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THE PERFORMANCE OF COMEDY IN EAST AND WEST Culturel Buonbaries and the Art of Cunning

Mieke KOLK

"And let me say many laughable things
and many serious things, too"
(Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, 393-4)

"Whereas perhaps it can be doubted whether the concept of the tragic, in the Classical Greek sense of the term, has existed in the Arabic cultural and literary tradition, no one will contest that the comic is an integral part of the Arabic literary heritage. From the 9th century onwards, comic genres were part of the common repertoire of both high and popular literature, in the form of jocular tales, comic anecdotes, poetry, scabrous jokes, and popular romances." And it was this heritage, writes Arabist Richard van Leeuwen (The Netherlands), that deeply influenced the modern tradition of Arabic drama and theatre, which developed within the frames of the artistic models from Europe, introduced in the middle of the 19th century. It was this same literary heritage of comical motifs, themes and strategies that facilitated the acceptance of the Western dramatic forms in its range of serious comedy, melodrama, farce etc. As in the West, in addition to being entertaining, a main function of the comic literature was to express social and political critique. Arabic playwrights could use critical moments in the existing examples of poetry and anecdotes, in handbooks for the cultural elites, in entertainment literature as tales of wonder and love romances. Old medieval genres like the *Maqama* (an oral rhymed narration) and the *Karagoz* -scripts written by Ibn Danyal, were recycled as narrative material in modern times. One of the main sources are the tales of *Thousand and One Nights*, framed by the story of the brave Shahrazâd and her frustrated king Shariyâr. Van Leeuwen traces the inspirational use of this Book in the comical structure of both the narrative and in critical, political motifs of two plays from the 1960s, by famous Egyptian playwrights Alfred Farag and Fârûq Khûrshîd.

It are not only literary sources from Arabic culture that frequently appear in Arabic drama and theatre. More and more the long line of comic heritage in what is now called the pre-theatrical performative tradition comes to the foreground in public events like shows with 'actors', in shadowplays and the puppet-theatre. Next to the performers, the place and the occasion are of crucial importance: the

marketplace, the village festival, the teahouses and even the palaces of the sultan. Central in nearly all these shows is the figure of the *Ibn al-Balad*, the common man, of his sorrow, joy, intelligence, wisdom and stupidity, represented in an overwhelming series of different names for different countries. Most famous seems the puppet play and its hero Karagoz. All these shows about the Ibn al Balad can be traced back till the Middle Ages and, thriving on stock-types and improvisation, they seem composed very much like the Italian Commedia dell'arte theatre.

Molièrization

Arabic pre-theatrical heritage was presented from different perspectives, most extensively from the Moroccan side. Seemingly 'gone underground' or consciously re-activated within an Arabic aesthetic frame, these cultural roots played an important role in the re-framing of a Western heritage, which was imported in the Arabic countries in the periods of their colonisation and/or studied in the West itself.

Drama and theatre came first to Lebanon, then to Syria and Egypt in 19th century. For the countries of the Magreb this cultural colonisation started much later. For a long period it was taken for granted, by Eastern and Western scholars, that this meant an introduction of theatre itself in these countries. The first theatre productions in the East were mostly adaptations of comedies from the West, most frequently of Molière, and some Shakespeare. Especially in the French occupied territories it was possible to speak of a "Molièrization" of the theatre, which not only meant the development of theatre in the French tradition but, in the case of the Magreb, also of the de-politization of the theatrical discourse. Nevertheless a rich history of drama was created, particularly in Egypt and Syria. During the 20th century drama writers used the theatre as a platform to discuss the national policy and identity with or against Western dramatic developments. This Arabic 'drama about drama', both before and after national independence, offers an exciting new perspective on European drama history and the political choices those authors made.

In the decades following the Second World War and the success of the revolutionary movements in different countries questioning of the Western forms of theatre began as a form of de-colonisation of the cultural apparatus. History, heritage, background, roots and identity became topics of discussion within the intellectual and theatrical worlds. In 1965 Egyptian writer Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) publicized a series of articles in which he declared the combination of

national identity and foreign art forms to be both invalid and impossible. Only authentic local art forms could represent universal values, or attain universality. For inspiration he did refer to more primitive indigenous folk art.

The search for identity, roots and universality was also present in Western theatre. In a surprising a/similarity between the two theatre-reformers, a couple of years later English director Peter Brook went intercultural, and travelled to Persepolis in Iran to discover the roots of the whole of mankind in his production *Orghast* (1971). Both interventions were important: they broke the dominance of traditional forms of drama and performance into hybrid combinations of old and new, western influences and eastern traditional forms, theatrical forms into the dramatic texts. Postmodernist and post-colonial theory and philosophy invaded the theatrical space and slowly globalized theatrical experimental thinking.

The conference on the Comic (*The Comic Condition as a Play with Incongruities; Cultural Varieties in Arabic and Western Theatre*) last spring at the Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan (Morocco) was part of the diptych of the 2003 meeting in Belgium /Ghent, focussing on the concept of the Tragic. Its proceedings were published in 2004, under the title: *Rereading Classics in East and West; Postcolonial perspectives on the Tragic*. With old and new participants, the general outline of the papers reminded that of the first conference, but was, due to the topic, also quite different.

1. The philosophers in the group mostly spoke about *The Comic per se*, its cultural boundaries, the possible cultural differences between European and Arabic traditions, and their possible forms of interaction and cross-fertilization.
2. Arabists explored the diversity of *The literary comic heritage in Arabic culture*, while a whole range of theatre scholars from East and West concentrated on *Egyptian classic and new drama texts*, their strategies of the comic, the grotesque and the absurd with a comparison with western models.
3. The *Arabic pre-theatrical heritage* and its influence on Arabic theatre was presented, from both an Egyptian and Moroccan perspective. Pre-theatrical performativity was also a central theme in the story about *Siyah Bazi / a blackface-show*, by two young scholars from Iran.
4. *The Western heritage* of comedy and its interventions of satire and parody in the tragic was explored by an European classicist, while two theatre-historians offered a remarkable development of the image of the Ottoman sultan between the 16th and the 18th century in Flanders and France: how the cruel tyrant was transformed into a benevolent patriarch. Orientalism revisited?

5. An extra topic developed itself during the conference and later. The presence of comedy-writer *Lenin El-Ramly* from Egypt led to a lively exchange of views with several scholars presenting papers dealing with his work. His own reflection on the writing of comedy presents us with the only voice right from theatre-practice and is as such very valuable. Last October Lenin El-Ramly received the Prince Claus Award in the field of Humour and Satire.

1. What can be laughed at? The quest for Comicality

Sharing the quest of comicality in a more philosophical way, cultural differences were explored in a rather confrontational manner: comedy works more political than tragedy, a comic performance serves through the ages as a social relief, is not easily forbidden by authorities and seems to be ungraspable for censorship in its sudden improvisations. Comic language uses symbols and metaphors, which hide and show reality at the same time. Comicality and the comic are culturally dependent in ways different from the dramatic expression of the tragic, which remains bound by the ancient Greek form. The Comic is universal.

In the Arabic presentations often a combination of two perspectives could be pointed at. This combination, Michiel Leezenberg (The Netherlands) explains, is based on Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri's vision on Arabic Culture from the Revelation of Islam or even before that, as a unifying cultural and discursive system on the one hand, and a Marxist inspired critique on economical dominance and cultural hegemony of the liberal, capitalistic West on the other.

It is clear that Said Naji (Morocco) represents the first perspective. In 10 short statements he explains how culture as a system is organized as a controlling system that turns all material and symbolic activities into a set of texts and signs, produced by the same hidden norms and values. Then he makes the following points: that those norms and values of the Islamic-Arabic culture were formulated in the era of *ad-tadween* (the codification of the Quran). That those deeply rooted structures of the Islamic system conflate the religious, the political and the domain of language, within a theocratic society. That this connection makes it impossible to violate or criticize the sacred, which includes every position of power in the social hierarchy even that of the family. And since, as he states, comedy exists in this violation of *objects, persons and classes* from the point of view of the marginal, he must conclude that in Arabic culture "comedy is under siege, fenced by a barbed wire". This argument about the topic of comedy will return in another way in the article of Alaa Hadi, where the author discusses the

absence of *serious* comedy in recent Egyptian theatre and the prominence of farce (physical activity and visual effects).

In his testimony on the situation of comedy in the East, playwright Lenin El-Ramly (Egypt) remarks that the cultural gap between East and West, instead of narrowing gradually, is getting bigger and bigger. Adaptations of Western serious comedy become increasingly difficult to present since alternative and intimate relationships are forbidden, as are religious and new scientific topics. An Arab Hamlet could exist soliloquising: "To be or not to be", not as a character who would ask himself if he should go to war, or not. The essence of drama: inner conflict within an individual and conflicts where a society should openly speak about are not permitted on stage. "Be these limits and constraints as they may", writes El-Ramly, "I have always found through them avenues of voicing my opinion, even if only in part. Sometimes comedy has proven a great tool in this regard, given the Egyptians' proverbial love for humour and comedy. *Comedy transcends reality only to catch it red-handed with the truth*. It pretends to speak in jest while being the height of serious thinking. A joke is a lie that reveals part of the truth or at least suggests it".

But Western scholars also put the question on the table. Karel Boullart (Belgium) asks himself: "What can we laugh at?" He opens his argument like this: "Banqueting Olympians aside, gods are no laughing matter. Indeed, how could a perfect being have any sense of humour and what could it be humorous about? It could not even have a hearty laugh at itself". The comicality of things and a sense of humour must pertain to the episodes of life, not to life in its totality; they must pertain to the accidents of life, not to its essential and inexorable and uniform necessity. However, further specifications are questions of opinion, i.e. of cultural choice; they depend on what is thought to be essential and substantial. This makes the domain of laughter vast and diffuse, defying definition: *one man's laughing stock is another's wailing wall*. Considering the disparity between thinking and being as an universal phenomenon, he describes the process of naturally and/or culturally and finally self-induced debunking of cultural pretence, as the defining feature of the comicality of things and of the sense of humor. From that same disparity between thinking and being some comic procedures may be deduced: irrelevance, ambiguity, incongruity, absurdity etc.

Turning to the comedy *In Plain Arabic* of Egyptian playwright Lenin El-Ramly, Boullart points to a interesting convergence of form and content where the frame of the-play-in-the-play reflects the authorial lighthearted but substantial cultural debunking of all pretences of, for instance, the unity of the 'Arab Nation' as total fiction. Michiel Leezenberg also addresses his attention to this comedy.

His focus is directed to the public function of the comic in a society but he questions the famous concept of the *comedy as carnival* of Michael Bakhtin in the generally applied meaning of a temporal reversal of the social order (in which for example women or slaves briefly become masters). He reminds us of Bakhtin's attention to the positive potential of a true culture of laughter. Instead of adopting Bakhtin's opposition between high state culture and low culture as the humour of the lower strata of the population, Leezenberg proposes his terms of *the dialogical or the polyphonic* as characteristic of the comic language itself when representing different voices and points of view within the text and out of reach of the author himself. He proposes the politics of non-serious performative language, and emphasizes the differences in the conception of both the comical and the political in Aristophanes and Ramly. In his comparison between Aristophanes' *The Frogs* and the Egyptian comedy, Leezenberg starts with the notion of *parrhesia* which means *free speech* (literally 'saying everything') as a relation between the speaker and what he says. This amounts to an act of speaking the truth, often with risks for oneself. It is specially this 'speaking the truth' that is the theme in El-Ramly's play. The group of students from 13 Arabic countries living in London are quite willing to speak the truth about the Arab Unity and Solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but they are unwilling to vent their criticism in public for fear of losing face or playing into the hands of the enemy. In this way, every sensitive topic is censored by the potential speaker, whether the topics under discussion are religion, sexuality or even soccer.

2. Arabic literary sources and Western models: heritage of what?

The absence of comedy as a drama-form is for Richard van Leeuwen no reason to dismiss the comic from Arabic literature. Starting with the famous cycle of tales in the *Thousand and one nights*, he follows the use of the comic as a narrative strategy in the framing story of the Nights and then jumps some 1000 years ahead, to two Egyptian comedies from the 1960s based on stories from the cycle: *Alí Janâh and his servant Quffa* by Alfred Farag and *The wines of Babylon* by Fârûq Khûrshîd. But first he deals with the Arabic heritage of comic literature from three genres (a. the anecdotes in the *adab* literature, b. the offshoot of *adab* in the rogue stories and the shadow plays and c. the plays written for the shadowtheatre) and one theme: power relations. All genres criticize power by, respectively, relativizing, challenging, satirizing and vilifying authority. In Alfred Farag's play, van Leeuwen sees the function of the tales as a reservoir of 'archetypes' of Arabic comic theatre, because they combine the elements of farce, stereotyped characters and socio-political function. Considering the

abundant presence of these same stereotypes in the early performative shows in the whole of the Middle East, including Iran, one is inclined to ask what has influenced what. This is a problem that cannot be solved.

Van Leeuwen leads us to another important fact and that is the inherent political character of all drama since the 1960s in Egypt; since the hopeful days, the heyday of Nasserism till after the defeat of 1967, when a traumatic social depression set in which lingers on. Gamal Abd al Nasir incorporated the Arabic revolution and the end of political and cultural colonization. Like the artistic experiments during the first years of the Russian revolution, Egypt's artists and intellectuals were re-inventing themselves. In their search for identity, one of the first self-imposed problems was the real Arabic heritage, now formulated against the Western earlier dominating influences. It was author Yusuf Idris, already widely known for his short stories, who devoted years to formulating a theory of new Egyptian drama. As Marvin Carlson (USA) observes about this new drama as "one that could be truly Egyptian in both subject matter and techniques instead of the work based on Western dramatic models," which had until then dominated drama in the Middle East".

In his series of articles *Our Egyptian Theatre* Yusuf Idris proposed what a post-Suez Egypt wanted to hear about the existence of folk art and popular forms of entertainment, that represented a rich national cultural heritage. As a medieval Arabic rhymed form of oral narration, the *maqama* was put forward, as was the shadow play tradition and its remarkable scripts created by Ibn Daniyal in the 13th century and published in Cairo, in 1963. Returning to the people and their festivities, Idris adopted for the new theater forms of the village *samir*, a gathering of artists and public in an improvised entertainment-event. Many of his theoretical discoveries were supplanted in his comedy *Al Farafir*, which also offered distinct influences of the French so-called Theatre of the Absurd, a combination Carlson is eager to trace in his comparison between *Al Farafir*, which he calls "one of the most powerful and darkest of the dark comedies of the 20th century", and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Somewhere between comedy and tragedy is the drama of another Egyptian author, even more famous than Idris, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987). Hassan El-Mniai (Morocco) discusses the generic character of *The Sultan's Dilemma*, as a necessary development of the tragedy into a tragic-comedy, due to the emphasis on the contradiction that lies at the heart of the human existence. As a tragic-comedy the play is also influenced by other dramatic modalities as the absurd and the grotesque. The anecdote of the play is intriguing: the Sultan has to undergo a public auction and is bought by a beautiful (and therefore suspect) woman: "...

selling the sultan is already considered the most absurd spectacle in the world". As a choice between the law, the idea of justice for all, and corruption, the sultan has to bow for the 'nobleness of the simple people' and the woman who decided to do the right thing and therefore does not want to be thanked.

Gender politics

Women doing the right thing... *Gender politics* are being discussed by Marina Kotzemani of Greece, when she writes about the *Lysistrata project of 2003*, a public reading of the play on occasion of the impending war in Iraq, and the different versions/adaptations of the Aristophanes comedy in the Arabic countries. Eman Karmoety (Egypt, Alexandria) explores two highly dramatic versions about a real event: the serial killing of a couple of women by two sisters, assisted by their husbands, in the Alexandria of the thirties. Mieke Kolk (The Netherlands) investigates two recent Egyptian texts, both using the image of a voyage at sea as a metaphor for crossing the boundaries of the unknown and the unsayable realities of sexual desire and violence.

What is most significant in the Arabic versions of the *Lysistrata* – women refusing to have sex with their husbands if they go on making war- is the reframing of the play. The global context is portrayed with an international community that is connected through the media, and threatened by autocratic Arabic governments, US controlled imperialism and Western 'civilizing' missions. Rather than creating the potential for greater democracy, this increasingly interconnected world creates greater danger of monitoring and controlling the people. Aristophanes' utopian ending becomes a darkly chaotic and nihilistic space where activism is either totally ineffective or of limited benefit. Gender and sexuality is of little importance; male-domination is transformed into Western domination, which is characterized by intellect and ability. New in the Arabic adaptations is, as Kotzemani remarks, a 'postmodern sensibility' where artistic liberty opens an exploration of power dynamics, preventing the underprivileged from expressing themselves freely and/or of having any political influence.

In the genre of the horror story Eman Karmoety traces the adventures of two sisters who kill a series of innocent but well to do women. Poor and depraved, the two sisters are turned into monsters by the pre-war press and in the movie made about their lives. A second version of the story of *Rahya and Sikeena*, written and staged for the theatre, tried to find different motifs for the evil sisters who had a terrible life, and also developed a narrative strategy to offer the public a different point of view in mixing the comic and the tragic moments and highlighting farce in

the middle of the horror. In this way, the dramatist stopped the evocation of pathos and melodrama. Karmoety concludes that where the text ends in melodrama the director seemed quite able to shift between tragedy, dark comedy and farce.

In *The Boatman* (1998) by Sameh Mahran and the *Boatpeople* (1980) by Nahed Naquib both an actual and an eternal metaphor is explored, when people leave the safe land to go at sea and have to endure the adventures that wait for them in this limitless space full of dangers. German philosopher Hans Blumenberg wrote an essay about the history of the Western actualizations of the metaphor of *life as a sea voyage* which encompasses a series of possible events: the voyage out, storm and calm, distress at sea, shipwreck, the foreign shore and the harbor. Mieke Kolk explores the choices the authors made from this scale of possible events and describes the topographies of desire that motivate the voyagers to go at sea. At the center of the metaphoric space lies sexual violence, at the moment the onlookers have disappeared and a reaction of the public is expected. Within the texts an overwhelming silence is created by the wordless and violated young people. They have no language for what happened to them. Existing social discourse excludes their reality.

3. Arabic pre-theatrical heritage and its influence on theatre now: postmodern hybridity

Khalid Amine (Morocco) extends the list of Arabic pre-theatrical forms. His story is comparable with that of other Arabic colleague's, but because the history of theatre in Morocco is different, the perspective of this author differs too. Amine looks back to a short rise and fall of Western theatre, imported by the French colonists after the Second World War. He then examines the period of the mixing of indigenous, western and universal theatre influences since the 1960s with authors/directors like Tayeb Sadikki et al. Moroccan theatre is now a theatre with a clear self-awareness, constructed, in his words, in a liminal third space outside indigenous and western modeling, and an intentional aesthetic hybridity in mixing the theatrical paradigms into new combinations. This theatre shows an ironic double consciousness, informed by the Western tradition and the moment of rupture with this tradition. It is a place of negotiation between Self and Other, East and West, tradition and modernity and orality and literacy. As such, theatrical practice in Morocco is highly political and functions in the dynamics of modernizing the country. Under the 'retrieval of a lost tradition' Amin describes the performance genres as *al-halqa*, a public gathering in a circle around one or more persons offering a rich combination of all sorts of stories, and *l-bsa:t*, a

performance event on stage with archetypal characters, genres which are incorporated in the new plays. As a new genre he presents the *Al-Murtajal*, a Moroccan version of the French *Impromptu*, devised by Mohamed El-Kaghat and functioning as a selfreflective improvised comic event. It is based on an unfinished dramatic script, full of holes, which should be filled by the actors. Often the discussions about what theatre should reflect, still move between an Arabo-centrism, which preaches a return to the roots and the view of Western theatre as the supreme model.

A comparable form of improvised event-ness is offered by the *Siyah Bazi Show*, the *Play of the Black* in Iran. Recently rediscovered and carefully studied, Farah Yeganeh from Iran (Qom) and Mehrdad Rayani from Teheran, offer an exciting account of characteristics, strategies and the history of the show about the black servant and his master. In this blackface show - the face of *Siyah* is blackened with make-up - the origin of the figure goes probably back to the black slaves working in Iran under Arabic and Portuguese masters. A famous *Siyah* actor at the end of the 19th century is quoted in a story about how he went to those black servants and watched how they talked, made fun and quarreled. Since they did not speak Persian well, their speech sounded funny. Both the slaves and the audiences liked his imitations very much. As a character *Siyah* was well tempered and 'sweet', he was also quick and alert, a vehicle for revolt, challenging oppression and evil. Together with the other fixed characters the performers told their usual stories, while singing and dancing and improvising on the actual situations of day and place. This aspect of playing with reality was banned in the Pahlavi Era (1925) In that period the social-critical aspect of the show faded and the moral aspect increased. The import of Western theatre seems to make the *Siyah Bazi* lose its place in the social discourse and turning the show into a performance, fit only for the museum.

Shams El Din Younis (Sudan) writes a short history of theatre in Sudan. Probably like the other Arabic countries Sudan knows an indigenous heritage as one can see in the paintings at the old temple walls. Drama in its Western forms came to Sudan through Egypt and the English colonizers. Comedy developed out of the comic monologues presented as intervals within a serious performance. Famous actors created new character-stereotypes modeled on daily life experiences.

4. Western Heritage and Orientalism reconsidered.

Freddy Decreus (Belgium) offers a history of poetic interpretations of the *Amphitruo* comedy by Plautus over a period of 22 Ages. Concentrating on three themes : the god/men relationship and the descent of Jupiter from heaven, a man's, Amphitruo's, anxiety about his wife and his ability to understand her and the question about the doubles : two masters, two slaves, two father and two sons. Describing the different perspectives and motivations in versions of Shakespeare, Molière, Dryden, Kleist and Giraudoux, Decreus ends with the adaptation of the German writer Peter Hacks where Jupiter is confronted with love as a sublimated form of human understanding. In a critical move away from the romantic longing for oneness, the author concentrates on the Lacanian vision on the impossible creation of love; "what is missing in one is not hidden in the other but is a part of a particular vision and construction that creates the other". Lovers are bound to never meet.

Lorna Hardwick (Open University, UK) reflects on the intermingling of the comic and the tragic genres and introduces the concept of the para-tragic, often interchangeable with the notion of parody. Concentrating on three recent productions in the UK of Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba* she investigates the parody of institutions and social conventions of the play. The Donmar production exposed the perversion of Xenia/ the tradition of hospitality/when a discussion between Polymester and Hecuba about murder and theft was set in the social rituals of a beach picnic, complete with tea and sandwiches. A second parodic critique was offered by the RSC foregrounding the democratic debate and decision making. The mock trial by Agamemnon at the end of the tragedy showed a democracy corrupted by the very people who proclaimed its values. Critics reacted violent on both interventions.

Two young theatre-historians from Belgium discuss in their articles a very intriguing development in the history of the representation of the Muslim people in Western-Europe, more precise in France and the Spanish Netherlands between the 16th and 18th century. Following the traces of stereotyped images and texts about the Ottoman/Turk, a changing model of oppositions between East and West becomes visible. In Early Modern times the focus is not that much any more on religious differences: like Muslim people are pitiless bullies threatening the Christian believe. Instead we see a secularization of the representation of the Turks under the influence of the new discourses in Western Europe about power and its relation to the subject.

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.

p.s.

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

Said NAJI

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.