Arrays of Egyptian and Tunisian Everyday Worlds

An update on the project

In 2016—How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the “Arab Spring”

edited by

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ISSN 0806-198X

Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies • 17 (2017): 455-508
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Satire (on YouTube channels)

On Monday, January 25, hundreds of police troops guard Tahrir square in the context of the celebrations of Police Day [\textit{Memorial Days/Commemoration}]. This year’s Police Day coincides with the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution of January 25. Tough security measures in the Egyptian capital in anticipation of any demonstrations make the day more representative of the state institutions than of the people’s revolution. In this atmosphere, and among the heavy troops, the young actors Ḥmad Mālik and Shādī Ḥusayn blow a number of condoms to appear in the form of balloons, writing on them the words: “From the people of Egypt to the Police Forces on January 25,” and distribute them to the police.

After recording a video of the process of blowing the condoms, writing the slogan and distributing the fake balloons to the police, Ḥmad and Shādī post the video on YouTube [\textit{Social Media}] and on their Facebook site. Shādī Ḥusayn, who works as correspondent for the comedy TV show Abla Fāḥīṭā, writes on his Facebook site: “In this freezing cold we decided to celebrate Police Day.” About an hour after publishing the video, he adds: “As long as neither demonstrations are allowed nor opposition can be voiced, you will be our object of ridicule. Even if we die, we will continue to make fun of you. I hope you enjoy the event” [\textit{Us vs Them}]. For ‘to make fun of you’, Shādī uses the Egyptian colloquial verb saffi/yisiff (which is derived from the Standard Arabic saffah/yusaffahu ‘to deride and depreciate’ a person or an opinion) [\textit{‘Āmmiyya}]. The word is a distinct marker of youth language; it often goes together with ṭallish/yiṭallish ‘to make a humorous comment on s.th.’, a term that is taken from the football lexicon, where it describes a ball missing its target [\textit{Football}]. Missing the target, i.e., deviation from the norm, seems to stimulate laughter.1

The video gets more than one million hits in one day and a flood of comments. In one of them, Bāsim Yūsuf, the ‘father’ of YouTube shows and icon for those following in his footsteps, writes: “Well done, Shādī! By law and constitution, you did not commit a crime.” On social media, a polemic discussion unfolds among those who support the idea of the satirical stunt as a means of expressing opinion, and those who consider it an insult to the police [\textit{Tickling Giants / Ḵillit adab}]. A few days later, a police officer uploads a
video to YouTube expressing his disapproval of the event; in his opinion, it lacks the reverence that is due to the police forces.

Talk show presenters Ahmad Mūsā and ‘Amr Adīb launch a campaign against Shāfī and Mālik in which they call for penalising them. In contrast, the TV comedy shows Abla Fāḥītā and Abru Ḥafīṣa consider it a moment of recklessness that should be permitted for the sake of freedom of speech. After a short interval needed for the creation of new episodes, also YouTubers join the debate. On February 1, Ahmad Buḥayr uploads a new episode to his Il-Usbūʿī fī kīs (‘The Week in a Bag’), a channel that presents commentaries on the top news of the week. The title of this episode, “il-‘Askārī fīh kitāb dīn” (‘The soldier has a religion book on him’), is a parody (‘alsh) of a sentence that is common among Egyptian children: il-shanta fīhā kitāb dīn (‘There is a religion book in my bag’), usually said to prevent other children from messing with one’s property. The metaphor presents a satirical comment on the meaning of the untouchable soldier that the talk show presenters, Lamīs al-Ḥadīdī and Tāmīr Amīn, argue for. In the same vein, Ashraf Ḥamdī, the popular YouTuber and cartoon film creator, gives his animation film the humorous title Ihna biṭū’ il-balālīn (We are the Balloon Guys), resembling the title of one of Adīl Imām’s movies (Ihna biṭū’ il-‘ātābīs, ‘We are those from the busses’). In the compressed style of a cartoon-like sketch, the episode stages the encounter of two main characters (= roles), Hammāda (= Egyptian youth) and a police officer (= police forces), and their conversation at one of the notorious check points [^Check-points/kamin]. As usual, the immediate motive for the police officer to stop the youth remains unclear. As the officer searches Hammāda’s pockets, he notices a Facebook account on the screen of his mobile, which means that he may be an activist. The young man feels the crisis; people have been arrested before for “unlicenced use of Facebook”. When the officer also finds a balloon in Hammāda’s pocket, this confirms his suspicion and seems to answer the question to which group Hammāda belongs: the police officer calls for a patrol to arrest the young man who “belongs to those who inflate balloons”. The caption below the video states that it is a response to what has come to be known as the “Condom Incident”: In the first week of February, police search the office of the well-known cartoonist Islām Gāwīsh, asking for software licences and a permit to use a Facebook account for the distribution of media material. Since Gāwīsh does not have such papers in hand, he is arrested and his computers are confiscated. For many followers of Gāwīsh’s Facebook page il-Waraqa, the missing licences are only a pretext—it is his satirical cartoons that provoke those in power [^Condom Incident, ^The System vs The People, ^Tickling Giants / Ḵillīt adab].

In contrast to political satire, reflection on media materials presented on local TV channels is the central theme for the YouTubers Hishām ‘Afīfī and Sālīzūn. ‘Afīfī’s YouTube show, al-Takhlīl al-istrāfī (‘Strategic Analysis’), is a humorous analysis of the plot and the visual design of selected advertisements and video clip songs, based on parody, which replaces the original lyrics with unrelated content, a technique with which ‘Afīfī manages to stimulate vivid laughter. In contrast, Sālī-zone deals with Ramadan TV series. The moderator elaborates on the contradictions in the narration and errors in scene recording. After Ramadan, both Sālī and Hishām dedicate their episodes to commenting on TV talk shows on local channels [^True vs False]. The window by which Sālī sits joking with a guest about the absurdity of her experience on TV has become iconic: through the window, fresh air and fresh ideas come in.
Social criticism, especially of the Egyptian family, is the central theme for Shādī Surūr. In the humorous sketches of his popular YouTube channel, he satirizes patterns of behaviour among sons and parents. One frequent stereotype is the strict father who suppresses his son’s choices and his aspiration to try out new things [Father Figures]. Surūr’s caricature of the father who prevents his son from watching video clips on TV while he himself enjoys watching the same content in his room exposes parents as humans with shortcomings. However, despite these flaws, life goes on, with a generation gap in values and perceptions [Young vs Settled].

Another mode of satire can be the assembling of the most circulated sentences in the streets of Cairo in a creative collage that becomes the script of YouTube episodes. With simple equipment—only a mobile phone camera [Mobile Phones]—the Aṭfāl Shāwārī (Street Children) band manages to attract hundreds of thousands of followers to their satirical YouTube channel. Six young actors, mostly under 25, together perform a type of street theatre. The tallest member holds the phone camera to film the videos in a selfie style, while the band chant their satirical text. It builds on contradictions in political and social expressions in everyday life and on TV channels. Muḥammad ‘Ādīl, one of the band’s members, says: “What we do is just a collage of what people are saying in public, rearranged to highlight the paradoxes in our lives that make people wonder how this happens without notice… The street is full of [things that provoke] laughter.” In January, they upload their first video, entitled Barā‘īm al-Īmān (“Buds of Faith”), criticising the stagnant programming on the Noble Qur’an Radio station. For almost forty years, programs have the same introduction, topics and closure. In order to remedy the lifeless monotony that has befallen this radio station, ‘Ādīl quotes the introductory sentences of some of the programs and chants them in a mechanical way to parody the original. In response to Aṭfāl shawārī’, Aẓhārī scholar Ahmad Karīma condemns their comedy video as an insult to Islam [In Islam...]. Undeterred, in their second video they put together segments of patriotic songs performed before background scenes that evoke contrary meanings—black, or at least dark, humour.

Related Entries

Arrays: ‘Ămmiyya; Check-points/kamīn; Dual identities; Father Figures; Football; In Islam...; Memorial days/Commemoration; Mobile Phones; Social Media • Codes: Past vs Present; Superiority vs Inferiority; The System vs The People; True vs False; Us vs Them. •

Codes collapsed: Past = Present (Stuck)

References

(All online references were last accessed in December 2017).


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Notes

Introduction: From “Issues” to “Arrays” (S. Guth & A. Hofheinz)


4 Much of the material was collected in a shared researcher’s notebook, using Evernote (https://evernote.com).

5 The “special dossier” Living 2016: Cultural Codes and Arrays in Arab Everyday Worlds Five Years After the “Arab Spring,” edited by Stephan Guth and Elena Chiti, appeared as pages 221-388 of JAIS, 16 (2016), and is accessible both at JAIS’s previous website (http://www.hf.uio.no/jais/volume/vol16/v16_09_living2016.pdf) and at the new pool of open-access journals hosted by the University of Oslo, see <https://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/JAIS/article/view/4761>.

6 The list, processed from the data collected in our researcher’s notebook as well as from the studies contained in the Living 2016 dossier (see previous note), is given on pp. 229-33 of Stephan Guth, “Introduction: Living 2016 and the In 2016 project,” JAIS 16 (2016): 224-33.

7 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.

8 Ibid. (our emphasis, S.G./A.H.).

9 Ibid. (dto.).

10 Ibid. (dto.).

11 Ibid. (dto.).

ʿĀmmiyya (E. M. Håland)

1 My translation – E.M.H.

Clash (E. Chiti)


2 Fieldwork notes, January-February 2016.


Fieldwork notes, Round Table Al-ṭaqāfa fi l-muwājaha, Cairo Book-Fair, Main Hall, January 29, 2016.


<https://twitter.com/moezmasoud/status/730910281442971649>.

TV show Anā Masrī, ḫalqat “Film Muhammad Diyarb Iṣṭibāk, bi-nakha siyāsiyya wa-thawriyya,” May 15, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiwWQxniP5WQ>; see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImutjDCBAs>.


Conversions (M. Lindbekk)


Ibid.


Ibid.

Notes

Dual Identities / Masking (S. Guth)

1 English mask is from Middle French masque ‘covering to hide or guard the face’ (16c.), from Italian maschera, from Medieval Latin masca ‘mask, specter, nightmare,’ which is perhaps from Arabic maskharah ‘buffoon, mockery,’ from sakhra ‘be mocked, ridiculed’ – <etymonline.com> (as of 09Dec2017).


3 Khadijah is a traditional Islamic name in reverence for the Prophet’s first wife.

Satire (on YouTube Channels) (M. Mohamed)

1 yīdallish, on the other hand, is the common term among Egyptian youth for all kinds of verbal practices that stimulate laughter, like puns, parody, and irony.