
Graphic Novels and Comic Books in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: Some Remarks

Francesco De Angelis*

The Egyptians are well known for having a propensity for irony and sarcasm, and, indeed, it is no accident that they are also known as awlād al-nuktah (children of jokes). But Egyptian humour, displayed in magazines, comics and popular stories, is never without significance. It offers an important occasion for reflection and criticism. It comes to create – through irony – a moment of sympathy amongst people afflicted by the same sufferings. Humour takes on almost a therapeutic function. This accounts for the abundance of jokes circulating after periods of crisis, and it is in this sense that al-nuktah (intended as a time for irony) is an indicator of the ḥālāh (situation) of the country. An Arab saying goes, more or less, like this: “Situations of great suffering call for laughter”. Thus, irony seems to be the psychological unlocking of repressed anxieties. It makes it possible to exploit whatever amount of ridicule there is in the enemy that is the object of humour. But humour can never become a remedy. It is an ephemeral escape from a no way out situation. In the conviction that revolutions, very much like irony, speak the language of the people, i.e. ‘āmmiyyah, we believe that the Egyptian riots which began on January 25th, 2011 are no exception. In this sense, “Tūk Tūk”, the comic by Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī, certainly stands out amid other satiric publications. Issued every three months, it was first published on January 9th, 2011, precisely on the eve of the Egyptian uprising. Does this publication confirm the theory, already advanced on other occasions, that movements immediately preceding or following popular riots are characterised by a proliferation of publications in dialect and with ironic overtones? Could “Tūk Tūk” represent a display of the fears of common people, like some of the satirical magazines that were published in the late 19th and early 20th century? Does “Tūk Tūk” reflect a new perception of reality surrounding Egypt’s less privileged social classes?

* Research Fellow in Arabic Language and Literature, Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication Department, Università degli Studi di Milano.

Introduction

The following analysis will start out with an introductory definition of Arab comics. Often misunderstood and undervalued, comics have acquired greater literary, artistic and expressive dignity with the passing of time, as shown by the expansion of dedicated sections in bookshops, the opening of specialised shops, the organisation of festivals and exhibits and the great number of studies on the topic, among other things. Will Eisner (1917-2005), a famous cartoonist and expert in the field, was the first to provide a general definition of comics. In one of his essays, Eisner speculates on comics as “sequential art”, defining them as an artistic form that combines drawings – or images – and words in order to narrate a story or dramatise an idea¹. Another important contribution to the definition of the comic book genre was provided by the cartoonist Scott McCloud (1960) who, echoing Eisner’s words, claimed that we are dealing with «juxtaposed pictorial or other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer»². The key traits of this medium would thus appear to be the coexistence and interaction of images and words that are sequentially juxtaposed in order to narrate events and/or actions, or in any case to convey a message.

Moving from this concept, it should be noted that comics have their own language, which consists of a mixture of verbal and nonverbal languages and of signs and phonemes that elicit synesthetic perceptive abilities³. It is also important to stress that in cartoons, graphically treated words can be regarded as images (think, for example, of typographical markings like the use of bold and italics), while images can be read as texts, being both iconic and symbolic⁴. It is the balance of these two fundamental components: images and words, that, like two dancing partners, ensures the quality of cartoons⁵.

The term “protocartoons” is occasionally used to refer to the sequential image narratives of Old Egyptian paintings, Trajan’s Column (II century A.D.), the Bayeux tapestry (XI century), the pre-Colombian illustrated manuscripts (discovered by Cortés in the XVI century), or William Hogarth’s printings of *A Rake’s Progress* (1732-1735)⁶. However, the birth of the first modern comic book is conventionally set in the United States in 1894 with the “Hogan’s Alley” series drawn by Richard Outcault (1863-1928). First published in black and white as a Sunday supplement in the magazine “Truth”, it appeared in colour in the “New York Journal” two years later with the title of “The Yellow Kid”, which was the nickname of the main character, a young Irish boy wearing a yellow tunic and living in an immigrant ghetto⁷. Despite its humorous nature, this first veritable

¹ W. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Poorhouse Press, Tamarac 1985 (Italian translation by F. Gadducci, M. Tivosanis, *Fumetto & Arte Sequenziale*, Vittorio Pavesio Productions, Torino 1997, p. 16).

² S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, Harper Perennial, New York 1994, p. 9.

³ G. Frezza, *Fumetti, anima del visibile*, Meltemi Editore, Roma 1999, p. 17.

⁴ S. Di Marco, *Fumetto e animazione in Medio Oriente*. Persepolis, Valzer con Bashir e gli altri: nuovi immaginari grafici dal Maghreb all’Iran, Tunué, Latina 2011, p. 49.

⁵ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, cit., p. 156.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.18-25.

⁷ D. Barbieri, *Breve storia della letteratura a fumetti*, Carocci, Roma 2009, pp. 15-16.

“comic book” (defined as so), set in a degraded New York suburb in the XIX century, did not disdain to show some degree of social attention.

The form of the comic book evolved throughout the XX century, branching off into a variety of genres and styles and taking up distinctive features that varied depending on the place of production. The American school will be followed by a French, a Belgian-French, an Italian, an Argentinian, a Japanese and, recently, an Arab one. Besides, the form will no longer be just the “comic strip”, though the tag continues to designate this type of work, thus contributing to its more or less explicit underestimation, as with the word “fumetto”⁸ (which defines the medium by means of a synecdoche, starting from the small cloud containing dialogue) in Italian or with “historieta” (small tale) in Spanish⁹.

Ambiguity – it should be remembered – has often predominated in cartoon terminology and, to some extent, still does. Those who, like the author of this paper, advocate a conscious use of specialised lexis in the field of comics, are faced with an immense literature in which lexical speculations are intrinsically ambiguous, when not contradictory. The illustration of this topic is however beyond the remit of this article that rather aims to advance a few observations in an attempt to reach a shared definition of expressions like “graphic novel” and “comic book”, too often used interchangeably by readers (erroneously) and by publishers (for marketing reasons).

Marco Lupoi, the original publisher of the Marvel Italia label, claims that, in recent years, the expression “graphic novel” has moved from a restricted and specialised use to a highly polysemous one, thus losing its specific meaning. Since any comic book is classified as a graphic novel, a concept that was born with a specific idea of its form and content is at risk of becoming totally banal¹⁰.

Coined in 1978, the expression “graphic novel” first appeared on the paperback cover of *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* by Will Eisner¹¹. The expression contains a blunt literary statement that sets the graphic novel apart from the realistic novel of tradition. In sum, if we take the novel to be a self-contained text whose narrative centre pivots around a crisis that inevitably leads the main character to a metamorphosis and to inner change, then it will have to exclude serial narrative. Besides, if the novel represents psychological growth, it cannot include all those narratives that focus on a character living entirely on the surface and forever: Tex, Batman, Tintin, Corto Maltese, Superman, Dylan Dog, etc.

⁸ “Fumetto”: diminutive from “fumo”, i.e. “smoke”.

⁹ D. Barbieri, *Breve storia della letteratura a fumetti*, cit., pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ M. Lupoi, *Graphic Novel: un po' di chiarezza su un termine abusato*, February 2008, <http://marcolupoi.nova100.ilsole24ore.com/2008/02/29/graphic-novel-u/>.

¹¹ In fact not all scholars agree on the prevailing idea that the expression was coined by Eisner in 1978. There are others who claim, instead, that the first one to introduce the expression was Richard Kyle, who had referred to the long-form comic book as a “graphic novel” in 1964. Cf. D.P. Royal, *What's in a Name?; or, Gutter Talk: The Problem of Critical Language in the Study of Comics*. SW/TX Regional PCA/ACA Conference Albuquerque, New Mexico. February 2007, https://www.academia.edu/1665847/What_s_in_a_Name_or_Gutter_Talk_The_Problem_of_Critical_Language_in_the_Study_of_Comics.

Besides giving space to new narrative features, the graphic novel develops the novel's legacy from an iconic viewpoint. This is to say that the image becomes novelistic whenever it includes photography, collages, different forms of painting or drawing techniques borrowed from graphic art, or that it can exploit expressive caricature drawing. In this way, narrative does not simply aim at the immediate recognition of a character or an action but boosts reflection. In comic books, graphic representations, signs, strokes and colours may also show the character's inner psychology and reveal a living or an alienating, a benevolent or a wicked, reality¹². Like the novel, the graphic novel is thus a unique, whole and unified narrative that is generally addressed to an adult public.

After delimiting the meaning of the expression "graphic novel", it is now easier to define the "comic book", or just "comics", at least within the boundaries of this article. It is a bound collection of comic strips, usually in chronological sequence, typically telling a single story or a series of different stories¹³.

A final point of clarification is the relationship between vignettes and comics. If we stick to the definition of "sequential art", the vignette, usually made up of only one frame without any narrative development, would appear to be only distantly related to comics. Vignettes usually appear in newspapers with the aim of commenting current news or mocking an attitude or a politician, and they are privileged tools for satire and humour. Although vignettes and comics often use the same language (cartoons, dialogues inside balloons, onomatopoeia etc.)¹⁴, scholars tend to agree that they are two distinct things, even though intermediate typologies may be identified (for example, vignettes that develop over multiple frames), indicating continuity between the two media¹⁵. It is a well-established fact, nonetheless, that comics derive from the tradition of satirical vignettes¹⁶, even though they will later branch out into several other typologies that are not necessarily associated with vignettes.

It is beyond the intent of this brief introduction to fully deal with the history of comics or analyse their features in detail. What should be underlined is, rather, the maturity that comics have acquired over time, crossing a large number of genres and themes and evolving into a contemporary narrative form, a mass communication medium and an art form¹⁷.

Doubtless, comics have developed, and a form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature and brilliant works. A character in a 2004 "New Yorker" comic strip expresses a common feeling when asking: «Now do I have to pretend to like the graphic novel, too?»¹⁸.

¹² N. Andreani, *Graphic novel: il fumetto spiegato a mio padre*, February 2011, <http://graphicnovel.altervista.org/>.

¹³ <http://www.britannica.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/127569/comic-book>.

¹⁴ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, cit., pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ A. Douglas, F.M. Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1994, p. 61.

¹⁶ D. Barbieri, *Guardare e leggere*, Carocci, Roma 2011, p. 96.

¹⁷ M. Pellitteri, *Sense of Comics. La grafica dei cinque sensi del fumetto*, Castelvecchi, Roma 1998, p. 12.

¹⁸ D. Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge (MA) 2007, p. 3.

Nonetheless, the way a large number of people talk about comics is still problematic: it is very hard to talk about them *as comics*. One numbingly common mistake in the way culture critics address them is to invoke “the comic book genre”, but comics are not a genre; they are a *medium*. Westerns, Regency romances and *film noir* are genres. Prose fiction, sculpture, video: those, like comics, are media¹⁹.

Another common misconception is to assert that highbrow comics are, somehow, not veritable comics but rather belong to a different breed than their mass culture namesakes. There is, in any case, a certain inherent nose-in-the-air class consciousness in this specific claim. Some worthy examples are the world famous graphic novels *Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi (1969) and *Maus* (1991) by Art Spiegelman (1948) that have often been compared to novels – instead of being considered simple brilliant graphic novels – due to the depth of their analysis of complex themes. As Douglas Wolk maintains, the genre/medium confusion is a misconstruction, while the “if-it’s-deep-it’s-not-really-comics” gambit is just an instance of snobbery (as it proposes to make a distinction between sophisticated taste and popular taste). However, the most thoroughly ingrained error in the language used to discuss comics is to treat them as if they were particularly weird or failed examples of another medium altogether. Good comics are sometimes described as being “cinematic” or “novelistic”. When they are applied to comics, however, these descriptive words sound almost derogatory for using them as praise implies that comics *as a form* aspire to being movies or novels²⁰.

Another controversial issue is whether to consider comics literature or not. I have previously mentioned the widespread prejudice, also of critics, concerning this particular literary medium. This is not the place to illustrate the theories that various intellectuals have developed about it, but let it suffice to say that there are those who consider them literature and those who do not. This is why the proposal of Douglas Wolk, who considers them para-literature, seems to be an interesting compromise to this quagmire²¹.

There are few certainties concerning what the French call the “ninth art”. A platitude is that it was born, in its modern sense, in the early XX century, although the first signs of it can be traced back much earlier. Nevertheless, it is sure that comics have been brought, in their modern form, to the Arab world from the West²².

Another fact about comics is that they widely employ the written and visual metaphor, a figure of speech through which the authors of comics manage to give substance to what is often abstract. Finally, the content of comics is always inextricably linked to the social context.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

²¹ According to Douglas Wolk, «comics are *sort of* literary. But that’s not all they are. Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they are not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that». *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² A. Douglas, F. M. Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, cit., p. 3.

1. Comics in the Arab World

As concerns Arab comics, an important geographical and cultural point should be made: comics produced in the Maghreb area under the strong cultural and linguistic influence of its French colonial heritage²³ should be distinguished from those produced in the Mashreq area and in Egypt, with two main fulcrums in Beirut and Cairo.

The first veritable *qiṣaṣ muṣawwarah* (literally “illustrated stories”, a phrase indicating cartoons) in Arabic were published in Egypt in 1923 in the children’s magazine “al-Awlād” (The Kids)²⁴. It was an eight-page production of comic strips that narrated the adventures of a group of kids. It looks like a primordial form of cartoons as the story is narrated in rhymes below each vignette. Nevertheless, the characters, like the context they inhabit, are carefully drawn so that certain details mirror their origins (the kids wear the typical headgears of the *ṭarbūs*).

This first version of Arab cartoons is also one of the first ones ever created, as few other examples of cartoon productions existed in the world at that time. However, this pioneering work was unfortunately not followed by a subsequent and regular production. We have to wait until 1946 to see a new publication. That year saw the birth of the children’s weekly magazine “al-Katkūt” (The Chick) in which cartoons only fill a few pages that are mostly dedicated to fantasy stories and puzzles for children. The most relevant aspect of the weekly magazine is that it inaugurates a trend that will be followed by several other similar productions, i.e. that of translating and representing Western cartoon productions in local colours. In “al-Katkūt”, for example, we find strips that narrate the adventures of Ḥammām, a young reporter who travels around the world with his little dog; it is nothing if not the Arabic translation of the Belgian comic strip “Les Aventures de Tintin” (1929). The “al-Katkūt” format was later taken up by other Egyptian magazines, like “Bulbul” (1946) and “Alī Bābā” (1951)²⁵.

The fifties saw the birth of two other pivotal magazines that were relevant in the development of Arab cartoons and quite different from one another: “Sindibād” (Sindbad, the main hero) in 1952 and “Samīr” (Samir, the main hero) in 1956.

The first strips, which were just a few pages long, contained in “Sindibād” tell of Zūzū, Šaddād and ‘Awād’s stories and were originated from the pen of the Egyptian artist Ḥusayn Bīkār (1913-2002). Their structure and dynamism make them the first cartoons in Arabic that contain the characterising graphic elements of the medium, like the fluidity of the characters’ movements, the peculiar narrative style and the use of balloons for dialogues. The content of the strips was originally highly connoted locally, without any reference to Western productions regarding characters, themes and settings. In “al-Awlād”, for example, every single detail in its visual conception reflects the Egyptian context, from clothing to desert spaces²⁶. When cartoonist Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Labbād (1940-2010) joined the magazine’s editorial staff towards the

²³ B. Vigna, *I fumetti nel Maghreb*, Thapros, Olbia 2012, p. 7.

²⁴ Nadim Damluji, *The Comic Book Heroes of Egypt*, in “Qulture”, 2011, <http://www.qulture.com/arts/comic-book-heroes-egypt>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ George Khoury, *A Brief History of Arabic Comics*, May 2, 2007, <http://jadarticles.blogspot.it/2007/05/brief-history-of-arabic-comics.html>.

end of the fifties, a particularly expressive graphic style was created that was minimal, simple and very similar to caricature. The language used in the magazine is *fushà*, or Classical Arabic, a choice that confers a certain stiffness to the text and reflects the educational aims of the publication, funded as it is by the government.

Starting from 1956, the publication of “Samīr” has marked further development. First, the magazine differs from “Sindibād” because it dedicates more space to cartoons. The collaboration between a large number of cartoonists and scriptwriters favours different themes and styles. Here we should mention Luṭfī Waṣfī, whose style privileges attention to images and narrative techniques and Ḥiḡāzī and al-Labbād, whose style, influenced by their experience in the field of caricature, charges their images with the function of supporting a humour-based narrative, thus creating funny strips that were very successful and have been imitated²⁷. Among the most remarkable innovations in comparison to prior productions is the use of *‘āmmiyyah*, or dialect Arabic, a choice that contributed to the magazine’s success, making it more accessible and enjoyable, as the live spoken language better suits the dynamic artistic form of cartoons.

In the sixties, moreover, Arabic versions of Western comics were systematically introduced into the Egyptian and, in general, Middle Eastern market, both through local translations of existing magazines and through adaptations, as in the case of “Mickey Mouse”, introduced in the Arab context by the magazine “al-Aṭfāl” (The Children, 1936)²⁸. An Egyptian-like version of the famous Disney character is represented by Mīkī, on whose covers Mickey Mouse is dressed in local garb and celebrates Muslim religious festivals²⁹.

Still in this period, the principal centre of comic books moved from Egypt to Lebanon, as the latter country was at an advantage in terms of the import, distribution and quality of print, not to mention its greater cultural, political and economic openness towards the West. A number of comic books also flourished in Lebanon, under the foreign influence of a range of products ranging from series of American superheroes to Disney-branded adventures that dominated the Arab market in the following decades. Young readers came to refer to these cartoons, seeing them as more appealing than local ones, which are usually heavily ideological and mostly brought out by publishers under direct or indirect government control. This is the case of Egypt, and especially of Syria and Iraq, where “Usāmah” on the one hand, and “Maḡallatī” (My Magazine, 1969) and “Mizmār” (Flute, 1970) on the other, became propaganda tools for their respective regimes and leaders, often portrayed in a paternal attitude and surrounded by children on the first page³⁰.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ B. Millet, *Samir, Mickey, Sindbad et les autres. Histoire de la presse enfantine en Égypte* (1987), Dossiers du Cedej, CEDEJ, Le Caire 1987.

²⁹ Nadim Damluji, *Made For You and Me. Localizing Disney’s Imperialism for an Egyptian Audience*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2011/01/made-for-you-and-me-localizing-disneys-imperialism-for-an-egyptian-audience/>.

³⁰ Lina Ghaibeh, *La propagande dans la bande dessinée arabe: du nationalisme au religieux*, 2011, <http://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2011-la-bande-dessinee/la-propagande-dans-la-bande-dessinee-arabe-du-nationalisme-a>.

At this point, therefore, the evolution of the local production of comics slowed down, at least until the early eighties, when the “Samīr” magazine was originated in Lebanon. The name is the same as the Egyptian one as well as the original spirit, i.e. that of being an exclusively pan-Arab production whose key mission is entertainment³¹. Another important comic book is “Māğid” (the name of a XV century Arab navigator, Aḥmad ibn Māğid), published in Abu Dhabi in the Arab Emirates since 1979. Its geographical diffusion, which sees it distributed in almost all Arab countries, as well as its number of readers, publication history and frequency (an issue a week up to today) make it the most influential cartoon magazine in the Arab world³². Though it is Emirati from an administrative viewpoint, artistically it should be considered Egyptian since it was founded by the Egyptian journalist Aḥmad ‘Umar and since its editorial staff includes some of the most important Egyptian cartoonists like Ḥiğgāzī and al-Labbād. They have guaranteed remarkable artistic standards, setting the comic book on a higher level than other similar publications. From a cultural perspective, “Māğid” presents itself as a pan-Arab product that taps into a shared cultural heritage³³.

2. Humour and Dialect in the Post-Revolutionary Crisis. Is There a New Generation of Ironic Reformers in the Latest Development of Arab Comics?

Actually, recourse to irony and consequently dialect is not new, as these two elements are inextricably entwined. The latest revolutionary movement, the return of repression and the publication of comics recall other similar moments in Egyptian history. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries there was a great flourishing of satirical magazines, which increasingly employed dialect to strengthen the humorous discharge of their attacks and involve readers, but especially to engender consensus around a given idea. Versatile artists like Ya‘qūb Ṣanū‘ (1839-1912)³⁴ and ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm (1842-1896) come to mind and, with a leap forward in time, also a little known figure of Egyptian contemporary literature: Muṣṭafā Muṣarrafah, author of the first Egyptian vernacular novel entitled *Qanṭarah allaḍī kafara* (Qanṭarah who Became an Infidel, 1940)³⁵.

In his “Abū nazzārah zarqā” (The Man with the Blue Glasses, 1877), Ya‘qūb Ṣanū‘ proposed increasingly sophisticated lithographs and drawings with captions in Egyptian dialect as early as the beginning of the last century. In his magazines “al-Tankīt wa ’l-tabkīt” (The Irony and the Reproach, 1881) and “al-Ustād”

³¹ George Khoury, *La bande dessinée d’expression arabe de 1950 à nos jours*, 2011, <http://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2011-la-bande-dessinee/la-bande-dessinee-d-expression-arabe-de-1950-a-nos-jours>.

³² A. Douglas, F.M. Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, cit., p. 151.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁴ Wafaa El Beih, *James Sanua e la presenza degli italiani nell’Egitto dell’Ottocento*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, IV, nn. 7-8, dicembre 2014, pp. 134-147, http://www.arablit.it/rivista_arablit/Numero7_8_2014/15_ElBeih.pdf.

³⁵ F. De Angelis, *Muṣṭafā Muṣarrafah a Pioneer of Narrative Techniques in his Qanṭarah allaḍī kafara, the First Novel Entirely Written in Egyptian Dialect*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, III, n. 6, dicembre 2013, pp. 19-27, http://www.arablit.it/rivista_arablit/Numero6_2013/2_DeAngelis.pdf.

(The Master, 1892)³⁶, al-Nadīm offered light educational stories in Egyptian dialect, possibly in an attempt to imbue readers with a nationalistic spirit. These two great writers of modern Egyptian literature, and many other magazine editors operated in a time of severe repression, foreign occupation and, above all, in a pre- or post-revolutionary period. Reference is here made to the revolution of Aḥmad ‘Urābī (1840-1911) in 1882, which attracted great popular participation much like the revolutions of 1919, 1952 and that of 2011. It is therefore no coincidence that the first, bitterly ironic, novel written in Egyptian dialect should mainly deal with the revolution of Sa‘d Zaḡlūl (1859-1927). Nor is it a coincidence that in recent years a flourishing production of comics has emerged in Egypt and in the Arab world along with the public’s growing interest in this kind of production.

What all the twentieth century satirical magazines had in common was their strong interest in the national cause. They were journals of dissent, which usually explains their short life. Quite evidently, those who practised that kind of journalism fully belonged to the reform movement that characterised the XIX century Arab world. They were the so-called *iṣlāhiyyūn fukāhiyyūn* (humorous reformers). In light of the considerations expressed further on, one might wonder whether “Tūk Tūk” and newly born comic books will be able to give birth to a generation of *iṣlāhiyyūn fukāhiyyūn 2.0*.

Arab comics have truly come into their own only in the second half of the past century. In the seventies many Western comics, mainly French and American ones, were adapted to the Arab context. Now the production is largely indigenous and original and part of an emerging regional mass culture whose forms may appear Western but whose content has long since ceased to be so³⁷.

Since around 2006, the Middle East has played host to a small and steadily growing scene of locally produced comics. Unlike the established tradition of children’s comics in the region, this culture of contemporary comics has witnessed the publication of comics that are explicitly intended for an adult audience. This new crop of independent Middle Eastern comics appropriates familiar Western formats such as graphic novels, monthly issues, and anthologies, while addressing topics ranging from religion to politics and sex³⁸.

Recently, the growing interest in comics is signalled by several exhibits and festivals that are periodically organised in several Arab capitals. Book fairs, such as those in Sharjah or Abu Dhabi, dedicate space specifically for Middle Eastern comics and graphic novels³⁹; festivals dedicated to this particular artistic form were organised, like the FIBDA (Festival International de la Bande Dessinée

³⁶ For more on the two magazines see F. De Angelis, *La letteratura egiziana in dialetto nel primo '900*, Jouvence, Roma 2007, pp. 101-108.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁸ Nadim Damluji, *Can The Subaltern Draw?: A Survey of Contemporary Arab Comics*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2011/09/can-the-subaltern-draw-a-survey-of-contemporary-arab-comics/>.

³⁹ M.L. Qualey, *The Capital of Arab Comics: Algiers, Beirut, Cairo, Or Dubai?*, in “Arabic Literature (in English)”, April 15, 2012, <http://arablit.org/2012/04/15/the-capital-of-arab-comics-algiers-beirut-cairo-or-dubai/>.

d'Alger) in Algiers in 2008, or the Middle East Film & Comic Con, a convention organised in Abu Dhabi in 2011 in the wake of the American ones, in which several artists were able to present their work and talk to the public. In September 2014, the first week dedicated to Egyptian comics was held between Alexandria and Cairo, hosting events, exhibits and workshops on this relatively long-standing art in the country⁴⁰.

Still in 2014, the American University of Beirut hosted the Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative, which was inaugurated with the aim of promoting the academic research, teaching and production of Arab comics. The Sawwaf family made the commitment of funding the project for the next five years, thus filling up the lack of an educational and academic perspective on this art form in the Middle Eastern regions by collecting materials and promoting university courses in the field.

Another creative attempt to promote and preserve Arab comics is being carried out by the website arabcomics.net, created in 2005. Its aim is threefold: to scan and archive classic Arab comics (like "Samīr" and similar ones), putting them at users' disposal; to translate foreign comics into Arabic; and to provide a social community in which fans and creators of comics can discuss, write, share and even produce their own work collaboratively⁴¹.

It should be observed that the constant and articulate development of this medium throughout the entire region has been largely hampered by two main obstacles⁴²: on the one hand the lack of financial means capable of guaranteeing a steady and flourishing production, except in the case of children's magazines, as their publishers are subsidised by the government; on the other, the scarce consideration so far received that has relegated comics, here as in other contexts, to a para-literary production, an attitude that is being contested only recently also thanks to some of the contributions mentioned above.

If there is a ground zero for this recent wave of Arab comics, then it is the Lebanese "al-Samandal" (The Salamander) that marks the spot. "al-Samandal" started in 2006 as a fully-realised and fully-packed comics magazine for «picture stories from here and there»⁴³ as the cover subhead reads. The aim is to encourage artists in the region to use the magazine as a springboard: anyone in the public is thus invited to collaborate by sending their work to the editorial staff⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ M.L. Qualey, *American University in Beirut Launches Sawwaf Comics Initiative; Egyptian Comix Week Starts Tomorrow*, in "Arabic Literature (in English)", September 21, 2014, <http://arablit.org/2014/09/21/american-university-in-beirut-launches-sawwaf-comics-initiative-egyptian-comix-week-starts-tomorrow/>.

⁴¹ Yazan al-Saadi, *Arab Comics: Creating Communities, Archiving History*, in "al-Akhbar English", April 1, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/15409>.

⁴² George Khoury, *A Brief History of Arabic Comics*, cit.

⁴³ Nadim Damluji, *Can The Subaltern Draw?: A Survey of Contemporary Arab Comics*, cit.

⁴⁴ Lena Merhej, *La revue Samandal (Liban): histoires d'ici et d'ailleurs*, 2011, <http://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2011-la-bande-dessinee/la-revue-samandal-liban-histoires-d-ici-et-d-ailleurs>.

Mağdī al-Šāfi‘ī’s *Mītrū* (Metro)⁴⁵, instead, has been recognised as the first Arabic graphic novel. It tells the story of a young software designer named Šihāb, who decides to rob a bank in order to pay back a massive debt he owes to corrupt officials. The story paints a scathing portrait of Hosni Mubarak (Ḥusnī Mubārak) era Egypt, where all police are corrupt and Egyptians themselves are too complacent to change anything. Not surprisingly, during the era of Mubarak’s police state control, this revolution-friendly comic was banned soon after its release, while al-Šāfi‘ī and Muḥammad al-Šarqawī, the publisher, were fined for distributing graphic pornography (there is a sex scene in the comic)⁴⁶. In truth, the true reason for censorship was *Mītrū*’s denunciation of the entire pyramid of politics, dominated at its peak by a mysterious *bāšā* that seems to be none other than Mubarak himself. The novel is the autopsy of a fragmented society that was waiting for a revolutionary moment to shake off the endemic corruption that was infesting its parts⁴⁷.

Today Arab comics are a flourishing medium with an enormous readership and a political and ideological spectrum that ranges from leftist and secular modernist views to Islamic religious beliefs. From this point on I will focus on “Tūk Tūk”, a completely Egyptian comic book, whose prevailing tone is humorous, written in perfect *baladī* (local) Egyptian style despite moments of absorbed reflection. The magazine includes different kinds of comics that can hardly be grouped under the same category, but whose predominant tone is ironic.

Comics are not just vehicles for stories but primarily documents that tell us something about our history⁴⁸, though in a special way. The motto of funny comic strips seems to be “something important is happening here and we are just kidding about this important thing”. Anyone who has spent some time in the land of pharaohs knows that laughing is a serious matter for Egyptians⁴⁹.

As can be elicited from what has been discussed so far, in the Arab context the comic book has crossed a large number of genres, turning itself into a tool for education, mere entertainment, simple fun, life testimony, and often a war diary. Surprisingly, humour has been able to emerge even in tragic situations like war, fraught with contrasts and contradictions, maybe thanks to the complexity of such a situation. Humour finds fertile ground in contradictory contexts where rationality withers: the onset of war, or the stark childhood of those who find themselves fully involved in the gloomy climate of a conflict during the alleged age of innocence and light heartedness are recurrent themes in Lebanese cartoons, for example.

⁴⁵ Mağdī al-Šāfi‘ī, *Mītrū*, Dār Malāmiḥ li ‘l-Našr, al-Qāhirah 2008. In English: *Metro: a Story of Cairo*, translated by C. Rossetti, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2012; in Italian: *Metro*, traduzione di E. Pagano, Il Sirente, Fagnano Alto 2010.

⁴⁶ Nadim Damluji, *Can The Subaltern Draw?: A Survey of Contemporary Arab Comics*, cit.

⁴⁷ Muhib Gameel, *Egyptian Comics: A History With a Revolutionary Flavor*, in “al-Akhbar English”, September 30, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21779>.

⁴⁸ D. Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, cit., p. 6.

⁴⁹ P. Branca, B. De Poli, P. Zanelli, *Il sorriso della mezzaluna: umorismo, ironia e satira nella cultura araba*, Carocci, Roma 2011.

Well-known for having a propensity for irony and sarcasm, Egyptians are also famous as *awlād al-nuktah* (literally: children of jokes). Egyptian humour, as displayed in magazines, in comics and popular stories, is never pointless. It offers an important occasion for reflection and criticism. It manages to create, through irony, a moment of sympathy among individuals affected by similar sufferings. Humour almost takes on a therapeutic function. This accounts for the abundance of jokes circulating after periods of crisis, and it is in this sense that *al-nuktah* is an indicator of the *ḥālah* of the country. An Arab saying sounds, more or less, like this: “Situations of great suffering call for laughter”. Aḥmad Amīn (1886-1954) must have been thinking especially of his Egyptian fellow citizens when he was asked why nature endowed only man with laughter, and he replied that the answer is very simple, because no other animal was burdened with so many woes as man⁵⁰.

Irony works by unlocking repressed anxieties in the psyche. It makes it possible to exploit whatever amount of ridicule there is in the target which is the object of humour. For a moment it closes the gap between rulers and subjects. But humour, Khalid Kishtainy maintains, can never become a remedy in itself. It usually adds nothing more to what listeners already know. It is an ephemeral escape from a situation from which there is no escape⁵¹. Arabs in general, however, and Egyptians in particular, seem incapable of doing without humour and, consequently, the use of dialect, especially in periods of increased political and social tension. Khalid Kishtainy shows that several terms related to humour have the same root as food words: *fukāhah* (humour) has the same root as *fākihah* (fruit)⁵², *mulḥah* (anecdote) as *milḥ* (salt), *nuktah* (joke) as *nukat* (ripe dates), and so on⁵³. It seems as if, for Egyptians, humour were as necessary for survival and as life-giving as food.

“Tūk Tūk” was originated from an idea of the artist Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī. Together with other cartoonists and scriptwriters and after almost a year of brainstorming sessions and preparation, he gave life to what is considered the first comic magazine for adults in Egypt. The first issue of “Tūk Tūk” was published on January 9th 2011, therefore only two weeks before the beginning of the protests in Tahrir Square.

The *tuk-tuk* is a picturesque three-wheeler taxi, especially widespread throughout Asia. Over the last five years this particular means of transport has contributed to increasing the already congested traffic on the roads in Cairo, especially in working-class districts. It is often driven by people without a driving licence and in total disregard of any street regulations. The noise a *tuk-tuk* makes and the dangerous way it negotiates the traffic on the crowded city streets stirs up anxiety and disquiet among residents, pedestrians and car drivers. The image of the *tuk-tuk* thus suggests danger and anarchy and evokes the microcosm of the Egyptian lower class, its behavior and environment in the cartoonists’ mind.

⁵⁰ Khalid Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*, Quartet Books, London 1985, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵² Interestingly, when Egyptians have guests, they often offer fruit besides tea.

⁵³ Khalid Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*, cit., pp. 19-20.

According to Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī, these tatty little vehicles come «directly from the streets, which is exactly what we want the comic book to be about»⁵⁴. Just like the three-wheeler moves among the roads of Cairo, the magazine goes round the streets and wants to tell stories about and criticise the characters it comes across. Moreover, like the vehicle picks up passengers along its route, so the magazine invites its readers to ride “Tūk Tūk”: readers are invited to send in their drawings, the best of which will be published.

The first issue of “Tūk Tūk” was a mere 44 pages, designed with meticulous attention to detail. The cover features a policeman writing a fine, a choice obviously alluding to the ubiquity of government control. The cover also gives us some indication of the nature of the magazine. On top we find *Mahattat al-qīṣaṣ al-muṣawwarah* (Comics Station) as a sort of subtitle. Lower, a more explicit reference is made to the audience the magazine is intended for: *Tuhfah ba ‘īd^{an} ‘an mutanāwal al-atfāl* (Keep away from children).

“Tūk Tūk” is a comic magazine without any superheroes to save the world, since superhero culture is foreign. Several characters recur in every issue, like the illegal parking attendant who exacts money from an airplane one time, from a jet ski another time and even from his son’s remote controlled car! Other characters return but I will not describe them in detail.

“Tūk Tūk”’s focus on the everyday embraces what comics do best and what gives the medium its subversive political power: mixing the high and the lowbrow without sentimentality or propaganda, and carrying a huge potential for ambiguity.

The spirit of this comic magazine would seem to contest Khalid Kishtainy’s claim that humour will get you nowhere. Indeed, “Tūk Tūk” authors appear to have deep trust in the unifying force of Egyptian humour and dialect. The impression in reading the magazine is that cartoonists and scriptwriters are imbued with a communal and collaborative spirit that cannot be too different from the one experienced by the demonstrators of Tahrir Square, at least at the initial stages of the protests, when almost everyone agreed upon what course of action to take. Although it may appear naïve, the idea seemed to be “If we are all together, we will manage to change the general state of things”.

This is what can be inferred from some magazine’s explicit requests to its readers. In the first issue we find, for instance: «With your [the readers’] participation, “Tūk Tūk” will reach its readers faster, and we will join the artists of the ninth art (comics) in Egypt and abroad [...]. Counting on your intellectual, artistic (and financial!) fuel, we will keep accelerating the speed of “Tūk Tūk”»⁵⁵.

The magazine, the authors explicitly claim, does not deal with politics, or at least it does not do so directly. The cartoonists’ intention is to engage citizens with essentially social issues and communicate with them. Since the very beginning the authors have striven to avoid themes that may clash with Egyptians’ religious and moral sensitivity. As mentioned above, “Tūk Tūk” does not ironise the powerful but

⁵⁴ Interview with Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī, in M. Detrie, *Egyptian Comic Book Harks Back to Golden Age*, in “National”, September 29, 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/egyptian-comic-book-harks-back-to-golden-age>.

⁵⁵ “Tūk Tūk”, January 2011, n. 0, p. 4.

the behaviour of the ordinary Egyptian man. By highlighting and ridiculing these common defects, the magazine suggests ways to correct them. Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī and his team thus invite their fellow citizens to assume their responsibility for the current state of their country. Unlike the majority of Egyptian intellectuals, “Tūk Tūk” authors seem to wish for a reform from the bottom of society and not from the top. The magazine’s true mission is that of making citizens aware of their defects, but also of the opportunities provided by more adequate behaviour in the wake of Henri Bergson’s theory that citizens are often unaware of their defects. The more unaware they are, the more comical citizens become until they gain awareness and start correcting themselves. Thus, Bergson sums up, comedy helps people correct their bad habits⁵⁶.

The target of the “Tūk Tūk” cartoonists, therefore, is not the rulers but some of the typical attitudes of the ordinary Egyptian or *‘ādāt wa taqālīd* (habits and customs) that are deeply rooted in Egyptian society. Criticism of habits and customs has always been one of the hardest taboos to break. Thanks to humour, al-Šinnāwī and his team manage to ridicule those behaviours without upsetting readers, who often are the target of humour. Their approach evokes Sigmund Freud’s theory: jokes allow us to exploit the ridiculous side of our target that we were previously unable to openly and consciously reveal because of a number of intervening obstacles. Once again, jokes will circumvent limitations and release previously unattainable sources of pleasure. Besides, jokes will persuade listeners, by means of that same pleasure, attracting them to our side as a result. In German the fitting expression is «Die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen» (to pull the laughs over to your side), the father of psychoanalysis concludes⁵⁷.

“Tūk Tūk” authors try to actively involve their fellow citizens, but they do not withhold strong criticism addressed to those who opt out and do not accept their personal responsibility when confronted with the new challenges imposed by the post-revolutionary period.

The story *al-Sanāfir ḥā’irūn* (The Smurfs in Panic)⁵⁸ drawn by Maḥlūf in the third issue of the magazine on July 17th, 2011, clearly illustrates this point. Papa Smurf suddenly decides to quit being the leader of the community, which is left disoriented, having lost a guide that has always thought of everything, so much so that the Smurfs have given up their brains. New candidates now guide the community. The story was clearly inspired by the political situation following Mubarak’s resignation and the subsequent run for president. The caricaturist’s scathing irony, as well as the choice of the Smurfs as creatures beyond time, expresses disillusionment about the Egyptian people’s will to take on collective responsibility without calling for a new leader⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (authorised translation by C. Breerton and F. Rothwell), The Macmillan Company, New York 1913, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁷ S. Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1987, pp. 112-113. For an English translation see S. Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by A.A. Brill, T. Fisher Unwin, London 1916.

⁵⁸ Maḥlūf, *al-Sanāfir ḥā’irūn*, in “Tūk Tūk”, July 17, 2011, n. 3, pp. 16-21.

⁵⁹ Dina Heshmat, *BD. Avec la parution de son troisième numéro, Toc Toc est désormais ancrée dans le paysage culturel. Sans être toujours centrée sur l’actualité, la revue garde son style frondeur et son ouverture sur les expériences artistiques passées et d’ailleurs*, in “Hebdo al-Ahram en ligne”, August 2011, n. 882, <http://hebdo.ahram.org/Archive/2011/8/3/livr1.htm>.

Another relevant example among many others is the *Biyqūllak*⁶⁰ story by Hišām Raḥmah and Tāmīr ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, a clever social commentary on Egyptians’ love for the word *biyqūllak*⁶¹ and the different ways they employ it to eschew responsibility and avoid commitment. Raḥmah and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd suggest that 2011 should mark the end of *biyqūllak*, and Egyptians’ implicit disconnection from responsibility for their own fate⁶². This criticism is therefore addressed to the Egyptian people as a whole, complicit with, as well as a victim of, a false and corrupt system⁶³. Thanks to irony, however, criticism is not an end in itself but suggests suitable conduct. Actually, the magazine’s contributors seem to rely on a concept expressed by the Egyptian intellectual ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964), according to whom laughter is a sudden and quick comparison between things as they are and as they should be. This quick and intelligent comparison is only possible for a complex mind which is able to evoke the right thing⁶⁴.

The wind of change and greater freedom of opinion have favoured the birth of a large number of artistic initiatives mostly carried out by young people willing to have their say in an alternative way, as for example in the several works of street art that colour the walls of the capital city. The contradictions between the Egyptian streets and its political and economic woes have paved the way for a number of young people, aware of the sensitivity and importance of the revolutionary moment, to come forward and express themselves. This stance may have served as a backdrop for comic magazines in Egypt, an alternative medium for self-expression and as a protest against mainstream thinking⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ Hišām Raḥmah, Tāmīr ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Biyqūllak*, in “Tūk Tūk”, II, April 2011, pp. 47-54.

⁶¹ “*Biyqūllak*”, an expression of the Egyptian dialect, literally means “he tells you”. The same expression is used to mean “I have heard, they say...”, which in the specific Egyptian context implies “it was not me who said that”. “*Byiqūllak*”, therefore, is a strategy to eschew responsibility without indicating who is responsible.

⁶² C. Curran, *Local Graphic Arts Magazine Launches Second Issue*, in “Daily News Egypt”, April 11, 2011, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2011/04/11/local-graphic-arts-magazine-launches-second-issue/>.

⁶³ A. Douglas, F.M. Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, cit., p. 75.

⁶⁴ Maḥmūd ‘Abbās al-‘Aqqād, *Muṭāla‘āt fī ‘l-kutub wa ‘l-ḥayāh*, Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, Bayrūt 1966, p. 1322.

⁶⁵ Muhib Gameel, *Egyptian Comics: A History With a Revolutionary Flavor*, cit.