

“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 *Tahyā 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 *Tahyā Maṣr* merged with Sisi’s first name, becoming *‘Abdelfat...tahyā 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 tahrīr 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 *Tahyā 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”, *Zahma*, 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-kulli-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 Nāḡī’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%3Amf_story_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 (*byi’raḥ yiṣarraḥ*), 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.

70 Jacquemond shows that Egyptian writers do not group anymore according to “generations”: JACQUEMOND 2013; Stephan Guth defines post-2011 youth literature as a “nonmovement”: GUTH forthcoming.

71 Mona Abaza talks about an “exodus” of artists and intellectuals from the political field, due to a “growing collective feeling of being personally targeted”: ABAZA 2015.

72 BAYAT 2010.

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