ʿĪsā ʿUbayd and Maḥmūd Taymūr, who “still write in the modus of (social) criticism, driven by the wish to promote moral improvement (*tahdhīb*), which are the main modus and goal of an optimistic Enlightenment with its ‘yes, we can!’ social reformism”.²⁵ In the following pages, I would like to suggest a more nuanced reading of the current output of Egyptian *adab sākhir*, as oscillating between **reformism** and **subversion**. Actually, this ambivalence is embedded in the very notion of satire. In the *Dictionnaire du littéraire*, Claire Cazanave defines satire as “a genre that aims at denouncing the vices and insanities of men with a moral and didactic purpose”.²⁶ This definition applies perfectly to the first masterpiece of modern Egyptian satire (although it has never been classified as *adab sākhir*), Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām*, a reformist manifesto *par excellence*. At the other extreme of the spectrum, Yūsuf Idrīs’s short story *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḍīʿi ʿl-nūr*, whose opening line I used as an epigraph for this piece, can be read as an epitome of the Egyptian carnivalesque where, as in Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais, things are turned upside down for the sake of nothing but mocking and ridiculing. In this short story written as a long *nukta* of sorts, the imam is not mocked in the way “men of religion” (*rijāl al-dīn*) usually are in modern Arabic literature, that is, as venal hypocrites who do not act accordingly to their preaches. Rather, he is portrayed as a victim of Lī-Lī’s awakening of his desire, which leads him to overstep his religious duty at the most crucial moment, that is, in the midst of the prayer he leads from the *minbar*. Far from advocating for moral values (sincerity *vs* hypocrisy, restraint *vs* greed, etc.), *A-kāna lā budda...* reveals and magnifies the locus where moral values cease to exist, namely, the realm of the flesh.

22 Several communications on Egyptian *adab sākhir* were presented at the Euramal conferences in Madrid (2014) and Oslo (2016). At least two Ph.D. theses on this subject are under way (Cristina DOZIO, University of Milan; David EISENSCHITZ, University of Paris-Sorbonne). Cf. also the thesis mentioned in fn. 20.

23 GUTH *2017 (forthcoming).

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 CAZANAVE 2002: 540 (my translation).

Between reformism and subversion

I will argue that analysing the current Egyptian output of *adab sākhir* through this lens, that is, as a genre in tension between reformism and subversion, or between *ta'dīb* (disciplining) and *qillat adab* (impoliteness), to use Tarek El-Ariss' suggestive formulation,²⁷ provides us with a heuristic approach not only to this specific output but perhaps more broadly to the predicament of the Egyptian intelligentsia in the post-revolutionary context. I will test this tension first through a comparison between the contrasted post-2011 trajectories of the two most famous names in the generation of satirists who emerged in the years 2000, namely, Bilāl Faḍl and 'Umar Ṭāhir.

The same age (Faḍl is born in 1974, Ṭāhir in 1973), they both started their careers as journalists in the late 1990s (Ṭāhir in *Nisf al-dunyā*, a weekly magazine published by al-Ahrām state-owned group, Faḍl in *al-Dustūr*, an independent newspaper that breathed new life in the Egyptian press as soon as it was launched in 1995). By 2011, they were well established enough as writers to become op-ed writers in the independent press that flourished at that time, notably in *al-Tahrīr*, a private daily launched in June 2011 by Ibrāhīm 'Isā (with whom Faḍl had worked in *al-Dustūr*). They also continued to publish books at an amazing pace (ten new titles by Bilāl Faḍl between 2011 and now—they probably include most of his press articles—, six by 'Umar Ṭāhir). Besides this, Faḍl was carrying on a successful career as a scriptwriter, and Ṭāhir as well as a *'ammiyya* poet, songwriter and scriptwriter.

After the Rābi'a massacre (August 2013), Bilāl Faḍl's voice was one of the rare, within the liberal camp, to condemn unambiguously the repression.²⁸ In the following months, he kept voicing his criticism at the new powers-to-be in the daily *al-Shurūq*, until the newspaper censored one of his columns.²⁹ A few months later, the producers of *Ahl Iskandariyya*, a TV series written by him, stopped the filming. This was clearly another act of indirect, unofficial censorship.³⁰ This led him to leave the country for the United States, with a grant to study drama in New York. He joined then *Al-'Arabī al-Jadīd*, a London-based Arab newspaper launched by the Qatari private company Fadaat Media in 2014 “as a counterweight to Al-Jazeera and its pro-Muslim Brotherhood influence”,³¹ which soon sheltered a number of dissident Egyptian voices. Since October 2015, he hosts a cultural

27 Tarek EL-ARISS, “Leaking: Fiction and **Revelation** in the Arab Digital Age”, keynote lecture presented at the 12th Euramal Conference, *Upholding Humanity in a Post-human World? Arabic Writing After the “Arab Spring”*, Oslo, 30 May – 4 June 2016 (unpublished).

28 *Al-Shurūq*, August 28, 2013. Translated into French in *Courrier International*, <<http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2013/08/29/une-armee-criminelle-et-ses-complices>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

29 Published by *Madamasr* in Arabic and English translation: “Al-Mārīshāl al-siyāsī” (The Political Marshal of Egypt), February 02, 2014, <<http://www.madamasr.com/ar/opinion/politics/السياسي-الماريشال>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

30 See details here: <<http://www.madamasr.com/news/belal-fadls-tv-drama-wont-be-screened-during-ramadan>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

31 Wikipedia article “Al-Araby Al-Jadeed”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Araby_Al-Jadeed> (retrieved Nov. 04, 2016).

program, *‘Aṣīr al-kutub* (Book’s essence) on Al Araby TV, the channel launched the same year by Fadaat Media. Although he maintains a strong presence on the book market, most of his books being published by Dār al-Shurūq, the biggest private publisher in Egypt, his self-imposed exile and his absence from the Egyptian media have clearly affected his audience.

Conversely, ‘Umar Ṭāhir kept a lower profile, continuing to contribute to *al-Ahrām* and *al-Akḥbār*, the main public, pro-government newspapers, as well as to *al-Taḥrīr*, which followed a pro-government line after the July 2013 coup, and, more recently (since May 2016) to *al-Maqāl*, the new opinion daily founded by Ibrāhīm ‘Īsā in February 2015. Maybe as a result of the current limits of his freedom of speech within the written press, Ṭāhir became much more active on the social media in the latest months, especially in Facebook where the number of his followers doubled (from 200,000 to 400,000) between May and October 2016.

In spite of their different political stances in the aftermath of 2013, Faḍl and Ṭāhir have followed a somewhat similar path, moving away from satiric writing and acting more and more, each one in his one way, 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. This is the explicit program of Bilāl Faḍl’s latest book, *Vītāmīnāt lil-dhākira* (Vitamins for Memory), published in January 2016. As for ‘Umar Ṭāhir, he has moved even further away from *adab sākhir*: his two latest books, *Athar al-nabī* (The Prophet’s trace, 2015) and *Idhā‘at al-aghānī* (Radio Hits, 2015), consist respectively of a series of pieces reflecting on various episodes in the life of Muḥammad, and a collection of accounts of the author’s intimate relationship with some popular Arabic songs.

The hypothesis of a tension between *ta’dīb* and *qillat adab*, or reformism and subversion, should be tested through a large panel of books coming under the category of *adab sākhir*. While I have not been able to do so in the limited scope of this research, I shall illustrate it with a few examples taken in the recent output in the genre. One of the most visible authors at the 2016 Cairo book fair, Īhāb Mu‘awwad, had just published *Wāy men lav mozaz* (Why Men Love Chicks, Dār al-Karma, 2015), a pastiche of *Why Men Love Bitches* (Sherry Argov, 2000), and his previous book *al-Rijāl min Būlāq wa’l-nisā’ min Awwal Fayṣal*,³² a pastiche of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (John Gray, 1992), was supposedly selling its 26th print.

Īhāb Mu‘awwad, born in 1969 and trained as an interior designer, became a marriage counsellor and he provides his advices in *al-Yawm al-sābi‘*. *Al-Rijāl min Būlāq* starts with a long introduction consisting of fictional encounters of the narrator with stereotypical characters from the lower classes, “Ḥamīda” and “Mursī”, who live in *‘ashwā’iyyāt*³³ (slums), and “Madame Ṣāfīnāz”, representing the upper middle class. Men/women relations in both classes are presented as **beyond repair**: in the first case, because their

32 MU‘AWWAD 2012.

33 On living conditions in the informal settlements cf. also the contributions to the present *dossier special* by Mona ABAZA (see “Tale II”) and Stephan GUTH (cf., in particular, films nos. #1, #9, and #19).

family problems are caused by “**poverty and ignorance**”, and in the second, because “these people have to sow religion and restraint in their inner selves”. Which leaves us with “the middle class, which represents 70% of our society”³⁴—a very broad definition, indeed, of the Egyptian middle class, but coherent with the authors’ purpose, which is to “know their [that is, those 70% of the society] problems and try to help them in solving these problems”.³⁵ Most chapters of the book follow the same pattern: a sketch, usually in dialogue form, presenting a dispute between **husband and wife**, followed by a “**commentary**” where the narrator stresses each side’s rights and wrongs and provides advice in order to enhance harmony within the couple. The whole book is written in Cairene **dialect** and the dialogues often sound like those of an Egyptian *musalsal* (TV series).³⁶ The characters and situations are quite stereotypical: the husband does not care about being attractive, forgets the wedding anniversary, neglects the household and his children, has an affair, wants to take a second wife; the wife gets jealous for no reason, cannot stand her mother-in-law, refuses to have sex with her husband, etc. Each conflicting situation is presented as if it always happened in the same direction: the stereotypical Egyptian wife cannot be neglectful of herself or of her household and children, she cannot have an affair (and obviously, she cannot dream of taking a second husband), whereas the stereotypical husband cannot be jealous, refuse to have sex with his wife or have problems with her mother, etc. The comments and advices provided by the narrator/author aim at preserving the matrimonial bond, and in order to do so, both parties must refrain from falling into the natural tendencies, so to speak, of their respective sex. Here is a typical example:

[As regards sexual needs], man is totally different from woman, because he is “positive”³⁷ and much less able than her to control his instincts. Of course, this does not mean that the woman is more virtuous or has a stronger will power: it is simply a gift our Lord bestowed on her so that she can protect herself in all situations. The clearest proof of this is that widows and divorced women can sometimes live without men, whereas it is very difficult for a widower or a divorced man to spend the rest of his life without a woman.

[...] As for the woman who refuses [to have sex with] her husband, ignores him or sleeps while knowing that he needs her [sexually], despite the fact that he treats her respectfully and tenderly, and justifies it by saying “It’s too hot, I’m fed up, I don’t feel like it, I can’t stand myself, I’m exhausted by the housekeeping and the children, I don’t feel like I need this from him, I’m too lazy to take a shower, I’m

34 MU’AWWAD 2012: 24. All translations are my own.

35 *Ibid.*

36 On the growing use of the spoken vernacular in writing in the post-revolutionary contexts, see also Myriam ACHOUR KALLEL’s contribution in this special issue: “La Rolls et la Volkswagen: Écrire en tunisien sur Facebook en 2016”.

37 The author uses the adjective *mūgab*, which refers to the positive electric polarity, the woman being implicitly characterized as the negative (*salbī*) polarity.

afraid for my hairstyle”, she is being unfair to her husband and she must understand that by doing so, she becomes accomplice in any fault he might fall into [...].³⁸

Like most satirists, Mu‘awwad is thus a moralist. He makes his reader laugh at his characters in order to reaffirm the matrimonial bond as a social norm. The last sentence of the book reads as follows:

This is the history of Hind and Hindāwī, the history of every household in our country, and how many histories there are inside the houses, but only the smart one understands that it is always the same old story, that he is not the only one to live it and enjoy it as it is, and that there is no harm in him trying to make it better. The only harm is to become desperate or run away and leave behind him a story he walked into by his own will and people who agreed to walk into it with him.³⁹

In this respect, it is very much similar to Ghāda ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s introduction of *‘Āyza atgawwiz*, where she expresses her scepticism towards young women who pretend not to care about marriage or having other priorities:

It might be true that many girls have high ambitions in their studies or in their careers, but I challenge any one of them to tell me that her first and foremost ambition in life is not to become a wife, if only because it is the only way for her to become a mother.⁴⁰

Here is another bestseller of *adab sākhir* where satirising marriage is a means not to mock the institution in itself, but to criticize its debasement in the current conditions prevailing in Egyptian society (or, as Īhāb Mu‘awwad would say, in the Egyptian middle class). Like Mu‘awwad, ‘Abd al-‘Āl is clearly on the reformist pole of *adab sākhir*.

Let us turn now to the other pole, the subversive one. Muṣṭafā Shuhayb (b. 1988) is a young writer and journalist with already five books published between 2010 and 2016. According to his Wikipedia Arabic page,⁴¹ the most successful (14 prints) is *Rihlatī min il-shakk lil-shakk barḍuh*⁴² (My Journey from Doubt to Doubt Again)—a pastiche of Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd’s bestseller *Rihlatī min al-shakk ilā ‘l-īmān* (My Journey from Doubt to Faith, 1970). The content is faithful to the title: unlike Īhāb Mu‘awwad, Muṣṭafā Shuhayb does not seek to provide **advice** or **guidance** through humour. His book is a candid and funny account of a young man’s **quest for himself** within a family and a society who provide him with unsatisfactory answers: the theme and style remind of ‘Umar Ṭāhir’s in *Shaklā-hā bāzīt*,⁴³ his first hit. The blurb, in pure ‘*āmmiyya*, is a faithful rendition of the book’s content, also written mostly in dialect:

38 MU‘AWWAD 2012: 131-132.

39 MU‘AWWAD 2012: 202.

40 ‘ABD AL-‘ĀL 2008: 5.

41 <https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/شُهَيْب_مُصْطَفَى> (retrieved Dec. 06, 2016).

42 SHUHAYB 2015.

43 ṬĀHIR 2003.

This book is for you if:

You never were top of the class. You can't take a decision. Dogs frighten you and you like to bully cats. You hate the smell of hospitals. You killed a cockroach and you waited until you watched the ants gathering around it. You used to put a slash on the RIGHT sign to make it look WRONG too. You got an electric shock when a child. You pilfered the private lessons money and you cheated on the price of the schoolbooks. You don't know your ID number, you can't memorize your father's phone number, your mother's or your sisters'. You are afraid of carrying babies. You lose all your receipts. You use traffic as an excuse even when the streets are empty. You're the best when it comes to give advice but you are as helpless as a babe!⁴⁴

Rihlatī is a succession of chapters where a first-person narrator who resembles the author, a young man in his twenties, makes fun of himself confiding to his reader stories about his family, his friends and more or less every kind of problem young men and women are confronted with in Egypt—except those having to do with sexuality. This silence about such a crucial matter for most Egyptian youth reveals the limits of the acceptable subversiveness in this kind of literature. As much striking is the absence of politics (no mention of what happened between 2011 and 2013 in the country in this book published in 2015) and religion: in other words, Muṣṭafā Shuhayb stays on the safe side from the famous “trinity of taboos” (*al-thālūth al-muḥarram*)⁴⁵. In spite of these concessions to the unwritten rules imposed by both state and society, *Rihlatī* still deserves to be read as a form of subversive satire in the sense that it is faithful to its title: it takes us “from **doubt** to doubt again”, opening a Pandora's box of **questions** and leaving the reader with no answers to them. It ends with a chapter where the narrator finds himself dead, witnesses his own funeral and seems to finally come to terms with his **depression** and **insignificance**. A very pessimistic ending, quite **anticlimactic** for a supposedly humorous book, but also much telling of, or in tune with, the mood of the Egyptian youth in the post-2013 context.

This trend is taken to an extreme of sorts in *Hikāyāt sīkūbātiyya*⁴⁶ (Psychopathic Stories), the first book of Wagīh Ṣabrī, a young author who presents himself as follows on the blurb:

Wagīh Ṣabrī is a young man in his twenties who has grown up in Egypt and has been educated in its schools. This is why he has learnt zilch in the field in which he specialised and he has decided to do what he enjoys doing.⁴⁷

The first “psychopathic story” is also reproduced in the blurb. It is a short, hilarious dialogue between a **psychiatrist** and a patient who complains from a weird addiction: he

44 SHUHAYB 2015: back cover.

45 More precisely, “[t]he real taboos could instead be labelled obscenity, blasphemy and political opposition, the classical reasons for suppression of the freedom of expression since Antiquity” (STAGH 1993: 127).

46 ṢABRĪ 2015.

47 ṢABRĪ 2015: back cover.

loves to rape doctors, male and female as well. It ends with the so-called patient starting to undo his shirt’s buttons in preparation of his raping. This, added to the author’s self-presentation, leads us to categorize *Ḥikāyāt sīkūbātīyya* as *adab sākhir*, even if the book title and front cover do not conform to the codes of the genre. The other stories are very much in line with that of the doctors’ rapist. Most of them consist of short (2-3 pages) dialogues taking place in daily social intercourses (job interviews, a woman buying sanitary towels in a pharmacy, an oral exam at the university, etc.). Yet dialogue becomes absurd when one of the parties, or both of them, is obviously mad, in a way that is nothing but an exaggeration of what is taking place in **ordinary life**.⁴⁸ Other stories aim at Egypt as a whole: a group of jihadists consider conquering Egypt, but when one of them describes it as a total mess, they renounce; aliens roam around Earth kidnapping people to enslave them in their planet, but when they discover that they have put aboard an Egyptian, they decide to send him back despite his supplications, because they “take everybody except Egyptians”, the “worst slackers on earth”.⁴⁹ The spaceship takes off and a few seconds later, “a creased fifty pounds note falls down”. The Egyptian “takes it, unfolds it, kisses it and puts it in his pocket”.⁵⁰

One finds here neither moral aim guiding the social critique, nor post-adolescent revolted confessions. All we have is **black humour**, **absurd** and a **derision** that spares no one, or rather, seems to target all Egyptians. Wagīh Ṣabrī’s look at Egyptian society is hopeless. It reminds me of Aḥmad al-‘Ā’idī (Alaidy)’s cult novel *An takūn ‘Abbās al-‘Abd* (Being Abbas el Abd),⁵¹ with the humour in addition. This subversive tone is also very much present in Ṣabrī’s very popular posts on Facebook,⁵² where he engages sometimes in direct political commentary. For instance, at the beginning of the Tiran and Sanafir affair⁵³ he published a hilarious imaginary dialogue between King Salmān and marshal-president al-Sīsī, a dialogue that could have been written for a Bassem Youssef program.⁵⁴ A few days later, he had this one:

48 [Editors’ note: The importance of everyday life experience is mirrored both in the *In 2016* project’s focus on everyday lifeworlds as well as in the special attention given to related aspects by several contributors to the present *dossier spécial*; cf., in particular, Mona ABAZA’s and Ragnhild ZORGATI’s personal impressions (on everyday life in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively), as well as Elena CHITI’s study of the treatment of this experience as a “dark comedy”, Albrecht HOFHEINZ’s description of the situation of the youth, and Stephan GUTH’s coverage of a number of contemporary films (see, for instance, film nos. ##1-3, #9, ##11-12, ##17-19).]

49 Cf. the collapsed code “*waṭan = ghurba* (alienation)” in Elena CHITI’s contribution to this dossier.

50 ṢABRĪ 2015 (37-38).

51 ALAIDY 2006 [orig. 2003].

52 As of December 09, 2016, he has more than 242,000 followers on Facebook (compare to ‘Umar Ṭāhir’s 417,000 and so followers, although Ṭāhir’s fame and media visibility are much bigger).

53 In April 2016, during King Salmān bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s visit to Egypt, president al-Sīsī announced that he had signed an agreement handing sovereignty of these two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia. The deal led to the largest protest movement since al-Sīsī’s election in 2014 and was then contested in court. On 16 January 2017, the Supreme Administrative Court issued a final verdict on the case, confirming Egypt’s sovereignty over the islands.

54 See his Facebook page, under the name Wageeh SABRY, <<https://www.facebook.com/wageeh.sabry?fref=ts>> (post published April 13, 2016).

- Sorry about that, *hagga*, your son has **hope**.
- Oh my! Why? How did he catch it? As if we didn't have enough on our hands!
- He might be born with it. Or he's one of those upright youth who took part in the revolution and painted the sidewalks. Let him take this suppository until he is cured and gets useless, characterless and unconcerned with life, with God's help.
- Let's pray to Him, Doctor!⁵⁵

This is as close as one can get to the famous French aphorism: *L'humour est la politesse du désespoir* (Humour is the polite form of despair). It is tempting to make a parallel between this kind of black humour, which seems to be rather unheard of in the field of Egyptian satiric literature, and the several **dystopian** novels that appeared recently in Egypt.⁵⁶ Each one in its own way, they appear as the literary expression of the state of mind of large sections of the Egyptian youth in the current context. The brutal repression of political dissent that has followed the army's takeover in July 2013 and targeted the "revolutionary youth" as much as, if not more than the partisans of the "deposed president" Muḥammad Mursī, has led to a shrinkage of public space as spectacular as was its expansion between January 2011 and June 2013. It has also reached several of those writers, cartoonists and other artists such as Aḥmad Nāgī, Islām Gāwīsh, the Aṭfāl al-Shawāri' music band,⁵⁷ etc., who unknowingly transgressed the shrinking limits of what is deemed acceptable within artistic or literary expression by the powers-to-be. But as sweeping as the counter-revolution may be, it cannot erase the experience lived during those two years, an experience that has been especially decisive for the young generation whose political socialisation took place in this context. Whether in the conventional book form, as we examined here mostly, or through social networks, whether in written form, in caricature or in the current Youtube videos that prolong the Bassem Youssef talk-show, satire remains a privileged form of expression of the Egyptian youth's discontent with the current state of affairs as well as a way to cultivate the spirit of freedom they experienced during the years 2011-2013.

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55 Wageeh SABRY's Facebook page, post published May 25, 2016.

56 See ALTER 2016. – Elena CHITI's contribution in this *JAIS* issue explores more systematically the parallel between satire and dystopia in several recent Egyptian literary works.

57 On Islām Gāwīsh and ṭfāl al-Shawāri' cf. esp. Albrecht HOFHEINZ's article in the present *dossier special*.

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Deciphering the Binary Code “Egyptian versus Foreigner” in Egyptian Cinema*

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Abstract

In 2016, emigration is more than ever a massive phenomenon in Egypt which both strongly affects the everyday lives of Egyptians and is central in Egyptian cultural production. This article aims to explore how the Egyptian cinema contributes to forging a binary code that differentiates between “Egyptian” and “Foreigner”. It argues that Egyptians who live abroad may also be perceived as potential foreigners for those left in Egypt. After briefly describing the corpus of seven emigration films, the article sketches a cartography of the geographic imaginaries of migration, which is paradoxically more oriented toward the West, while in fact the majority of Egyptians abroad are in the Gulf. Finally, it demonstrates how movie directors have produced a very pessimistic vision of emigration, in a manner that is equally critical of the countries of arrival as of Egyptian society. Their discourse on the theme of the migrant’s identity, on the personal, familial and national levels, resonates with the social imaginary concerning migration, which is dominated by a nationalist paradigm. Are we nevertheless witnessing the emergence of a transnational cinema, that is, one that envisages the possibility of an identity that is simultaneously of here and elsewhere?

Keywords: Egypt, cinema, migration, transnational, foreigner

In 2016, with several million Egyptians living abroad, emigration is more than ever a massive phenomenon in Egypt which both strongly affects the everyday lives of Egyptians¹ and is central in Egyptian cultural production,² since emigration is a core theme for writers and filmmakers, who themselves have very often been migrants.

Curiously, considering that Egyptian cinema has been much studied,³ in particular in the social sciences,⁴ the theme of emigration in film remains little explored by researchers.⁵ It is true that Egyptian cinema is mainly famous, in the Arab world and elsewhere, for its realist and melodramatic veins, strongly imbued with local colour and stereotyped plots, characters and decors. Representations of the “other”, or rather the “elsewhere”, long remained rare, images of Western countries generally being reduced to mere backdrops for

* This text is a reworked version of an article published in French in 2013 in *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM), see PAGES-EL KAROUI 2013. Although it does not deal with films issued in 2016, it is included in the present *Living 2016* dossier because it treats a topic that has remained of high relevance for the *In 2016* project (see, e.g., below, footnote 6), – For the notion of binary “codes” (and “codes collapsed”), cf. S. GUTH’s introduction to this special dossier.

1 Migration constitutes a core concept among those “used by people to categorize and structure their experiences and to locate themselves in space and time”. Cf. GUTH, introduction to the dossier.

2 Cf. chapter “Space (Homeland as Exile)” in Elena CHITI’s contribution to the present dossier.

3 SHAFIQ 1997, 2007, 2011.

4 ARMBRUST 2011.

5 GAUTIER 1992; AL-HAMARNEH 2005.

love stories, tales of espionage, or honeymoons. However, since the end of the 1990s, a “new wave of emigration films” has emerged.⁶

The theme of economic emigration enables restatements of several central motifs in Egyptian cinema, such as gender, class and the nation,⁷ articulated around several key plots: the emancipation of women vis-à-vis patriarchal society is generally depicted through the triumph of love marriage over arranged marriage;⁸ the narrative of social mobility, omnipresent since the 1930s,⁹ is often played out through a story of impossible love between two characters from opposed social classes; finally, the question of national identity, historically formulated in a colonial and post-colonial context, is reworked from the angle of globalization. Beyond their dreams of making it in the world and their fears of cultural alienation, do migrants not also contribute to questions surrounding the national imaginary?

On the basis of a corpus of seven emigration films, I will explore how the Egyptian cinema contributes to forging a binary code¹⁰ that differentiates between “Egyptian” and “Foreigner”. I postulate that this code has not been strongly modified since 2011, and clearly these fictions which have been seen by a large audience are still shaping the migratory imaginaries of ordinary people living in 2016.¹¹ Who are the “foreigners” in this code? Not only non-nationals. Egyptians who live abroad may also be perceived as potential foreigners for those left in Egypt.

After briefly describing this corpus, an essential step for readers not familiar with this filmography, the article sketches a cartography of the geographic imaginaries of migration on the silver screen, which is paradoxically more oriented toward the West, while in fact the majority of Egyptians abroad are in the Gulf. Movie directors, like writers, have produced a very pessimistic vision of emigration, in a manner that is equally critical of the countries of arrival as of Egyptian society. Their discourse on the theme of the migrant’s identity, on the personal, familial and national levels, resonates with the social imaginary concerning migration, which is dominated by a nationalist paradigm. Are we nevertheless witnessing the emergence of a transnational cinema, that is, one that envisages the possibility of an identity that is simultaneously of here and elsewhere?

6 SHAFIQ 2011: 1027. – For two recent counterparts from Tunisia, cf. films no. #16 and #20 in Stephan GUTH’s contribution to the present dossier.

7 SHAFIQ 2007.

8 ARMBURST 2011.

9 SHAFIQ 2011.

10 See note 1, above.

11 Several films or TV series dealing with migrations were released after 2011. A TV series *Im-barāṭūriyyit mīn?* [Maryam Abū ‘Awf (Mariam Abou Ouf), 2014] demonstrates how government and media question the loyalty of bi-nationals: Amīra, an Anglo-Egyptian living in London is enthusiastic during the 25 January revolution and decides to come back to Egypt with her family. In the end, she is arrested and accused of being a spy. The comedy *il-Dunyā Maqlūba* [Hānī Ṣabrī (Hany Sabry), 2015] imagines a time when America has become less developed than Egypt and every American tries to migrate to Egypt. Depicting the difficulty of legal migration, the main character migrates to Egypt illegally. Despite this funny attempt to reverse the course of history and the route of migration, no strong break is discernible relative to typical representations of migration in Egyptian cinema. Most films dealing with emigration seem to be underpinned by a moral aimed at trying to limit emigration.

I. The New Wave of Migration Films

The corpus examined here comprises seven films in which emigration is the central theme, produced between the end of the 1990s and 2010. These years marked a turning point with respect to the technical quality of Egyptian films—which had slowly declined since the 1970s—in the context of the renewal of movie theatres, especially in shopping malls.¹²

The theme of emigration is not however a new one for Egyptian cinema. *Il-Nimr il-Iswid* [*The Black Tiger*, ‘Āṭif Sālim (Atef Salem), 1984] is among the great classics: it follows the rise of a young Egyptian who becomes a boxing champion in Germany. Directors inspired by neorealism, like Muḥammad Khān (Mohamed Khan) or Khayrī Bishāra (Kahyri Bishara) made two types of films in the genre in the 1980s and 1990s. The first type is about unsuccessful attempts to emigrate to the United States, for example *Amrīkā Shīkā Bīkā* [*Abracadabra America* – Khayri Bishara, 1993], *Arḍ al-Aḥlām* [*The Land of Dreams*, Dā’ūd ‘Abd Al-Sayyid (Daoud Abdel Sayed), 1993]. The second type are films about “returnees” from the Gulf, for example *Arḍ al-Muwāṭin* [*The Return of the Citizen* – Muḥammad Khān (Mohamed Khan), 1986] or *Sūbirmārkit* [*Supermarket* – M. Khan, 1990]. Both types of films were very critical of the society born of *infītāḥ*, and the last ones held migrants returning from the Gulf responsible for social changes in Egypt. They criticize the disintegration of society and family ties, the dangers of losing one’s identity, and the culture of consumerism and waste, all precipitated by the easy money made by emigrants.¹³ The change that has occurred since the 1990s lies less in theme (there are numerous continuities with earlier films on emigration) and more in the number of films, the increase in their budgets, and the conditions under which they are produced and distributed. The number of films made on location abroad has increased, and they increasingly evoke, not without clichés, the difficulties faced by Egyptian expatriates, while comparing them, in a game of mirrors, with the snares of Egyptian society.

A. Short synopsis of the films

- *Hāllū Amrīkā* [*Hello America* – Nādir Galāl (Nader Galal), 1998], with ‘Ādil Imām and Shīrīn

Bakhīt is not rich enough to marry his fiancée, ‘Adīla. When his cousin, an American citizen, gets him a visa to the United States, Bakhīt thinks he has gone to heaven. But once there with ‘Adīla, his disappointment is considerable: his cousin exploits him, so he leaves

12 The massive decline of movie theatres, which were mainly frequented by male spectators from the popular classes and which lost ground when VCR’s began to be introduced in the 1970s, stopped in the 1990s with the renovation of downtown cinemas and the construction of new movie theatres that made use of the latest technologies (digital sound and Dolby stereo) on the outskirts of the city, in shopping malls. A new type of “shopping mall film” began to appear at that time, specially conceived by producers to appeal to this new audience, consisting of young men and women of the middle classes (SHAFIK 2011: 1003). *Hammām fī Amstirdām* [*Hammam in Amsterdam* – Sa’īd Ḥāmid, 1999] is a classic example of this genre.

13 GAUTIER 1992.

his house and is forced to work odd jobs. Caught between the animosity of Americans toward Arabs and Muslims, and the self-interested solidarity proffered by Muslim fundamentalists, his dream becomes a nightmare. Having thought they would become millionaires, Bakhīt and ‘Adīla finally end up on the street, penniless.

- ***Hammām fī Amstīrdām*** [*Hammam in Amsterdam* – Sa‘īd Hāmīd (Saīd Hamed), 1999], with Muḥammed Hunaydī, Aḥmad al-Saqqā and Mūnā Līzā

Unemployed in Cairo, Hammām is unable to marry his fiancée. He therefore decides to go to Amsterdam, where one of his uncles succeeded in marrying a Dutch woman. With the help of other Egyptians, he progressively manages to find a stable job, falls in love with a Moroccan-Dutch woman named Ruqayya, and will even end up owning a restaurant.

- ***Al-Madīna*** [*The City* – Yusrī Naṣrallāh (Yousry Nasrallah), 1999], with Bāsim Samra, Rushdī Zam (Roschdy Zem), Inès de Medeiros

‘Alī, a young accountant who lives in Rōḍ al-Farag, a working class neighbourhood in Cairo, dreams of becoming an actor, to his father’s great disappointment. He decides to leave Egypt for Paris, where he lives for several years, struggling alongside other undocumented migrants and working as a boxer in fixed fights. Tired of hustling, he wants to return to Egypt, but is beat up by his former employers. Badly injured, he loses his memory but succeeds in returning to Egypt, where he finishes by fulfilling his dream of becoming an actor.

- ***Tāyih fī Amrīkā*** [*Lost in America* – Rāfī Girgis (Rafi Girgis), 2002], with Khālīd al-Nabawī, Ḥalā Shīḥā

Having arrived alone at the Los Angeles airport, Sharīf il-Maṣrī overhears two Egyptian-Americans, Naḥla and her daughter Nūr, confiding in one another that they do not know what ‘Ādil, the cousin they have come to meet, looks like. ‘Ādil, a rich peasant from the Delta, is supposed to come to meet Nūr in order to marry her. Sharīf decides to pass himself off as ‘Ādil and leaves with Naḥla and Nūr, who take him to their luxurious villa. The impostor is not immediately discovered since the real ‘Ādil is arrested by mistake while leaving the airport. Lost in the bad parts of Los Angeles, he is hit by stray bullets during some gang violence, and loses his memory. At the hospital he is treated by a young Lebanese-American nurse, who will take him home and help him to find Naḥla and Nūr. Meanwhile, Sharīf has fallen genuinely in love with Nūr and is unable to reveal to her his true identity. The real ‘Ādil turns up the day of the wedding between Nūr and Sharīf/‘Ādil, and unmask the impostor. But the film has a happy ending as the love marriage triumphs.

- ***Iskīndīriyya... Nyū Yūrḳ*** [*Alexandria–New York* – Yūsuf Shāhīn (Youssef Chahine), 2005], with Maḥmūd Ḥumayda, Yusrā, Aḥmad Yaḥyā

Shāhīn dramatizes his own life through the character of Yaḥyā, an Egyptian filmmaker in his seventies who travels to New York to receive a prize during a film festival. There he re-

meets Ginger, the woman he loved in his youth while he was a student in Pasadena. He learns from her that they have a son, Iskandar, conceived when they briefly crossed paths again, some twenty years earlier. But Iskandar rejects his father out of hatred toward Arabs.

- *Qaşş wa-Laşq* [*Cut and Paste* – Hāla Khalīl, 2006], with Ḥanān Turk and Sharīf Munīr
Gamīla is a young woman in her thirties, single and resourceful, who wants more than anything else to emigrate to New Zealand. To improve her chances of emigrating, she decides to marry Yūsuf, a young man she met randomly, who also wants to work abroad. They end up falling genuinely in love and stay in Egypt.

- *ʿAsal Iswid* [*Bitter Honey* – Khālīd Marʿī, 2010], with Aḥmad Ḥilmī and Idwārd
Maṣrī ʿArabī is an Egyptian who has lived in the United States for twenty years. He returns to Egypt after his father's death to spend the holidays and see if he can live there. However he arrives in Cairo with only his Egyptian passport. The whole first part of the film shows the tribulations of an Egyptian-American who is a mere tourist and lacks all points of reference trying to navigate his way through a Kafkaesque Egypt where human beings are valued differently according to their nationality. Then, having succeeded in re-locating his old apartment, his childhood friend and his neighbours, he progressively rediscovers his Egyptian identity and the positive sides of Egypt. In the end he decides to stay for good.

B. Varied genres for simple narrative structures

This corpus includes films belonging to varied genres (dramas, melodramas, comedies, etc) and to different categories (*films d'auteur* versus popular films), as contestable as such categories are. The theme of emigration provides an entry point that cuts across the entire constellation of Egyptian cinema, both in terms of actors and directors. It includes great "stars" like the unavoidable comedy actor ʿĀdil Imām, who has been a fixture on the Egyptian scene since the 1960s, or the younger generations of the end of the 1990s, such as Muḥammad Hunaydī or Aḥmad Ḥilmī. Watched and liked by large audiences,¹⁴ these films reveal a great deal through the way they resonate in the collective imaginary, by expressing the dreams and fears of a large part of the Egyptian population. In this sense, they are of great interest to social science researchers.

Numerous factors underscore the artificiality of the distinction between popular films and *films d'auteur*, among others a certain predilection for the mixing of genres: Yūsuf Shāhīn's *Alexandria–New York* oscillates between romantic tragedy and musical comedy, between autobiographical fiction and a pamphlet denouncing American imperialism. In a different register, Saʿīd Ḥāmid's *Hammam in Amsterdam* also plays off the mixing of genres, combining comedic sketches with action scenes (a high speed car chase) or scenes where the characters break into song, all the while introducing a geopolitical dimension

14 When they were not seen in movie theatres, it was possible to watch them on cassette, DVD, or the internet. Several films in this corpus were evoked by Egyptian migrants living in France and the Emirates in the course of interviews.

through the character of Yūda, the Arabophone Israeli who claims the Pyramids belong to him¹⁵ and who is willing to do anything to prevent Hammām from getting a leg up in the world. In the end, what would seemingly allow for distinguishing “*films d’auteur*” from “popular films” is the presence of more complex narrative structures, a blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, a more driven aesthetic, more subtle play with cinematographic language, or also a more reflexive position relative to cinema. For example, in *Alexandria–New York* Shāhīn makes constant reference to Hollywood’s golden age, with its stars (the filmmaker’s youthful love is named Ginger, like Ginger Rogers) and musical comedies, to which he compares contemporary cinema in a manner that is unfavourable to the latter and is summed up in a compelling ellipsis between Fred Astaire and Sylvester Stallone.

The plot of the films in this corpus is always focused on a migrant, generally a man,¹⁶ potentially also a couple, like Bakhīt and ‘Adīla in *Hello America*, where Bakhīt nevertheless remains the main character. Only *Cut and Paste*, directed by a woman, Hāla Khalīl, has as its main character a young woman who wants to expatriate herself at any cost. The migrants are all originally from cities. The majority are from the middle or working classes. Whereas rural migrants are overrepresented in sociological and anthropological studies, they do not appear to interest filmmakers, who confine them to caricatural secondary roles, like the Upper Egyptian roommate in *Hamman in Amsterdam*.¹⁷ The narrative constructions across all seven films can be analyzed in terms of Greimas’s actantial model (1995).¹⁸ The hero’s departure corresponds with the quest for an object: in the majority of films, as it occurs in real life in Egypt, men migrate in order to **make enough money to marry**.¹⁹ In *Alexandria–New York*, the plot rests on a dual quest, for a **youthful love** and the **son** he has always dreamed of. In *The City* and *Cut and Paste*,²⁰ it consists rather of a **quest for autonomy**, of a will to emancipate one’s self from the **constraints imposed by family**. When

15 This seems to be an allusion to the fact that Menachem Begin, on his visit to the National Museum in Cairo in 1977, claimed that it were Jews who built the pyramids. It had been taken up in a similiary way already in Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s *al-Lagna* (1981).

16 On the silence on female migrants in social science literature on Egyptian migrations see AHMED 2011.

17 A Ramadan soap opera, *Misyū [Monsieur] Ramaḍān Mabruk Abū ‘l-‘Alamayn Ḥamūda* [Sāmiḥ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 2011], with Muḥammad Hunaydī, the famous actor from *Hamman in Amsterdam*, recounts the tribulations of a teacher from a village in the Delta, who discovers the harsh reality of the life of Egyptians in France.

18 Emerging from structural semiotics, the actantial model picks the narrative apart into a subject (the hero), the quest, and an object. The quest is initiated by a sender, for the benefit of a receiver. The characters, or other elements, which help the hero in his quest are called helpers, and those which hinder him, opponents. To obtain the object of his quest, the hero must go through a series of tests or ordeals. – For a valuable short introduction into the theory, cf. HÉBERT 2006.

19 [Editor’s note: Here and in the following, terms emphasized in **bold** indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project’s search for GUMBRECHT’ian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed, cf. Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier. The emphasis is the editors’.]

20 In *Cut & Paste*, the actantial model is inverted, since the desired object is migration itself, and marriage becomes a helper, which will aid the heroine in pursuing her quest. With its happy ending, the traditional structure is re-established: Gamīla finally falls in love with Yūsuf, and the question of emigration ceases to be central.

‘Alī, the main character in Naṣrallāh’s film, is asked by his father, who disapproves of the son’s departure for France, “You think Paris will save you?”, ‘Alī replies “No, but there I will be really on my own.”

Migration appears to be a personal choice,²¹ never something imposed by the family. This is contrary to the portrayal by novelists (*The Other Country*, by Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Magīd) or anthropologists and geographers²² who, in rural areas, often explain departures as part of a familial strategy in which the family member considered most apt to succeed is designated. The migrant is therefore not presented as a victim, as is often the case in the Egyptian press,²³ but rather as an actor responsible for his own destiny. *Hammam in Amsterdam* ends in success. The hero manages to overcome the three trials described by the actantial model: qualifying (finding work), principal (getting married to a beautiful Moroccan-Dutch woman) and glorifying (ending up as the owner of a large restaurant). However in *Hello America* and *The City*, the heroes gain nothing from their expatriation. Along their paths, strewn with pitfalls, the protagonists encounter characters who help them in their quest (the “helpers”). These are either Egyptians who migrated earlier (Adriano, Hammām’s friend²⁴) or **second generation Arabs**, generally women born of bi-national couples (the Lebanese-American nurse who helps ‘Ādil recover his memory in *Lost in America*, or Ruqayya, the young Moroccan-Dutch woman who works in the same hotel as Hammām and who he ends up marrying). Relations with citizens of the destination countries are few or are limited to the role of opponents, that is, those who hinder the quest, such as the police officers or customs agents who systematically impede the characters’ freedom of movement. The constraints resulting from the **Schengen** area or the closure of the American borders have been deeply interiorized by the filmmakers.

II. Mapping the Foreign Countries of Egyptian Migrations: West is Best?

Whereas Egyptian migrants for the most part live in the Gulf (three quarters), followed only secondarily by North America (12.5%) and Europe (12.5%), the corpus of films reflects an orientation that favours the West: four films evoke migration to the United States, two to Europe, and one to New Zealand. Why do the films generally use migration to the **West as their frame** when Arab countries are in reality the principal destination? Novels about migration, for their part, frequently evoke emigration to the Gulf. The answer can perhaps be located, first, in the conditions related to the production of films. It is quite difficult to obtain a permit to film in the Gulf countries,²⁵ all the more so to denounce the conditions under which Egyptian workers are exploited. In addition, the answer also stems

21 If we follow the actantial model, the sender and the receiver are conflated in the hero.

22 SAAD 2005; MÜLLER-MAHN 2005.

23 CANTINI & GRUNTZ 2010.

24 Adriano is a Copt and this friendship between the characters is celebrated in the film as symbolic of the national alliance between Christians and Muslims.

25 This explains why the films of the 1980s focused above all on the question of return from the Gulf countries (GAUTIER 1992). Since the 2000s, films have been made in the Gulf, but with limited political significance.

from the cinematographic genre, which has been heavily influenced by the canons of Hollywood: the Western “elsewhere” [*barra*] always seems to make for a better plot in cinema, even if it transforms itself into a nightmare.

A. The American Dream or the American Nightmare?

The portrayal of the **United States** in Egyptian films is a fairly uniformly unappealing one, even in the films that are not inculpatory, like *Lost in America*. If the American Dream is often part of migrants’ imaginary, their encounter with reality invariably reveals the darker side of the American way of life. In *Hello America*, the main character, Bakhīt, imagines that in the United States he will quickly become a millionaire, marry a tall, beautiful blond in order to get citizenship, and end up one day—why not—President of the United States, since everything is possible in this land of immigrants. His destiny reveals itself to be the exact opposite. The United States are generally depicted as a place of racism toward African-Americans and widespread Islamophobia and xenophobia toward Arabs. The characters are barely off the plane before being suspected of being drug traffickers or terrorists. In *Hello America* a strong-smelling Egyptian cheese that falls out of the baggage compartment sets off a bacteriological alarm in the plane and Bakhīt and ‘Adīla are arrested. In *Lost in America*, ‘Adīl is stopped at customs as the *mulūkhiyya*²⁶ that he is carrying in his bags is mistaken for drugs. **Urban violence** is often depicted: almost all the main characters are attacked and robbed at least once.

The director of *Hello America* endeavours to turn the advantages of personal freedom into a critique of **loose morals**. Bakhīt enthusiastically supports a street protest until he vexedly realizes it is a demonstration in favour of gay marriage. Bakhīt and ‘Adīla later happen upon a couple languorously kissing in a car; they are the ones finally picked up by the police, for voyeurism. Shocked to see his cousin, who has become an American citizen, allowing his daughter to go out with her boyfriend, Bakhīt also endures his fiancée’s liberation when ‘Adīla decides to go out to a night club without him, scantily dressed. She responds to his indignation by countering “I am a free woman in a free country.” The director also introduces a political dimension: **freedom of expression** leads to the development of fundamentalist groups. Kicked out of his cousin’s house, Bakhīt is scooped up by an Imam whose preaching is virulently anti-American. The latter manages to convince Bakhīt to marry Barbara, a poor, overweight, alcoholic, black woman, in order to get American citizenship. Toward the end of the film, Bakhīt gives a patriotic speech on television, condemning American **imperialism** and affirming that Egypt has no need for America’s **military and financial aid**.

For Yūsuf Shāhīn, who was initially hopelessly enamored with the American model, the denunciation of the myth is less moral than political. *Alexandria–New York*, which is dedicated to Edward Said, recounts 50 years of turbulent relations between the filmmaker and the United States, made of love and rage, which end in a virulent tract against American imperialism. As its title suggests, the film operates on the basis of a **rhetoric of oppo-**

26 The plant, which is made into soup in Egypt is considered an Egyptian “national” dish and has hence come to symbolise Egyptianity.

sition, contrasting the myth of **Alexandria**—symbol of **cosmopolitanism, culture**²⁷ and **tolerance**—with a vision of America as **racist, arrogant** and mired in **cultural mediocrity**. In order to avoid falling into a simple antithesis and to honour his love of America, Shāhīn plays with the characters' symbolism. Yahyà, the director and his alter ego, who refuses in the first instance to go to the festival in New York as a sign of protest against America's political support for Israel, embodies the **conscience** of the Arab world. Ginger, his youthful love, personifies a soft and luminous face of the America of long ago, the one that fed the dreams of Shāhīn the adolescent and who continues to haunt him. Their son, Iskander, who refuses to recognize his father, on the pretext that he is Arab and that as a dancer his milieu includes many **Jews** (the argument seems rather undeveloped!²⁸), represents the dark side of contemporary America, with its **xenophobia, intransigence, and vanity**, all symbols of a society in **decline**. The reductiveness of the characters' symbolism, along with the often caricatural discourse, weaken Shāhīn's argument. Thus, both commercial films and *films d'auteur* have in common a very negative image of the United States, which "reflects the deep **mistrust** of Egyptian intellectuals toward American democracy and foreign policy".²⁹ This dark and ambivalent image of the United States, which can also be found in literature,³⁰ pre-dates September 11, since the most anti-American film of the corpus, *Hello America*, was released in 1998. Paradoxically, whereas resentment toward the United States grew steadily in Egypt over the 2000s, filmmakers during that period preferred the path of **introspectiveness** toward Egyptian **identity** (*Bitter Honey*) over re-doubled nationalism.

B. A Safe-haven in Europe ?

According to Ala Al-Hamarneh, Europe is depicted in a much more welcoming light than America in Egyptian films on emigration.³¹ One finds there a greater number of generous and likable characters, prepared to help Egyptians. In *The City*, 'Alī writes to his friend saying that "Paris is exactly like Cairo." Europe represents less of a figure of radical alterity than the United States. While violence can also be found there, it is more circumscribed to **organized crime** networks (*Hamman in Amsterdam, The City*). The negative characters who dupe freshly arrived migrants are either, with the caricatural character Yūda in *Ham-*

27 SHĀHĪN evokes the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine CAVAFY (1863-1933) and the novelist Lawrence DURRELL (1912-1990), author of the famous *Alexandria Quartet*.

28 However SHĀHĪN establishes a distinction between Jews and Israelis. While Yahyà denounces the virulence of Israeli politics, he praises the merits of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, evoking his three best high school friends, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim.

29 AL-HAMARNEH 2005, <<https://en.qantara.de/content/arab-cinema-cinematic-migration-to-the-west-in-egyptian-film>>.

30 See, e.g., Ṣun'allāh IBRĀHĪM, *Amrīkānī* (2003); 'Alā' al-ASWĀNĪ, *Chicago* (2006); 'Izz al-Dīn Shukrī FISHĪR, *Ināq 'inda Jisr Brūklīn* (2011).

31 *Ibid*. In interviews with Egyptians living in France or who had returned to Egypt, several comments were made about the greater cultural proximity between Europe and Egypt, in order to distance both the United States on one hand, and the Gulf countries, on the other.

mam in Amsterdam, Israelis—the enemy par excellence in political films³²—or Arab migrants, who are depicted as scam artists or people who have lost their moral values.

While it does not represent other Arab countries, this corpus does present a very interesting image of North Africans living in Europe, one which is far from the myth of a single Arab nation or solidarity between brethren countries. In *The City*, Yusrī Naṣrallāh depicts a French person of North African origin (Rushdī Zam/Roschdy Zem), who plays the role of an **intermediary** between clandestine Arab migrants and employers in the informal economy. While the sociological description is accurate, the character’s **ambivalence** is salient: he presents himself as a **benefactor** for his Arab “brothers”, but does not hesitate to **exploit** or **betray** them. When he is chased by the police, he steals ‘Alī’s **passport** and assumes his identity in order to travel to Egypt. But he is not a wholly negative character, since he will later try to compensate ‘Alī for his wrongdoing, just as in *Hamam in Amsterdam*, the Westernized uncle who chased his nephew from his home saves him at the last minute by lending him money to buy his restaurant.

While the portrait of Europe may be less grim than that of the United States, it must be acknowledged that some representations are common to both: the omnipresence of police officers persecuting illegal migrants, racism against Arabs, or the impossibility of belonging to two cultures at once. In *Hamam in Amsterdam*, like in *Hello America*, we encounter the character of the cousin or the uncle, who left Egypt long ago, has become rich, and has married a Westerner. They each have a nice big house, two children who don’t speak Arabic, one of whom is an adolescent daughter who is the right age to have a boyfriend—so as to denounce lax morals—and the other a young son who knows nothing about his country or religion of origin. In both cases, the newly arrived migrants are quickly kicked out of their relative’s home. With respect to the older generations, integration is thus presented as assimilation: Bakhīt strikes out at his cousin saying “You’re no longer Egyptian” after a violent altercation resulting from his discovery that his niece is having sexual relations with her boyfriend. The **boyfriend** complex appears to constitute the lynchpin of Egyptian identity, as the filmmakers define it.

Paradoxically, bi-national characters are presented in a more positive light, with the character of the migrant’s girlfriend, who speaks Arabic perfectly (the Lebanese-American nurse in *Lost in America* or Ruqayya, the Moroccan-Dutch woman in *Hamam in Amsterdam*), but they are never of Egyptian origin, as though the “**graft**” between Egypt and the West were not viable.

III. Migration and Identities Rhetorics: The Persistence of the National Paradigm

If these films are very critical of the countries of arrival, they also harshly critique, in parallel, contemporary Egyptian society, while exalting traditional Egyptian values. But one hardly finds the subversive tone that may exist in satiric literature, described by Richard JACQUEMOND in the present dossier, since the social critique is usually guided by moral aims.

32 ARMBRUST 2011.

A. Emigration, or the Perils of Losing One's Identity

Research on Egyptian migrations can be divided into two categories. An optimistic approach, of neoliberal inspiration, affirms that in the long term the people and money that circulate between Egypt and the Gulf countries will **rebalance** wealth and salary inequalities.³³ A pessimistic approach, of Marxist inspiration, deplores the increase in **imports** caused by migrants' return and their negative influence on Egyptian society, where **pan-Arab** ideals have been replaced by the pursuit of **individual happiness**, through the development of **consumer society**.³⁴ Films and novels tend to be more in the second vein. Like novelists,³⁵ filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s often deployed the theme of a dual feeling of *ghurba*, that is, the feeling of **nostalgia** and **exile** felt by Egyptians who live far from their birth country and are confronted with a strong feeling of **alterity**, but also the feeling of **strangeness (alienation)** that they experience on their return, insofar as they feel **outside** their society of origin. In *Hello America*, *ghurba* is evoked in a burlesque fashion: in order to feel closer to their country, Bakhīt and 'Adīla start smoking **sheesha** in their room, setting off a fire alarm.

The films place greater emphasis on the **loss of identity**. On their arrival, the characters generally find themselves in a *terra incognita*, without any points of reference.³⁶ In *Hammām in Amsterdam*, Hammām progressively loses all his money, his uncle's address, and his passport. The title *Lost in America* already says a great deal, and 'Ādil loses the address of his cousin and finds himself in Los Angeles' bad neighbourhoods. Injured, he loses his **memory**, just like 'Alī in *The City*, who also suffers from **amnesia**. Emigration thus directly threatens migrants' bodies and memories. In a similar register, identity theft is a frequent dramatic device (Sharīf pretends to be 'Ādil in *Lost in America*, and Rushdī steals 'Alī's passport in *The City*). The only points of reference they possess—**relatives** who expatriated themselves long ago—turn out to be **unreliable**: as we have seen, in becoming **Westernized**, they lose their sense of **familial solidarity**, which is replaced solely by ties of money. In *Hello America* Bakhīt's cousin refuses to lend him money, but offers to hire him as a handyman for a mediocre salary.

The centrality of questions of **identity** is manifest right down to the choice of the characters' names. Several of them have highly symbolic names, like Maṣrī, which literally means Egyptian. The full name of the hero of *Bitter Honey*, of whose past we know absolutely nothing, is Maṣrī 'Arabī, meaning literally Egyptian Arab, and that is also the family name of Sharīf, the hero of *Lost in America*. Thus, it is the **national imaginary** that is threatened by emigration.

33 BIRKS & SINCLAIR 1980.

34 GRUNTZ & PAGÈS-EL KAROUI 2013.

35 See, for instance, al-Ghīṭānī's *Risālat al-baṣā'ir fī 'l-maṣā'ir* (1989). About migration literature and cinema in Egypt, see PAGÈS-EL KAROUI 2013.

36 This constitutes a *topos* for emigration films, which can also be found in Indian or Iranian cinematography, for example.

B. Nationalist Credos: Discouraging Emigration

For filmmakers, as for researchers in the social sciences,³⁷ expatriation is generally envisaged as a temporary experience, due to migrants’ supposed strong attachment to Egypt. The question of **return** is therefore almost always evoked: generally, the hero returns to his country after having lived through a painful experience abroad. At the end of *Hello America*, Bakhīt and ‘Adīla are back at their point of departure: still broke and unmarried. This moral clearly aims to emphasize to future migrants that emigration success stories are rare and that many emigrants experience very difficult conditions without succeeding in improving their lot. Even in *Hamam in Amsterdam*, one of the rare films to depict social mobility through emigration, the narrative ends with a brief homecoming scene at the Cairo **airport**. And it is important to underscore that the hero’s success is associated with his “attachment to Egyptian identity, due to his belonging to the popular classes of the Egyptian street, but also his moral convictions that place him in (friendly) opposition to the film’s secondary, and heavily Westernized character, Adriano”.³⁸ Apart from the film *Lost in America*, the underlying thesis seems to be that the migrant gains nothing by emigrating, and indeed in *The City*, he ends up realizing his dreams back in Cairo, where he becomes an actor. The dominant cinematographic discourse therefore gives the impression that it is seeking to discourage emigration, all the while fiercely criticizing current living conditions in Egypt, which are the principal cause of the massive expatriation of Egyptians.

This patriotic vision is not expressed in the same manner by all the filmmakers. A chauvinistic nationalism comes through in *Hello America* and *Hamam in Amsterdam*. The sentiment of identity expressed by Shāhīn is more complex, consisting of a threefold **belonging**: Arab (reference to Israel is recurrent), Egyptian, and of course also Alexandrian, as the titles of his three-part autobiography suggest.³⁹ The myth of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism,⁴⁰ as bygone as it may be, is frequently invoked by the filmmaker and owes a great deal to his autobiography: he was born in the 1920s to a Christian family of Lebanese origin.

Naṣrallāh’s vision can be differentiated from one of nationalism, since according to him “there is no elsewhere. Wherever you go, you will find the same thing”.⁴¹ This approaches a negatively defined transnationalism. He discovered this phrase in the 1970s while working in Lebanon, when he read a poem by Cavafy entitled *The City*, which provided the inspiration for the title and the theme of his film. The scale of belonging here is no longer the nation, but the city. Around the world, all cities resemble one another in their **exploitation** and **rejection** of the **poor** and **marginal**. That is what ‘Alī, his main character, learns during his time in France. He decides to flee to Paris after the Rōḍ al-Farag bulk market where he works is moved to Cairo’s distant periphery, in the middle of the desert, and he

37 ZOHRY & HARRELL-BOND 2003.

38 SHAFIK 2011: 1029.

39 *Iskindiriyya... lēh (Alexandria... Why?, 1978)*, *Haddūta maṣriyya (An Egyptian Tale, 1982)*, *Iskindiriyya kamān wi-kamān (Alexandria Again and Forever, 1990)*, *Iskindiriyya–Nyū Yūrk (Alexandria–New York, 2004)*.

40 ABÉCASSIS 2003.

41 Interview of Yusrī Naṣrallāh by Pascale GHAZALEH, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 1999, n° 441.

refuses to move along with it. But his experience in France is a failure. At the end of the film, 'Alī's dream, to become an actor, comes true in Egypt, due less to the country's intrinsic qualities than the magic of cinema. A scene shows him poor, crammed into a packed Cairo bus [*zaḥma*], then through a camera movement the shot widens and we see a director shouting "Cut", after which we see 'Alī climb into a beautiful convertible driven by the famous actress Yusrā. Here again, the director invites the viewer to see returning to the home country as the only solution, notwithstanding his vigorous critique of Egypt's social situation.

C. 'Asal Iswid, or The false blurring of the Egyptian/Foreigner binary code

'*Asal Iswid*⁴² is a very popular comedy by Khālid Mar'ī,⁴³ with the famous star Aḥmad Ḥilmī. It has been seen and is appreciated by many Egyptians. It was released in 2010, just before the revolution and the film denounces all of the problems and frustrations Egyptians experience in their daily lives (**unemployment, corruption, housing shortages**, etc.) and which led people to revolt against the regime. It is the story of Maṣrī, an Egyptian returning after twenty years in the United States, where he became a citizen. The story is about how he will be reintegrated into Egyptian society, despite all its defects and shortcomings.

1. Narratives of how to be reborn as an Egyptian

Bitter Honey (2010) is a particularly interesting film for analyzing how the question of return is coupled with social critique, since it presents a view that is opposite to the one in films from the 1980s. Whereas the earlier films emphasized the responsibility of the émigré for social changes in Egypt and depicted his progressive marginalization relative to his family and Egyptian society, this is a narrative of **reintegration**. Maṣrī, who went to the United States as a child, returns to Egypt twenty years later. He has become a perfect stranger in his country of origin: he speaks **Egyptian Arabic** with an American accent; because of his **dress** he is taken for a **tourist** and is swindled accordingly; an émigré in a city that he no longer recognizes, he can no longer find his apartment; he no longer masters the etiquette of Egyptian society since when his neighbours propose to lodge him, he offers to pay for their **hospitality**. In sum, he finds he lacks all points of reference, precisely like migrants arriving abroad. Like those migrants, he is initially subject to a series of ordeals, which in this case are a testimony to the difficulties Egyptians endure on a daily basis (**bu-reaucracy**, corruption, problems of housing and unemployment, **mediocrity** in the education system). The first part of the film looks like a tourist horror comedy.

In the second part, he finally discovers the positive sides of Egypt: the spirit of **resourcefulness**⁴⁴ and mutual assistance, the warm **family** atmosphere of neighbours during

42 The title conveys the idea of something that should be nice, but is in reality bitter or harsh. Literally, it refers to molasses.

43 He is the editor of *Cut and Paste* and a director of TV series (*El Ahd, El Saba Wassaya, Neeran Sadiqa*) and films (*18 Days, Bolbol Hayran 2010, Aasefala el-'izag, Taymour & Shafiq*).

44 Cf. chapter on "Everyday Life (Ordinary Citizen as Hero)" in Elena CHITI's contribution to the present dossier.

Ramadan. In the end he decides to stay and settle in Egypt (he even loses his American accent). The film thus presents a more optimistic vision of the second generations, for whom reintegration is possible, but at the cost of affirming Egyptian identity, symbolized by a speech pronounced by the patriarch of his **neighbours**’ family, who in substance says: “granted, in America you have **freedom** and financial **comfort**, but here, in Egypt, even if we are drowning in problems, we remain **patient** and are in **solidarity** with one another, because we know how to relinquish ourselves into the **hands of God**”.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that Maṣrī’s reintegration into Egyptian identity takes place through his neighbours, an extension of, or here a substitute for the family, which constitutes the foundation that cements Egypt as a nation.

2. The *khawāga* complex

The first part of the film is made possible by a plot device by which Maṣrī enters Egypt on an Egyptian passport, having left his American passport at home. Following on from this, a series of sketches reveal to Maṣrī how much more the life of an American is worth compared to that of an Egyptian. For example, the receptionist at his hotel refuses to give him the room he reserved from the United States on the pretext that he now has an Egyptian passport, and he encounters the same problem at other hotels. *ʿAsal Iswid* is a perfect illustration of the ambivalence of the “*khawāga*”⁴⁶ complex”. This expression is often used to refer to Egyptians who have an inferiority complex in regard to their Egyptian identity and who adopt and valorize Western culture. This may be interpreted as “a kind of post-colonial trauma” and “a side-effect of globalism”,⁴⁷ and is used as a means of social distinction by elites to preserve very strong social distance with lower classes. “Egypt is the only country in the world where foreigners are treated much better than the local citizens” is a common belief among Egyptians.⁴⁸ In this sense, the complex may be seen as the reverse of patriotism. But in fact, the *khawāga* complex seems rather like a feeling which stems from both a sense of **superiority** and **inferiority**. The former is manifested in condescension and resentment towards foreigners, the latter in envy and thoughtless emulation. The two emotions are paradoxically often expressed at the same time, as shown in the film. The film ends in strong praise of Egyptian **resilience**. Like most of the other emigration films, *ʿAsal Iswid* shares the same end and the same moral: however harsh life is in Egypt, it is better to live in the country than abroad.

45 The film’s central argument is summed up in the song that plays during the closing credits: *What makes Egypt so special?*

46 *Khawāga* “sir, Mr. (title and form of address, esp., for Christians and Westerners, used with or without the name of the person so addressed” (WEHR/COWAN 1979), “European or western foreigner” (BADAWI/HINDS 1986). – Etymologically, the word goes back to Persian *khwāga* “master”.

47 GOLIA 2004: 127.

48 In Mexico, the concept of *malinchism* expresses disdain for those who are attracted by foreign values, thinking them superior, of better quality and worthy of imitation. See HANCOCK 2010.

IV. Conclusion: No Transnational Turn for the Egyptian Cinema?

Although filmmakers espouse a critical vision of migration, in condemning both host countries and Egyptian society, they usually link migration with rhetorics of identity, depicting experiences in host countries as ones of loss of memory, alienation, nostalgia... But directors usually seem less interested in the encounter with the Other, than in the risks for Egyptians of losing their national identity when living abroad. Emigration films are directed by filmmakers who have often themselves experienced expatriation (the United States for Shāhīn, Lebanon for Naṣrallāh, and the director of *Lost in America*, Rāfī Girgis, is an Egyptian-American). These filmmakers often share a nationalist posture, which tends to overestimate the external causes of social change, manipulating the rhetoric of imported versus authentic local Egyptian values. Egyptian identity is considered to be coherent, stable and fixed, and usually evolves around the ideas of moral values and preservation and control over women's bodies, but also (though to a lesser extent) clothing and food. So, contrary to European societies that link immigration with national identity, in Egypt, it is more that emigration threatens the national imaginary.

These national values seem to be embedded in the **Egyptian soil**, since Egyptians abroad risk losing their national identity outside Egypt. This idea of identity as produced by a **place**, as something which risks being lost if one leaves this space, is also very present in Egyptian literature, since Maḥfūz's novels.⁴⁹ Whereas the transnational paradigm is dominant in research on Egyptian migrations,⁵⁰ and is fairly widespread in the cinematography of neighbouring countries—North African, Lebanese or Turkish⁵¹—it is very much in the minority in Egyptian cinema, which remains embedded in a strong methodological nationalism.⁵² Egyptian films can thus be said to belong more to the category of “exilic film”,⁵³ centred on the country of origin and the desire to return to it, and saturated with narratives of retrospection, loss, absence, solitude and alienation.⁵⁴

What theoretical insights can be drawn? As fascinating as Appadurai's analyses (1996) inviting us to illuminate transnational practices through the imaginary are, his concept of “ethnoscape” requires some refinement. He postulates, in a framework of globalization, that the acceleration of movements and the use of new modes of communication and forms of information necessarily produce multiple and hybrid forms of identification, in sum, a cosmopolitan outlook. Egyptian cinema shows, on the contrary, the omnipresence of the question of return and a strong attachment to and identification with the homeland, with a

49 Cf. in this context also the importance of the “house” or “alley” metaphors, see S. GUTH 2011.

50 AHMED 2011; MÜLLER-MAHN 2005; SAAD 2005.

51 MENNEL 2010.

52 WIMMER & GLICK SCHILLER 2002. In the end, only Naṣrallāh's *The City* comes close, and then only in part, to being a transnational film, both through the circumstances under which it was filmed (as a France-Egypt co-production, with French actors) and its theme.

53 NAFICY 2001.

54 He establishes two other categories: the “diasporic film” (multi-situated between the home country and the different poles of the diaspora and dominated by narratives of plurality and hybridity) and the “post-colonial ethnic film”, centered on the host country and the politics of the hyphen (divided identity and double absence).

binary codification of Egyptian and Foreigner. No contemporary Egyptian filmmaker seems ready to celebrate the “pleasures of hybridity”⁵⁵ born of emigration.

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55 GÖKTÜRK 1999: 7.

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Impressions from Tunisia, Spring 2016

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Key words: Sousse Spring Festival, *Saxofans*, music, terror, fear, safety, security, economy, religion, politics, cultural heritage, clothing, presence of the past

I sit in the Municipal Theater in Sousse, a city south of the Tunisian capital, thinking about the Bataclan Theatre in Paris and the National Theater in Oslo. I have never been to the Bataclan, only seen the pictures from that night of terror. But the seats in the municipal theater in Sousse remind me of the red plush seats in the National Theater in my hometown Oslo, although the decorations are less lavish overall here in Sousse and the ceiling less lofty. Today, it is the musical group *Saxofans*¹ who enters the stage with their brass and percussion instruments—ranging from the saxophone, of course, to drums like the *darbouka* and *table*.

The drummer is the same tall, lanky guy whose body is rhythm and whom I watched together with friends and family at an outdoor concert in the Roman amphitheater of the *Ribat* in Sousse the summer of two years ago. Last year we abstained from any concerts. The memories of the massacre on the beach north of Sousse, only four kilometers south of our apartment still reverberated in the ground. Attending an outdoor concert was unthinkable then. But now we are here, less than a year later, attending an indoor concert. I wish I had eyes in my back that would enable me to see an eventual attacker. I do have nerves in my lower back, though, and they are tense. I have recorded all the emergency exits and I think of how I will run in zigzag to confuse any gunman should he appear.

After a while, I begin to engage with the music. The deep voice of the vocalist envelops my thoughts and my eyes notice her black boots and her black plain dress. The band consists in equal part of men and women on brass. On percussion there are only men. I can't avoid noticing that one of the women wears a **miniskirt**² and that all the men are cool and relaxed, dressed casually in white shirts hanging loosely over their jeans. There are many photographers present; one of them is a young lady in Islamic garb—she is fashionable in a floor-length coat with a matching **head scarf**. Carrying a state-of-the-art camera, she takes many pictures. Maybe she is a local journalist? – For this is the closing concert of the 23rd Sousse Spring Festival. We write March 26th, anno 2016.

1 *Saxofans* is a Tunisian brass band from Sousse, <https://www.facebook.com/saxofans-134750706543903/about/?ref=page_internal>.

2 [Editor's note: Here and in the following, terms emphasized in bold indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project's search for Gumbrechtian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed (cf. my Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier). The emphasis is the editor's.]

The concert is divided into three parts with three different vocalists. First out is a young lady performing within the Arabic song tradition. Her voice aspires towards that of a diva, an Umm Kulthoum or a Fairouz, but the expression is simpler. She also reminds me of Emel Mathlouthi³—**Mathlouthi** whose magnificent song shook the audience at the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony in Oslo last December (2015) as her voice brimmed with revolutionary force. She voiced the **anger**, the **grief**, the **frustration**, but also the **empowerment** of the **young generation** that ousted Ben Ali from power.

In Tunisia, the TV spectators were also preoccupied with Mathlouthi's dress. It was extremely low-cut, down to the navel—and she doesn't even have a bosom! We discussed this issue over a glass of tea during the spring holidays. Many of those present argued that she should have dressed in a more traditional gown to show her **Tunisian identity**; I affirmed that her choice of dress was bold but smart, because it **challenged stereotypes** in the global north about Islam and Arab (Muslim) women. Meanwhile, I pointed out that I had seen wedding dresses in Tunis with the same low-cut—so Mathlouthi's dress simply represented a new expression of an old, Tunisian tradition. The last discussant out - wearing a hijab herself—stressed that the dress expressed Mathlouthi's own style and ought to be recognized and accepted as such.

Back to the concert: the music engages the audience and we let go of our worries; we clap the rhythm; some are dancing. **I feel the beat in my bones**. The second part of the concert becomes my favorite. This is extremely catchy music—**traditional songs** from the most remote inner areas of Tunisia. They are beloved melodies for most of those present, but in a rhythmic **brass remake** that speaks to my Norwegian ear. This music does not need an intellectual effort on my part to be liked. I don't need to educate my ear. This is music that talks directly to my body—could we call it world music?

During the third part of the concert, which is dominated by **American pop** and a vocalist known from Star Academy, my thoughts wander back to the past week.

In 2016, the Easter holiday coincided with the Tunisian spring holiday which always takes place during the two last weeks of March. And still it was so quiet, so **few people!**⁴ In Port al-Kantaoui—a well-known tourist resort that was crowded by spring seeking northerners from Russia, France, England, Germany, Sweden and Norway six years ago, before the 2011 uprisings there were only a couple of Tunisian families strolling about. Some of them had been on a boat trip with one of the few catamarans or pirate ships that were still in business, most of the tourist boats having been brought into dock. An old couple, maybe from France, were the only foreigners that were left, except for me. The **restaurants** were **empty** during lunch time. At one we were served by seven waiters who, in addition to us, only had to take care of two other tables. We asked the owner how he got by: he said they were targeting the Tunisian market. Many hotels on the stretch from

3 Emel Mathlouthi is a Tunisian singer and composer known for her protest songs during the Arab uprisings, especially *Kilmtī hurra* (my word is free) that she performed spontaneously in front of the crowd on the Habib Bourguiba Street in January 2011. In December 2015 she performed the same song at the Nobel Peace Concert in Oslo in honour of the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, <<http://emelmahlouthi.com/index.html>>.

4 [Editor's note: highlighted because the deserted tourist resorts may become an array in the GUMBRECHT'ian sense]

Kantaoui to Sousse seemed deserted; the less luxurious ones were derelict with broken windows and peeling plaster. Only the impressive Mövenpick keeps its façade. Here, at the Mövenpick, there are private guards every ten meters and black Mercedes in front of the entry. So there is still some money in this broken economy! – An economy ridden by **unemployment** rates reaching 25% per cent among the young people; a decline in investments and exports; a decline in the tourist industry with repercussions into other markets. The artist weaving her carpets has no customers and the farmer is not paid for his produce: parts of last summer's fruit and vegetables intended for the tourist market had to be thrown away, rotten. The **prize of dates** has sunk from 15 dinars per kilo in 2014 to 7 in 2016. But this does not help those families whose incomes are cut short. And the crisis is spreading. He who used to work in the hotel business and who paid for private tutoring for his kid does not pay any more: hence, another little, local business providing afterschool homework aid is also plunging.

The poor charcoal-burner becomes even poorer. He lives in a ramshackle shed at the outskirts of town in order to keep the glow alive during the night. His son, with a two-year high school education, takes casual jobs in the neighborhood, the dog barks towards strangers, and his wife sells bread to the family that has been a patron since time immemorial. But times are changing and the grand families do not rule alone any longer. The country is full of **parvenus** who made their fortunes under Ben Ali—of *nouveaux riches* with no education or manners, and utter disrespect for traditional means of conflict resolution: Where, forty years ago, the fathers brought their sons together to settle disputes within the walls of the family domain, the sons now bring their cases to court. May the judge be incorruptible!

On the wall of the charcoal-burner's shed there is a photo of the national patriarch Habib **Bourguiba** and the new President Beji Caïd Essebsi with the red Tunisian **flag** in the background. The photo is framed by two black banners with inscriptions in gold about Makkah and Medina. Nation and religion. There is no decultured Salafism aspiring towards the global *umma* within these walls, as far as I can tell. Olivier Roy's thesis about postmodern religion does not cover every situation. In this room one still **knows one's place**, one's **nation** and one's **religion**; but what about the son? Perhaps he has joined a neo-conservative, rebellious, Salafi group? Who knows?

Before the 2011 uprisings, there were no "**Salafi looks**" in the streets of Sousse and Tunis. Such an exaggerated and outré religious appearance would, with 100% certainty, attract the attention and in most cases the rough treatment of the police. Then came the uprisings; the Islamists came to power and religion was unleashed: **hijabs** came on, the **niqab** in some rare cases, **beards** grew, **moustaches** were trimmed or completely razed to imitate the Prophet Mohamed, trousers were shortened over the ankle, skirts were lengthened underneath it. The *qamis* was imported from Pakistan and Saudi, but the **sneakers** remained **Nike** - in original or fake versions, and one might sometimes have glimpsed a Louis Vuitton. That was in 2011-2012, the period that witnessed an increase in the economic crises; the incapacity of an inexperienced government to fulfill the hopes of its voters for economic development, dignity, and justice; and a public debate focusing on values and identity. In 2012-2013 everything escalated: two politicians were assassinated; there were terror attacks in the Chaambi Mountains; and Tunisian soldiers were killed on the border to Algeria. In 2014, new elections were held and with Beji Caïd Essebsi coming

into office, Bourguiba's aura again illuminated the country. But the illumination was short lived: In March 2015, terrorists attacked the **Bardo** museum in Tunis, in June they came to the beach north of Sousse, and in September the presidential guard was the target in the middle of the capital. In March 2016, *Daech* attacked the frontier city of Ben Guerdane.

At that time the **Salafi look** was no longer tolerated. You were stopped at every police **check point**—one in every roundabout, approximately every five kilometers. It became impossible to be a taxi driver with a long beard. Young charismatic men with their eyes towards Makkah, spare time in the mosque, and with the Quran and hadith on their smartphones, were brought into custody, several times, until the chief inspector told his men that these youngsters were harmless, they were quietists—please do not bring them in anymore! Now, in 2016, the police men who under Ben Ali were perceived by a majority of Tunisians as the watchdogs of the regime are gaining status in many circles. The **soldiers are heroes**, and ads on national television feature a son greeting his father coming back from the front line. In these ads, the mother with rather short hair and no hijab represents the third member of the modern nuclear family. In the background floats the Tunisian flag.

Before going to Tunis in March 2016, I saw the play *Klassen vår* [Our School Class] at the National Theater in Oslo by the Polish playwright Tadeusz Słobodzianek. The play follows the life trajectories of a couple of class mates from a small village in Poland from the 1930'ies until the 1980'ies. It stages fifty years of war, terror, human cruelty and vulnerability in the most disturbing ways.

Listening to the music of the *Saxofans* in the Municipal Theater in Sousse I just make one wish: let 2016 be the year of rhythm and music!

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