Friday, 10 January 2014

349. Vulnerable Expression and the Arab Uprisings

3:30–4:45 p.m.

Program arranged by the Division on Arabic Literature and Culture

Presiding: Hoda El Shakry, Pennsylvania State University

1. "Bassem Youssef's El-Bernameg and the Resurgence of Political Satire in the Middle East," Suha Kudsieh, Coll. of Staten Island, City Univ. of New York

At the turn of the twenty first century, the use of the Internet and social media (Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype) became ubiquitous in the Middle East, which weakened the state’s iron grip on its citizens and its monopoly over the media. When the Arab Uprisings began to spread from one country to the next, political satire, a genre that was common before 2011, became sharper, bolder, more poignant and scathing.

A handful of films (e.g. the movies of ‘Adel Imam in Egypt) and plays (e.g. the plays of Ziyad al-Rihbani in Lebanon and of Durayd Lahham in Syria) employed political satire before 2011; however, after Jan. 2011, the genre attained a sharper, bolder, and more poignant edge. While in the past satire was aimed at authority in general, without pointing fingers at a specific president or naming a particular government, the Arab Uprising ushered in a new era in which the limitations imposed on freedom of expression were contested and challenged. Bassem Youssef’s El-Bernameg is a testimony of this shift.

The early episodes of the program entitled The B+ Show were shot at Youssef’s basement in al-Ma’aadi, Cairo, and aired on Youtube in March 2011. The phenomenal success of the early episodes brought the program to the attention of Egyptian TV channels. The next series of the program were entitled El-Bernameg (meaning “program”) were aired on ONTV in the summer of 2011. Youssef later negotiated a new contract with CBC, which offered him the opportunity to film the weekly episodes before a live audience. The second season began to air in Nov. 2012.

Although the show is modelled after Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show, the stakes of organizing El-Bernameg in Egypt are much higher. The popularity of the program among TV viewers and on Youtube, and its scathing criticism of the current president (Morsi) and the ruling party Hizb al-‘Adalah, a.k.a. the Muslim Brotherhood) brought it to the attention of Islamist hardliners and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, who began to issue fatwas against watching it and legally sued Youssef, the producers, and CBC. For instance, an Egyptian prosecutor investigated Bassem Youssef on charges of maligning President Morsi, and a few Shaikhs accused Youssef of being an apostate because he had criticized a Muslim president. Despite those fatwas, the program continued to attract more viewers and followers. It pioneered a new type of satire, such as ‘Ala al-Tayer, another satirical show that airs on Youtube in Saudi Arabia.
My paper will examine how Bassem Youssef uses parody and political satire to highlight the hypocrisy of the state and the government, and how he manages to skirt the legal and religious challenges triggered by his program. By examining Youssef’s show, I will be able to trace the resurgence of popular political satire in Egypt in particular and in the region in general. The theoretical framework of my paper will draw on parody, satire, rhetoric and media studies.


In the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, new modes of discourse within Arab spaces continue to challenge traditional forms of expression. Prior to the onset of such social and political upheaval, writer Abdellah Taïa publically acknowledged his homosexuality, creating controversy within his native Morocco. In 2007, the writer stated in the publication Tel Quel that he, “dreams of a Morocco that thinks, grows, and evolves with culture.”

In his novel, L’armée du salut (2006), Taïa aptly challenges the limits of free expression through the creation of a gay character that seeks liberation from the constraints that define Arab sexualities. Situating his novel in both North Africa and Western Europe, Taïa underscores the challenges associated with being gay in Muslim culture, as well as the difficulties of embracing newfound freedom in the West. Following the events that began in Tunisia as public outcry, Taïa’s work continues to reflect the changing face of the contemporary queer subject.

In this paper, I propose to examine Taïa’s text through an anthropological lens, focusing primarily on the auto-fictitious narrator and the challenges of fleeing the Arab world for a new life in the West. I will consider how the author portrays the beauty of the queer encounter, juxtaposed against the vulnerability of his own Muslim imaginary. While my paper will focus primarily on Taïa’s L’armée du salut, I will also consider a series of passages from his 2012 publication, Infidèles.¹

Traveling to Switzerland in what the author has described as the narrator’s “final transformation,” Abdellah abruptly discovers that the allure of European civilization is perhaps pure fantasy. The isolation of his existence in Geneva poses as a turning point in the novel, and it is here where the text yields salient commentary on the quest for freedom—freedom of expression, as well as the possibility to construct a new cultural identity.² In the case of Taïa’s work, cultural freedom results in the creation of an alternate self, as well as the possibility to explore new forms of self-

¹ In his most recent novel, Infidèles (2012), Taïa continues to challenge the limits of expression by considering the notion of religious and personal freedom. In this vein, I hope to establish that this novel poses as an extension of his 2006 publication, further evidence that Taïa’s work poses a cornerstone of the contemporary cultural production that continues to define the Arab world following the onset of the Arab spring.

² When considering the construct of a new cultural identity, I will also consider the fact that Taïa writes in French (mainly from France).
expression.


In May of 2012, at a rally in the ancient city of Kairouan, Abu ‘Iyadh, the founder and leader of the Salafi jihadist organization Ansar al-Shari‘ah revealed a stack of paper tickets emblazoned with the group’s insignia. In handing out the tickets he would deputize the members of his audience, encouraging them to consider themselves “political police” and to enforce security, and “shari‘ah,” where the government would not.

The reign of terror that ensued that summer hardly bothered members of the country’s ruling party, however. The day following the most egregious incident, a twenty-four hour rampage through upscale neighborhoods of the capital following an art-exhibit that displayed “blasphemous” instillations, Ennahdha introduced a ban on violations of the “sacred” into the Draft Constitution, effectively bolstering the work of the reactionaries. Pressure from outside group and secular voices within the country eventually forced the Troika to remove the article, but the incident evidenced what many viewed as a cooptation of authority from well beyond the walls of Parliament.

With research conducted as part of a federal grant to study the narrative dimensions of emergent political discourse in post-revolutionary North Africa, the aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which extra-official groups in Tunisia have driven the political process, both practically and ideologically, and to what extend this phenomenon deviates from or reinforces previous patterns of political consolidation in Tunisia and beyond.

4. "Documenting Nonviolent Palestinian Resistance in Five Broken Cameras," Carine Bourget, Univ. of Arizona

This talk addresses the issue of competing nationalisms that fuel the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the lens of transnational cinema, focusing on a 2011 documentary co-directed by a Palestinian and a Jewish Israeli. Nominated for an academy award, Five Broken Cameras is a moving documentary about the non-violent resistance movement of the small West Bank village of Bil’in. The film consists for the most part of footage filmed by Palestinian Emad Burnat; Israeli Guy Davidi shaped the narrative that weaves Emad’s personal life since the birth of his youngest son with the protests of his village, whose mean of subsistence is threatened by a wall and encroaching illegal Israeli settlements separating them from their lands. Repression and censorship are ever present in the film, from the peaceful demonstrations violently dispersed to the structure of the film, which is punctuated by the number of cameras that were deliberately destroyed by Israeli forces.

Although the transnational funding and producing mechanisms at play in this documentary are typical of third world cinema in the 21st century, its Oscar nomination had stirred up a controversy over the “nationality” of the film which brings to the fore many questions about the entanglement of film making and politics in the specific context of the Arab-
Israeli conflict. While *Five Broken Cameras* is not the first documentary to highlight non-violent Palestinian resistance movements, I want to argue that its co-direction and co-production are symbolic of a view of politics of the region promoted by the likes of Edward Said, who, among others, has long argued against the viability as well as the validity of the two-state solution, a view that does not get exposure in the mainstream media.