

The Courts in France and in Spain are both impressed and intimidated by the glitter and glamour of the Turkish Sultan. In the 18th century this "Orient" is represented as a despotic space where the harem functions as a negative example for the still going European discussions about good government and just kings. These discussions are even reflected in the popular genre of the French Opéra Comique. In *Soliman II ou les trois Sultanes*, the Sultan is taken to task by French Sultane Roxelane who refuses to disappear in the harem. In her crusade against the despotic state, thriving on the laws of tyranny and slavery, she convinces the Sultan in the end to accept a government where power-relations are based on mutual agreement, dialogue and respect. Van Oostveldt describes and analyses carefully the system of counterstrategies the women in the harem develop and the images and paintings by artists from the West that represent them.

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During a one-day late summer seminar in Aarhus (Denmark) on Egyptian comedy, playwright Sameh Mahran spoke about a creative cultural interaction between people, an interaction containing the necessary diversity and reaching out for the borders of our common existence. Interaction is the keyword. It means also: transparency, balance, credibility, equivalence. He then referred to the cultural base that we all share, be it in East or West: the Greek civilization. In the famous myth of Narcissus, the character is looking at his image reflected in the water and speaks to it lovingly: let me kiss you. In doing so he misses a second character Echo who is very much in love with him. Condemned by Hera to repeat the last part of every sentence she hears, her beloved thinks that what he hears is his own voice.

The myth ends, Mahran said, with the collapse of both Narcissus and Echo. The idea of this myth is that self-enclosure leads to death and dissolution into the other does that too. It is the same with cultures. And so it is.

COMEDY IN THE ARABIC CULTURAL SYSTEM A Preliminary Critique

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1. No human community can exist without a cultural system that unifies its collective identity and structures its material, spiritual and symbolic activities. A cultural system is a set of interrelated values and principles that constructs a hidden map of the community's most vital exchanges: it orders its daily life and its worldly and spiritual times. Therefore, the collective daily activities (i.e., producing, consuming, communicating and thinking) are based on a tacit set of principles and values which controls its production and allows community members to recognize the outcome of these activities, given that these productions are related to the community members as they themselves are related to them.
2. The cultural system consists of different structures: some are dogmatic and spiritual, some are linguistic and communicational, some are socio-political, and some are material and productive. These foundational structures constitute the settings of both material and symbolic exchanges in society.
3. At the level of the material exchange, we may include all the productive and consumptive exchanges, as well as all forms of exchange related to human activity and its material and intellectual production, while at the level of the symbolic exchange, we often think of cultural, communicational, spiritual and artistic exchanges. The overlap between these two kinds of exchanges is essential to any communal life, since the materialistic and symbolic levels are so persistently and constantly shifting that on occasion, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two.
4. On the basis of this preliminary argument, we can say that culture is not that much a collection of 'texts' produced by a certain human community; rather, it is a set of values that controls the production of such 'texts'. As a whole, culture is a system, both hidden and explicit, that controls the production of linguistic and non-linguistic signs. In fact, it is a system that turns all the material and symbolic activities into a set of symbols and signs produced in the same manner. Accordingly, such apparently different cultural products or artefacts, such as cookery dishes, the architecture of cities and the performing arts, can be analysed in the same manner as signs produced by a cultural system.

5. We can say that the era of *at-tadwîn* (the codification of the Quran) is the first time when an Arabo-Islamic cultural system came into being. Islam as a religious practice was consolidated, the Arabic language was codified in accordance with specific political and religious ends, and the reproduction of the Quran was regulated when the caliph Uthman ordered the compilation of the authentic verses of the holy Quran and the burning of all diverging copies. Consequently, a new political reality was created based on the *khilâfa* (governance) that drew its power from religious authority. Therefore, it was in the *tadwîn* era - an era that was established by a political decision - that the deeply rooted structures of the Arabo-Islamic cultural system were established that are still effective in our lives to these day. Likewise, systematic interconnections were established between, first, the religious text - which now had become unified and codified - and its interpretation (*at-tafsîr*) through "al-fiqh" and "al-hadîth"; second, the mechanisms of interpretation and subsequently of expression (*at-tabîr*), i.e. language compiling; and finally, the means of organizing a society in terms of production and consumption through a theocratic political system that relies on the principle of transcendence and on a form of governance far removed from principles of participation, consultation or opposition.

6. This system has evolved through several successive historical stages, in which some structures were deleted; others were changed or added, particularly during the period of colonial intervention and the great openness toward European modernism that it initially entailed. Nonetheless, we can say that since the era of *tadwîn*, Arabs have been living according to broadly the same productive and consumptive mechanisms, and according to the same material and symbolic exchanges which were consonant with this cultural system.

7. The Arabo-Islamic cultural system rests on sacredness, and on the prohibition of either violating or criticizing it; hence, the religious text, the language and the political system are all held to be sacred. Outside this sacred trajectory, other levels of sacredness are organised in a similarly hierarchical way: the sacredness of the mother and father, the sacredness of the "wali salih" (the divine master), the sacredness of the governor or the ruler, and the sacredness of words. Thus, the view of Arabic as sacred, unchanging, and identical to the language of Adam in Eden, is still widespread.

8. Ever since the establishment of this cultural system, the comic imaginary in Arabic culture has been thwarted. Consequently, comedy and the comical - according to all phenomenological, psychological, or anthropological interpretations - rely on paradox, and on the violation of the cultural system and

the dismantling of its linear codification by means of lateral yet subversive agencies and marginal interferences. Hence, comedy is the violation of the sacredness of objects, persons and classes, and the unveiling of their deeply rooted paradoxes. That is why the church banned Aristotle's work on comedy. Therefore, comedy is a violation of the self-complacent system, and a rupture of the linearity of things. Comic agency triumphs when one utters a word and its opposite is understood, when the tyrant and powerful ruler becomes a fool and yet not a fool, when the father ceases to be a father figure and becomes an object of ridicule in the eyes of his son... Thus, comedy is the intervention of the poor, marginal and effaced characters to say their word on an actual stage or a stage of words.

9. Comedy is a challenge to authority. It is an empowerment of the weak and underprivileged who triumphs only for one hour, to the marginalized who is relocated at the centre at least for a short while. Comedy is the intervention of an unusual power that breaks things but builds others, even if only for a short time. If this is so, how could a comic imagination ever be erected within a cultural system that annihilates it and exalts sacredness, in addition to its shielding it with destructive weapons such as *takfir* or excommunication, prohibition and censorship, and charges of atheism or debauchery, etc?

10. Comedy in the Arabic culture is under siege: fenced in by barbed wire, it is not allowed to invest in fields other than sociological, linguistic, and experiences of everyday life. If it attempts to cross the red lines of religion, the sultan and the sacred, it will be hindered and thwarted. As a result, part of the low level of comedy in our Moroccan and Arabic theatre is due to the fact that it is crippled by a rigid cultural system.

Translated from Arabic by **Samira Tarjisti**