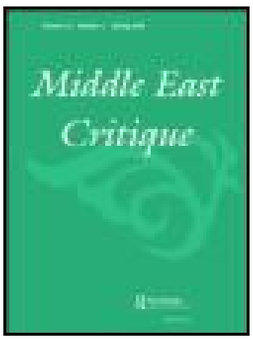

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Compressing Scales: Characters and Situations in Egyptian Internet Humor

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ABSTRACT *This article examines common political assumptions made in Egyptian internet comics, mainstream television discourse, and everyday conversation in Cairo. These assumptions compress local, national, and global scales of analysis into a manageable set of characters (e.g., the President, the People) interacting in everyday situations. Arguing against psychological interpretations, the article highlights the social and historical context within which humor is 'entextualized' on par with television and everyday discourse, based on an analysis of a selection of Egyptian internet comics, television moments, and political talk in Cairo between 2013 and 2015.*

KEY WORDS: *Digital culture; Egypt; Facebook; Humor; Internet; Memes; Political communication; Television*

Every day, Egyptian Facebook pages like *Asa7be Sarcasm Society* are updated with 'comics,' a widely shared variety of internet memes in Egypt. Figure 1, posted on March 9, 2015, has been liked over 80,000 times and shared around 18,000 times as of the writing of this article. Both in style and content, this comic is typical of a great range of visual materials posted on pages like *Asa7be*. The composition is divided like a comic strip. The upper half shows President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; the lower half shows an Egyptian flag where the national eagle is replaced by a WinRar logo, referencing the digital compression software. In the upper half, a caption from the Egyptian daily *Al-Watan* quotes Sisi's latest address to the people: 'We need to *press* ourselves a little more'. The Arabic word used in the quote, *neḍghaṭ*, is the same one used to describe digital 'compression'—hence the joking stick figure, who substitutes the eagle for the WinRar logo, both in laughs at the wordplay, and in tears at its concrete meaning. The demand to 'press ourselves' hardly could bear the same consequences for digital files as it does for the livelihood of ordinary Egyptians.

A competent Egyptian meme consumer would take a few seconds to figure out the joke, but the comic condenses several layers of meaning which, to the analyst, conjure 'anxieties of scale.'[1] To begin with, there are inscriptions typical of the internet and Egyptian Facebook in particular: a small signature with the cartoonist's name, *Tifa*, over a red brushstroke in the bottom right corner, next to *Asa7be*'s different social media handles on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and its recognizable logo. The comic also includes: a mainstream interview

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[1] Walter Armbrust (2000) Introduction: Anxieties of Scale, in W. Armbrust (ed.) *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, pp. 1–31 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).

Figure 1. Sisi to 'the people': *We need to press ourselves a little more.*

portrait of President Sisi; a distorted Egyptian flag; a quote from a national newspaper whose logo features to the left of the bigger *Asa7be* logo in the middle of the comic; the icon of an international digital compression software; and a stick figure who will be immediately recognized by meme aficionados as a 'Yao Ming face'—a common sight on Western meme websites like *9Gag*. All these elements 'compress', to add a further layer to the comic's wordplay, several scales of analysis ranging from local Facebook culture to national broadcast media to global corporations, all in one image.

This compression of local/national/global scales is evident in vernacular practices of political analysis in Cairo, including in everyday conversation and on mainstream television. I will argue that internet humor casts a fresh light on wider political conversations in Cairo, but not because comics introduce a radically novel way of doing politics. After all, to use

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's term,[2] they 'remediate' earlier visual forms like comic strips and movie gags, which have been integral to a long tradition of political criticism in Egypt.[3] What I argue, instead, is that internet comics showcase certain political assumptions equally manifested in mainstream Egyptian television and in everyday conversations. The core difference is that comics make these assumptions *visible*, via intermedial juxtapositions between current events and popular plays, movies, TV dramas, and commercials. This intermedial character, as well as the national Egyptian audience that it presupposes, has been a well-documented aspect of Egyptian popular culture.[4] This article extends these analyses into the realm of Egyptian internet humor.

More specifically, the argument is intended as a contribution to research on political humor in Egypt and in the Arab world. The next section overviews the meagre literature on the subject by highlighting its psychological and folkloristic bias, a trend which has been documented in humor research more broadly,[5] and by pointing to its implicit interest in 'entextualized' humor.[6] I then examine two political assumptions crossing over everyday conversation, mainstream television, and internet comics in Egypt. First, I describe the way in which local, national, and global scales of analysis are compressed, in all three cases, into identifiable 'characters.' In so doing, complex political phenomena like the everyday workings of the Egyptian state are reduced to a recognizable set of individuals whose psychology becomes the locus of political agency. Second, I describe how, in all three cases, these characters are inserted into identifiable 'situations,' or what locally is known as *mawāqef*. In this view, each political action is situated within a wider set of possible reactions by equally identifiable—yet sometimes invisible—political actors. This is well illustrated in discussions about Egypt's international relations whether online, on television, or in everyday life. Of course, 'situating' events is not a unique feature of political conversation *per se*, but it is a widespread way in which vernacular political analysis is articulated in Cairo.

This argument relies on ethnographic fieldwork among middle-class Cairenes conducted between 2013 and 2015, as well as mainstream television narratives and internet comics collected on Facebook over the same period. In its broad outlines, the period of my research is characterized by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's gradual ascension to power. A minister of defense in President Mohamed Morsi's government in 2012, Sisi became the leader of a military coup on July 3, 2013 and, eventually, President of Egypt in late May 2014. Unsurprisingly, Sisi features prominently in internet comics, and the current events mocked by comic-makers are colored by a historical trajectory paralleling Sisi's own. Still, as I will suggest, reading recent Egyptian history through the lens of one man's biography involves a compression of multiple scales of analysis that is well illustrated by Egyptian internet humor.

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[2] Jay D. Bolter & Richard Grusin (2000) *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press).

[3] See Khalid Kishtainy (1985) *Arab Political Humor* (London: Quartet); Allen Douglas & Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1994) *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); Walter Armbrust (2007) Bravely Stating the Obvious: Egyptian Humor and the Anti-American Consensus, *Arab Media & Society*, 3 (Fall). Available at https://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=413, accessed August 12, 2017.

[4] See Walter Armbrust (1996) *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press); and Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) *Dramas of Nationhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

[5] See Michael Billig (2005) *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (London: SAGE).

[6] See Richard Bauman & Charles L. Briggs (1990) Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19, pp. 59–88.

Political Humor in the Arab World

Echoing a sentiment expressed by Samer Shehata in the early 1990s, one still can observe that 'unfortunately, Egyptian political jokes, and Arab political jokes more generally, have received very little scholarly attention.'[7] This article is partly intended to fill this gap, with attention to a specifically digital form of humor—i.e., Egyptian internet comics. It is worth noting that the already slim literature on Egyptian and Arab humor tends to focus on *political* jokes. Humorous practices and discourses that extend beyond a strictly political reading are given little to no attention in academic writing. As a consequence, to use Afaf Lutfi Al Sayyid Marsot's metaphor, reading about Arab political humor is like watching a series of anatomists dissecting the body of jokes and analyzing their cadaver.[8] What is lost in the meantime is the living performance of humor, whose everyday manifestations extend beyond narrower attempts at isolating, collecting, and explaining political jokes.[9]

With this caveat in mind, Arab political humor did garner some academic attention. Early on, Al-Sayyid Marsot wrote a short history of political cartoons in Egypt,[10] a subject that has been reprised with additional detail in Khalid Kishtainy's volume on Arab political humor.[11] Since then, Arab political cartoons have been examined in extensive case studies, including Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas' well-known volume on children's comic strips in the region,[12] Matthew Diamond's article on the representation of 9/11 in Arab press caricatures,[13] as well as two articles on Palestinian caricature.[14] All these studies analyze cartoons as visual texts either communicating a historically specific ideology, e.g., Nasserism in 1960s children comics,[15] or communicating a set of social norms, e.g., gendered roles in cartoon representations of Palestinian resistance.[16]

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[7] Samer S. Shehata (1992) The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek in Egyptian Political Jokes, *Folklore*, 103(1), p. 76.

[8] Afaf L. Al-Sayyid Marsot (1980) Humor: The Two Edged Sword, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 14(1), p. 1.

[9] A brief listing of vernacular categories of 'humor' in Egypt indicates the very broad range of phenomena hidden behind the label. Next to the joke (*nukta*), one can talk about the gag (*effeh*), the caricature (*karikateir*), or the comic as conventional forms of humorous discourse. One can 'joke around' (*yhazzar*), 'act silly' (*yhayyes*), 'make tame jokes' (*ye'lesh*), 'say nonsense' (*yhalles*), or 'make wordplays' (*y'affi*) to engage in everyday humorous practice, especially among young urban males in Cairo. One can evaluate someone's sensitivity to joking by talking about the 'lightness of the blood' (*kheffet el-damm*), the lighter being the merrier. In an exhaustive account of 'humor' in Egypt, one would need to take these diverse joke texts and practices into account—see Atif's early attempt to address the matter among Cairo's urban middle-classes: Nadia Izzeldin Atif (1972), *Awlad el-Nokta*: Urban Egyptian Humor, PhD thesis, University of California at Berkeley. All this is without mentioning formal meta-categories like 'comedy' (*komedya*), 'humor' (*fukāha*), or 'satire' (*sukhriyya*), which are used to describe various literary genres in the Arabic tradition and in Egyptian popular culture. On this matter, see: Laila Abou-Saif (1972) *Najib al-Rihani wa Tatawwur al-Komedia fi-Misr* [Najib al-Rihani and the evolution of comedy in Egypt] (Cairo: Dar el-Maarif); Abdallah Ahmad Abdallah (1983) *Al-Saḥāfa al-Fukahiyya fi-Misr* [The satirical press in Egypt] (Cairo: General Book Organization); Shawki Dayf (1984) *Fil-Shi'r wal-Fukāha fi-Misr* [On poetry and humor in Egypt] (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif); Shahe Kazarian (2011) Humor in the collectivist Arab Middle East: The case of Lebanon, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24(3), pp. 329–348.

[10] Afaf L. Al-Sayyid Marsot (1971) The Cartoon in Egypt, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13(1), pp. 2–15.

[11] K. Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*.

[12] A. Douglas & F. Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips*.

[13] Matthew Diamond (2002) No Laughing Matter: Post-September 11 Political Cartoons in Arab/Muslim Newspapers, *Political Communication*, 19, pp. 251–272.

[14] Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh (2007) Historiographies of Laughter: Poetics of Deformation in Palestinian Political Cartoon, *Third Text*, 1, pp. 65–78; Nadia Yaqub (2009) Gendering the Palestinian Political Cartoon, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 2, pp. 187–213.

[15] See A. Douglas & F. Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips*.

[16] See N. Yaqub, Gendering the Palestinian Political Cartoon.

The continuity between political cartoons and internet comics is evident on two counts: First, specialized comic websites sometimes have contributors who are cartoonists in their offline lives; and second, as I hint in the introduction, the visual format of many comics is modelled on cartoon conventions. Nonetheless, existing analyses of Arab political cartoons are not necessarily helpful for grasping Egyptian internet humor because they cannot account for the way in which online comics 'remediate' various media forms, or how they become 'entextualized' as I argue below.

In addition to an interest in cartoons, a second trend in the analysis of Arab political humor can be traced to Al-Sayyid Marsot's early address to the Middle Eastern Studies Association.[17] The address urged Middle East scholars to consider jokes as a source of data on public opinion in autocratic Arab countries. The notion that jokes, as anonymous popular culture, represent an 'authentic' voice of the voiceless is prevalent in humor research in the Middle East and, indeed, across the world.[18] This notion regularly has been invoked to justify the seriousness of political jokes as an object of study,[19] but I shall dispute it below. Nevertheless, the limited literature on political jokes has seen a noted resurgence since the Arab Spring, with a particular interest in humor produced in Tahrir Square during the 18 days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. In general, these recent studies describe the ways in which protesters mocked Mubarak and his regime by relaying some of the most popular jokes emanating from the Square.[20] Some studies concentrate on specific forms of joking, such as online Mubarak jokes[21] or insult slogans.[22] Few studies, however, have examined post-Arab Spring humor outside Tahrir Square, which is what I intend to do in this article.[23]

[17] A. L. Al-Sayyid Marsot, Humour: The Two Edged Sword.

[18] For examples in Franco's Spain, see Stanley H. Brandes (1977) Peaceful Protest: Spanish Political Humor in a Time of Crisis, *Western Folklore*, 36(4), pp. 331–346; and Oriol Pi-Sunyer (1977) Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain, *Ethnohistory*, 24(2), pp. 179–190. For the Soviet Union, see Christie Davies (2007) Humour and Protest: Jokes under Communism, *International Review of Social History*, 52, pp. 291–305; and Christie Davies (2010) Jokes as the Truth about Soviet Socialism, *Folklore*, 46, pp. 9–32.

[19] K. Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*; Sharif Kanaana (1990) Humor of the Palestinian 'Intifada', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 27(3), pp. 231–240; and S. S. Shehata, The Politics of Laughter.

[20] See further Farida Makar (2011) 'Let Them Have Some Fun': Political and Artistic Forms of Expression in the Egyptian Revolution, *Mediterranean Politics*, 16(2), pp. 307–312; Iman Mersal (2011) Revolutionary Humor, *Globalizations*, 8(5), pp. 669–674; Heba Salem & Kantaro Taira (2012) *Al-Thawra al-Dahika*: The Challenges of Translating Revolutionary Humor, in Samia Mehrez (ed.) *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, pp. 183–211 (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press); Bahaa-eddin Abulhassan Hassan (2013) The Pragmatics of Humor: January 25th Revolution and Occupy Wall Street, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), pp. 551–562; and Mohamed M. Helmy & Sabine Frerichs (2013) Stripping the Boss: The Powerful Role of Humor in the Egyptian Revolution 2011, *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 47, pp. 450–481.

[21] Deepa Anagondahalli & Sahar Khamis (2014) Mubarak Framed! Humor and Political Activism before and during the Egyptian Revolution, *Arab Media & Society*, 19 (Fall 2014). Available at: https://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=846, accessed August 12, 2017.

[22] Elliott Colla (2013) In Praise of Insults: Slogan Genres, Slogan Repertoires and Innovation, *Review of Middle East Studies*, 47(1), pp. 37–48.

[23] Some recent studies have emerged on news satire in Egypt; see, for examples Joel Gordon & Heba Arafa (2014) 'Stuck with Him': Bassem Youssef and the Egyptian Revolution's Last Laugh, *Review of Middle East Studies*, 48(1/2), pp. 34–43; Yomna Elsayed (2016) Laughing Through Change: Subversive Humor in Online Videos of Arab Youth, *International Journal of Communication*, 10, pp. 5102–5122; and Amal Ibrahim & Nahed Eltantawy. (2017) Egypt's Jon Stewart: Humorous Political Satire and Serious Culture Jamming, *International Journal of Communication*, 11, pp. 2806–2824. On humor outside Egypt, see Matt Sienkiewicz (2012) Out of Control: Palestinian News Satire and Government Power in the Age of Social Media, *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 10(1–2), pp. 106–118; Lisa Wedeen (2013) Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria, *Critical Inquiry*, 39(4), pp. 841–873; and Anke Reichenbach (2015) Laughter in times of uncertainty: Negotiating gender and social distance in Bahraini women's humorous talk, *Humor—International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(4), pp. 511–539.

Setting aside the empirical bias toward Tahrir,[24] I wish to highlight some more fundamental issues with the existing scholarship on Arab humor. To begin with, there is a marked bias toward psychological explanation. This bias might be explained, in part, by the genealogy of theoretical works invoked in humor research, going back to classical texts like Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* or Henri Bergson's *On Laughter*, and continuing with contemporary debates on the psychological functions of humor as a mechanism of 'norm enforcement', 'relief', or the expression of 'superiority.'[25]

This psychological literature is limited in two ways. First, as Michael Billig argues, there is an implicit moral assumption that humor is positive by definition, and accordingly, that the academic study of humor ought to be appreciative of its inherent benefits. This assumption ignores how humor can be deployed to abrasive or discriminatory ends, which is why Billig is bent on a critique of the 'negative' aspects of humor, including ridicule, satire, or irony. Without engaging in the same critique of 'negative' laughter, this article highlights the need to consider humor and humoristic texts in an amoral sense, as a social and historical fact independent of any implicit judgment about its goodness or badness.

Second, psychological analysis is limited to the extent that humor is imagined as a form of direct communication between a joke-emitter and a joke-receiver. This reinforces the impression that jokes or cartoons are the 'most natural' representations of humor, insofar as 'what is funny' is imagined to be a fixed text, communicated between someone who jokes and someone who 'gets it'. What the psychologist inevitably misses is that the overall circumstances in which a text is produced, circulated, and consumed overdetermine its funniness. To say that a specific discursive arrangement is funny *without* considering how this arrangement is deployed in specific social and historical settings would be, in this view, a vain attempt. In Billig's words, 'so long as these theories are expressed in psychological terms, none can explain why laughter is primarily a social act.'[26]

This criticism can be illustrated with a favored Mubarak joke in the literature on Tahrir Square. A slogan like 'Leave means go away, you idiot!' [*erḥal ya'ni emshi, yalli ma-byef-hamshi*] is deemed to be funny because it inverts the joker's power relation *vis-à-vis* Mubarak and/or because it provides 'relief' to the joker. What is underplayed, here, is that the joke is only funny insofar as it emanates from Tahrir Square in the middle of a fight against the Mubarak regime, by people who understand the nuance between the classical Arabic '*erḥal*' and the colloquial '*emshi*', as well as the implication that Mubarak is too stupid to understand both levels of language, which inserts the joke in a longer history of satirical depictions of Mubarak as a simpleton.[27] Without this background, it is difficult to laugh at the joke, let alone understand it—e.g., when it is translated verbatim to an English-speaking audience. Moreover, the joke will not necessarily be 'funny' to everyone at all times. In a pro-Mubarak rally, one can imagine, it would not go over very well. No matter whether, in a particular instance, a joke is deemed 'funny' according to a given psychological mechanism, its overall comedic value needs to be situated in wider social and historical perspective.

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[24] The geographical concentration on Tahrir Square is indicative of the way in which 'the Arab Spring' has been located at the heart of Cairo in academic discourse, although anthropologists have been at the forefront of examining how the revolution was experienced at the margins. See: Lila Abu-Lughod (2012) Living the 'Revolution' in an Egyptian Village: Moral Action in a National Space, *American Ethnologist*, 39(1), pp. 21–25; Samuli Schielke (2015) *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

[25] For a well-developed literature review on the matter, see: M. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

[26] M. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p. 175.

[27] See further S. S. Shehata, The Politics of Laughter; and Adel Hammouda (1992) *Al-Nukta al-Siyasiyya: Kayfa yaskhar al-misriyyun min ḥukkāmihim* [The political joke: How Egyptians ridicule their rulers] (Cairo: Sphinx lil-Tibā'a wal-Nashr).

Compounding the bias toward psychological explanation is a folkloristic one, where humor is seen as the expression of an anonymous and ancient Egyptian civilization. Significantly, as Nadia Izzeldin Atif remarked early on, this viewpoint is a common emic representation among Egyptians of all social backgrounds.[28] Expressions to the effect that the 'Egyptian people' [*el-sha'b el-masri*] are 'the offspring of jokes' [*awlād nokta*], or a 'hilarious people' [*sha'b maskhara*], or cannot live 'without laughter' [*men gheir ḍeḥk*] commonly are used to describe Egyptian national character. This representation assumes that the 'Egyptian people' is an immutable entity with a 7,000 year-old history; and that this folk entity produces organic yet anonymous humor that cannot be reproduced anywhere else in the world. Both assumptions are mistaken, since they fail to take account of the global dynamics that inform Egypt's modern history, e.g., capitalism, colonialism and nationalism, all of which drastically have changed the land of the Pharaohs. Moreover, they ignore interesting commonalities between Egypt and various countries where humor is invoked as being 'distinctively' local. For example, there are striking continuities between the kind of political jokes cracked about Francisco Franco's last days and the ones made about Mubarak's last days in power.[29]

Too many Arab humor scholars buy into a folklorist narrative. Al-Sayyid Marsot, for instance, prefaces her history of political cartoons in modern Egypt with a mention of ancient Egyptian bas-reliefs that ridicule ancient rulers.[30] Knowing that Egyptian political cartoons intimately are associated with the rise of nationalist newspapers in opposition to British colonial influence in the late nineteenth century, the link between ancient Egyptian art and modern political cartoons seems as justifiable as a link between, say, ancient Mesopotamia and the 2003 Iraq war. In a slightly different vein, Shehata argues that 'Egyptian political jokes reflect the popular feelings and opinions of the Egyptian people.'[31] The category of 'Egyptian people,' here, seems to mirror the emic, monolithic view in contrast with a more nuanced, empirical picture of public opinion. Even more recently, Deepa Anagondahalli and Sahar Khamis have claimed that, 'For Egyptians, jokes have historically marked their relationships with their oppressive rulers since the time of the pharaohs.'[32] Without being ahistorical in a strict sense, these statements imply that 'humor' remains constant throughout extremely long and eventful periods—a doubtful claim, to say the least.

Taken together, these statements support unwarranted generalizations about political humor as a 'safety valve,' designed to vent the anger of oppressed populations against their rulers, or as a 'weapon of the weak,' aimed at criticizing autocrats in indirect ways. By implying that political humor is produced spontaneously and anonymously by people standing up to their rulers, these statements obscure the historical conditions under which humor is produced, circulated, and consumed. This argument is well illustrated by a comparison between the work of Christie Davies and Alexei Yurchak on Soviet humor.[33] While Davies is content with collecting Soviet political jokes to illustrate how ordinary folks 'resisted' the regime, Yurchak has a more nuanced take on the act of joking in late socialist Russia, which becomes at once cynical acceptance of the regime's inevitability as well as subversion of its

[28] N. I. Atif, *Awlad el-Nokta*, pp. 1–2.

[29] Compare O. Pi-Sunyer, Political Humor in a Dictatorial State with D. Anagondahalli & S. Khamis, Mubarak Framed!.

[30] A. L. Al-Sayyid Marsot, *The Cartoon in Egypt*, p. 3.

[31] S. S. Shehata, The Politics of Laughter, p. 80.

[32] D. Anagondahalli & S. Khamis, Mubarak Framed!, p. 4.

[33] Compare C. Davies, Humor and Protest: Jokes as the Truth about Soviet Socialism with Alexei Yurchak (1997) The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*, *Public Culture*, 9, pp. 161–188.

intent and propaganda. The idea is not to take the joke's funniness nor its political function at face value, but to dig deeper into the concrete historical circumstances which allow the joker to be co-opted by hegemonic discourses while criticizing, satirizing, or mocking them. Thus, what counts is not the joke itself but the social conditions under which it is told.

It is tempting to characterize the contemporary conditions under which Egyptian political humor is produced as the age of 'cynical reason,' to use Peter Sloterdijk's expression.[34] There is hardly a better example of cynicism in action as the stereotypical 'comics' consumer, browsing through Facebook pages to satisfy a bodily urge to criticize Sisi's regime which, in a matter of seconds, is consummated in a knowing yet lazy chuckle. The political implication, here, is that the comics producer/consumer is a cynical slacktivist, without any impact on the regime's authority in offline social life. I hesitate to generalize this picture because it would reduce the reasons behind the creation, circulation, and consumption of internet humor to a specific kind of late-modern subjectivity, so well described by Sloterdijk. To complicate the picture, one ought to mention the commercial imperatives that drive the creation of comics pages—the largest of which are now 'monetized' and receive revenue through Facebook ads—as well as the subversive intent behind the sharing of political memes in certain online communities.[35] This is not to say that comics elicit a necessarily cynical, commercialist, or activist attitude in Egypt. Rather, all three attitudes pre-exist humoristic engagements with comics, which is why it is more helpful to examine comics as part of wider political, economic, and social worlds that project pre-existing attitudes onto these comics.

Political jokes and cartoons are a specific case of much wider uses and practices of humor in Egypt. Nevertheless, research on political humor in the Arab world tends to examine humorous forms as a series of self-evidently textual productions, rather than *entextualized* forms. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs coined the term 'entextualization' to argue that texts are not natural occurrences but rather a *process* whereby performance—including humoristic performance—is set into concrete texts with stable and recognizable formal features.[36] These texts, in turn, always potentially can be taken out of their original context to take root in a new setting, where they can acquire new meanings or even undergo re-entextualization. Bauman and Briggs' framework allows us to think about texts—novels, songs, jokes, comics as *moments* in a process where textual and non-textual elements are assembled and disassembled in different circumstances. Thus, the original context of production is not necessarily what gives meaning to the text. Rather, meaning arises in constant circulation, where the text always potentially is decontextualized.

In the studies reviewed above, the entextualized nature of political humor is taken for granted. It is only to the extent that Shehata believes jokes to be organic texts emanating from 'the Egyptian people' that he can justify collecting a sample of around 70 jokes in mostly middle-class settings to illustrate popular resistance against Mubarak's dictatorship.[37] Likewise, when Anagondahalli and Khamis base their analysis of online political humor on Google searches of terms like 'Mubarak jokes' or 'Arab Spring jokes,' they assume that the joke is a self-standing unit of criticism against the regime.[38] To the extent that the joke is

[34] Peter Sloterdijk (2001/1987) *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

[35] See Adel Iskandar (2014) The Meme-ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt, *Jadaliyya*. Available at: https://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19122/the-meme-ing-of-revolution_creativity-folklore-and, accessed August 12, 2017.

[36] R. Bauman & C. L. Briggs, Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life.

[37] S. S. Shehata, The Politics of Laughter, pp. 79–80.

[38] D. Anagondahalli & S. Khamis, Mubarak Framed!.

entextualized in particular circumstances, however, it is important to bear in mind that it is only one of many ways in which humor is expressed; that it is always liable to be 're-entextualized' once it circulates; and that it is consumed by various audiences who may or may not 'get' the joke. Thus, we ought to situate all analytical inferences based on entextualized humor in a framework where texts are produced, circulated, and consumed variously in different social and historical settings.

This article, as I have explained in the introduction, is not an ethnographic case study of the production, circulation, and consumption of Egyptian internet humor. My aim is to indicate the overlap between everyday conversations, mainstream television, and internet comics when it comes to certain political assumptions that collapse the local, the national, and the global into specific characters and situations. My approach remains broadly anthropological, however, since I assume that the discursive evidence summoned to support my analysis is not a series of self-contained texts, produced by an anonymous mass existing in historical suspension, communicated between imagined joke-emitters and joke-receivers. Rather, I try to point to the ways in which internet comics entextualize socially and historically specific relations between various media forms, between, say, cinema, television, and Facebook. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the displacements through which these comics circulate out of their original context, but I believe that paying attention to the dynamics of entextualization should open subsequent research to exploring Egyptian internet humor in a more anthropological light. This exploration, I hope, will be less beholden to the psychological and folkloristic biases prevalent in existing (Arab) humor research, and will be aware that 'jokes', 'cartoons', and 'comics' are only concrete moments in a wider process of entextualization and decontextualization.

Characters

A little over two months after the 2013 coup, I was watching television with the octogenarian Fatima.[39] Sitting in her crowded room, where the bed is almost stuck to the TV set next to a large wardrobe, Fatima recalled her father. 'He was a real, real man' [*ragel ragel!*], she said, adding that the only real man in Egypt now is General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. His portrait loomed large over the room. 'He's the only one to have done what he did in the last 80 years,' said Fatima. This was a talking point on mainstream television at the time, when pundits unanimously were applauding President Morsi's overthrow on July 3, 2013. Fatima went on to tell a joking anecdote about Ahmad Shafiq, the last prime minister under Mubarak and a general in the Egyptian Air Force. She asked her daughter-in-law to tell her father, himself a general in the Air Force, to tell Shafiq that his daughter's father-in-law is deceased and 'his widow says hi', implying that Shafiq might want to marry her. We both laughed. She concluded by cheekily adding that Shafiq is now a thing of the past, because she would rather marry the much younger Sisi.

Sisi came up again a month later, at the Opera House's cafeteria, where I sat with the prominent director Ali and his Levantine friends. Amidst cigarette smoke and refreshing drinks, they were having a very animated conversation about Arab politics. All agreed that what Egypt needed at the time was to 'get the state back' after the Muslim Brotherhood had destroyed it, and all agreed that Sisi was the only one capable of bringing the state back to Egypt in the current circumstances. They all said that they did not agree with him

[39] Given the wave of repressive measures exacted against academics and intellectuals by the current Egyptian government, I have chosen to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors through the use of pseudonyms. The ethnographic vignettes remain, however, actual occurrences.

unilaterally, but that he is the short- and mid-term solution to the current crisis. One of the Levantines added that the 2013 revolution had restored Egypt as a relevant regional player, which explains why the Emiratis and, later, the Saudis fully supported Egypt—because they thought they might pay a much higher political price in the future if they did not align themselves with Sisi right away.

'This guy, Sisi, he's crazy!' said Zulfoqar a few months later, while Sisi was still considering a presidential run. 'Have you seen the Omega watch leak?,' he added with an incredulous smirk. I had not seen the leak, as it were, so Zulfoqar hastily took out his laptop. 'You've got to see it', he said, summoning a Youtube clip with an audio tape allegedly featuring Sisi. According to Zulfoqar, he only gave interviews to the journalists he most trusted, but the 'scandalous' audio of this interview managed to get leaked before it could be edited and published. In it, Sisi says that he has always had lucid dreams [*manamāt*] that no one ever was able to interpret. In one dream, he saw himself wearing an Omega watch (hence the clip's popular title), and when people asked him why he wore the watch, he answered that it had his name on it, adding that the dream's interpretation sets him and Omega next to global success [*el-'alamiyya*]. I exchanged a few laughs with Zulfoqar, who concluded with a brief reflection: 'This shows you how the country is run' [*dah bywarrilak kayfa todār al-balad*].

Although these vignettes have been dramatized for effect, I remember vividly the way Fatima exulted in Sisi's evocation; the way Ali and his friends supported his presidential candidacy; the way Zulfoqar laughed at the Omega leak. While each interlocutor held a different political opinion, all three participated in a seamless compression of Sisi into the Egyptian state, such that the former became automatically identified with the latter. Sisi became a metonym for the state, and his individual character an accurate blueprint of the state's workings. In Fatima's narrative, Sisi's heroism was compressed into the 'liberation' of Egypt in 2013 and the patriarchal role of a 'real-man' father and (potential) husband. In Ali's narrative, Sisi is the last hope for the Egyptian state, whose destiny is embodied by the savior's stand against the Muslim Brotherhood. In Zulfoqar's narrative, lastly, the Omega leak is evidence of Sisi's delusional character and, by extension, the way in which the state as a whole works in a delusional way. Whether in support of or in opposition to Sisi, these statements involve a seamless association between individual agency and state policy—an association which obscures the everyday workings of the Egyptian state, with its internal struggles, its localized modes of governance, its unholy alliance with the business elite, and so on.

This compression of the national and the local into the individual is equally typical of mainstream television in Egypt. In its simplest manifestation, it is made evident by the direct appeals of television pundits to the president, oftentimes to bring attention to an issue that is technically under the purview of provincial or municipal administration. Anyone who watches Egyptian television will have seen this rhetorical strategy at play on countless occasions, but I will detail only a small recent incident to illustrate the point. In November 2015, a news item surfaced concerning the illegal demolition of the Cicurel villa, a nineteenth-century house built in Alexandria by the Jewish-Egyptian business mogul Moreno Cicurel, which was deemed to be a heritage site by the national press. The pundit Gaber el-Armouti, who has a daily show called *Manchette* on the local satellite channel ONTV, went on air to ask Sisi in person to stop this demolition. In his rant, he addressed Sisi not 'in person' but 'as a state' [*ka dawla*], and he asked him to try the neighborhood's chief administrator [*ra'is el-ḥayy*] because he allowed the demolition to happen. Implicit

in el-Armouti's address is the assumption that Sisi embodies the entire Egyptian state. As such, any failure in its workings—in protecting national heritage for example—is not just attributable to local administrative troubles: it is attributed to Sisi himself in a compression of the individual, the local, and the national scale.

Compressing these scales into identifiable characters is a common feature in political jokes. In the words of Oriol Pi-Sunyer, 'Political humor is often a type of shorthand. In a joke or story attitudes and feelings are expressed in concentrated form and much of the impact of a particular episode derives from the collapsing of the complex into the simple.'[40] This analysis can be extended to internet comics, with the difference that the episodes in question can be represented visually and, significantly, visually imprinted by a parallel universe of fictional characters. This is clearly illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, using different plays by superstar Adel Emam to make their political point. Figure 2 compresses the entire 'Egyptian people' into a complaint by a younger Adel Emam, who is portrayed in his iconic role as *The Witness Who Hasn't Seen a Thing* [*Shahed Mashafsh Ḥaga*]. The caption sets the meme's context: a news item from the local satellite channel Al-Ḥayah states that a source inside the High Elections Committee (HEC) confirms that anyone who abstains in the upcoming 2014 presidential elections will be prosecuted by the General Attorney's office. Emam ripostes by saying that if every abstainer is sent to the attorney, the whole country will spend the night in jail, implying that the whole country will not go out to vote.

This riposte can be understood better in the context of the original play, where Emam is testifying to the judge in a Kafkaesque trial. In the comic, the entire HEC is condensed into the judge, visually absent yet central to Emam's address, who comes to condense the voice of 'the people.' It does not matter whether a sector of the Egyptian population actually went out to vote or whether another would probably agree with the HEC's decision to try all abstainers: Emam's response is made to mock a certain lack of interest toward the elections by co-opting a large portion of 'the people' in the process. Much like in political jokes, the people are a monolithic agent, with the difference that they are visually embodied by Emam's character. Significantly, Adel Emam has been well-known to embody this archetype earlier in his career, as he regularly played the role of the marginalized citizen [*mohammash*] who is caught in events beyond his control and above his lowly social standing. His iconic roles in plays like *Sayyed the Janitor* [*El-Wad Sayyed el-Shaghghāl*], where he plays a janitor who suddenly becomes an aristocrat, as well as movies like *Terrorism and Kebab* [*El-Erhāb wel-Kabāb*], where he plays an ordinary citizen who leads an impromptu sit-in against the state bureaucracy, are among the many examples illustrating this career-long trend. Thus, the intermedial juxtaposition between a news item, a popular play, and Adel Emam's personal history produces a particular compression of the individual and the national, which is difficult to achieve by a verbal joke.

Figure 3 produces a similar compression, this time identifying Sisi in person with Adel Emam in his iconic role as *The Leader* [*El-Za'im*]. This image is divided into two halves. Above, a photograph of President Sisi's speech to the United Nations in September 2015, where he was applauded unanimously by his delegation in a half-empty assembly; below, a scene where Emam (in official costume, to the right) plays a buffoonish dictator who instills fear in his ministerial cabinet (in black suits, standing in a row). By juxtaposing this scene onto Sisi's speech, the comic juxtaposes Sisi's character onto the funny yet scary dictator played by Emam, while juxtaposing the delegation's characters onto the squeamish ministers in the play. The expected effect, one might conjecture, is to point to the absurdity

[40] O. Pi-Sunyer, Political Humor in a Dictatorial State, p. 182.

Figure 2. Al-Ḥayah: A source inside the 'High Elections Committee': *'Abstainers' will be directed to the General Attorney.* Emam: *'Sir, if all abstainers are sent to the General Attorney. The whole country will spend the night in jail.'.*

of Sisi's hold over the country, just as the play is designed to point to the absurdity of the leader's power.

Originally performed at the height of Mubarak's reign, Emam's *Leader* is unsurprisingly used in a great number of comics to metonymize the actions of the Egyptian state since the 2013 coup, with a constant juxtaposition between Sisi and Emam. This again is evinced in Figure 4. Emam's head is replaced by Sisi, who paraphrases a famous line in the play by

Figure 3.

saying that the Egyptian people ought to be martyred because martyrs go to heaven. The original line was pronounced in Emam's opening speech, where he said that the people ought to live poor because poor people go to heaven. The comic takes a darker turn in Sisi's presence because a false equivalency is established between the dictator and the people, who are compressed in a zero-sum game in which millions need to die in order to keep one person—and his power—alive. In the comic's case, this point is strengthened via an intermedial juxtaposition with a popular play, widely circulated on Egyptian television and online.

It is not my intention to exhaust the reader through these analyses, but I wish to highlight two important traits emerging in the comics' entextualization. First, these comic texts emerge at specific historical moments, where the comic-maker meaningfully can associate social and political forces, e.g., President Sisi, the 'Egyptian people' and the HEC with pre-existing characters in popular plays. I am not suggesting that these comics cannot be removed and reinterpreted outside their original context, but rather that this context gives meaning to *all* the intermedial connections established by the comic-maker. The juxtaposition between Sisi's speech at the United Nations and a reference to the specific scene in *The Leader* where

Figure 4. Sisi: *The people have to be martyred. Martyrs go to heaven.*

Emam terrorizes his cabinet would make little sense were it not for the historical conjuncture whereby Sisi is isolated on the international stage to such a degree that his only supporters, however insincere, are within his own delegation.

Second, by engaging in a metonymic reduction of the macro- into the micro-social, internet comics parallel a discursive operation evinced by everyday political conversation and mainstream television. This operation, in short, involves a character, e.g., Sisi, Adel Emam, who comes to embody, metonymically, a much more complex organization, e.g.,

the Egyptian state, the Egyptian people. No matter whether one's views are progressive or conservative, this compression of the local and the national into the individual is central to the way in which politics come to be discussed in contemporary Cairo. In a way, it is not unreasonable to believe that Sisi has an impact on state policy in an autocratic country like Egypt, yet collapsing his individual character onto the entire state apparatus obscures the various social agents and institutions invested in its workings—the police, the army, the civil bureaucracy, and so on. This is most clearly the case when considering another assumption, which situates compressed 'characters' in global 'situations.'

Situations

In social anthropology, the ability to *situate* social actors in a larger political, economic, historical, and sociocultural context is a professional requirement. Fieldwork, if anything, is about situating the tacit understandings brought by these actors in their interactions. It is an 'apprenticeship,' in Tim Jenkins' words, whereby the ethnographer learns not only about his interlocutors, but *with* them, in embodied contact with their verbal and non-verbal practices. What often is underplayed, as Jenkins points out, is that our interlocutors engage in the very same labor of situating actors within their environment through embodied interaction.[41] Thus, it is important to situate these actors' meta-conceptions of 'interaction' as they inform a specific way of knowing what there is to be known about the social world, which is not necessarily compatible with the ethnographer's own way.

Cairenes have a central emic concept to narrate and discuss past interactions: the *mawqef*. The term traces to the root *w-q-f*, which literally means 'to stand.' *Mawqef* is the point at which one stands. In contexts where someone takes a *mawqef*, it means 'taking a position' *vis-à-vis* a particular issue or a particular person; in contexts which are described as a *mawqef*, the term comes to mean the sum of positions taken by all actors involved in a particular event—a 'situation,' in short. There is no neutral way of describing a *mawqef*, especially not one in which the narrator is involved. To use Paul Dresch's metaphor of a 'wilderness of mirrors,'[42] all actors involved in a *mawqef* constantly are confronted with a paucity of information about each other's position-taking, which leads them to infer to these different positions based on convention or conjecture. With a sound understanding of these positions, according to the emic conception, it would be possible to infer to each party's expected actions and reactions in the course events take. Any area of everyday interaction therefore can be described as a *mawqef*, but what I wish to highlight is the way in which political conversation, mainstream television, and internet comics tend to transform political events into just such 'situations.'

Let me go back to the conversation between Ali and his Levantine friends. In a conversation where all insisted that Sisi was the only solution to the Egyptian state's crisis in 2013, all agreed that Egypt was the last Arab power in the region—as against Turkey, Israel, and Iran. All agreed, moreover, that it was a central partner for 'the Saudis' and 'the Emiratis,' who were afraid to see the consequences of Egypt's downfall. In their view, Emirati and Saudi capital pouring into the country was not a self-interested attempt to expand the Gulf's geopolitical influence, but a preventive measure against Egypt's collapse, which would lend a deadly blow to what they consider as the beating heart of the region. What is more

[41] Tim Jenkins (1994) Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life, *Man*, 29, p. 452.

[42] Paul Dresch (2000) Wilderness of Mirrors: Truth and Vulnerability in Middle Eastern Fieldwork, in: P. Dresch, W. James & D. J. Parkin (eds) *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*, pp. 109–127 (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books).

interesting, here, is the way in which geopolitics is compressed into a *mawqef* akin to a chess match, where each country is a piece reacting to extremely complex events based on presumed position-takings toward Egypt, the chess 'queen' of the Arab world. No need to say that the complexities of political economy and internal conflict in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are eroded by this analysis, where each state's behavior is explained by a vague threat that the Egyptian master piece might be taken out.

This kind of analysis is not just reductive: it is also *productive*, in the sense that Ali and his friends were able to conceive of very complex geopolitical events in relatively simple terms, taking into account each player's involvement in the 'game.' Interestingly, I have had conversations manifesting a very similar set of assumptions with taxi drivers across Cairo. The following excerpt, noted down around the same time as Ali's conversation, is a case in point:

> On our way to downtown, [the driver] starts commenting on politics. (...) He says that if Arab League countries unite, the USA won't strike Syria, because they'll be alone. He says the EU won't strike, not for military reasons, but because they have *masaleḥ* [interests] with Arab League countries. He says that Tel Aviv would be happy to strike Syria, because they're already striking in Golan, but they're thinking that the Americans will do the dirty job for them. If Egypt stands alone against the strike, the Americans will strike according to him.

Notice how the driver compresses entire countries into entities with transparent and monological motivations. Each entity is inserted in a common 'situation'—a pending decision on American intervention in Syria—where each action will be met by a reaction deduced from each other's nature. Unlike the Americans or the Israelis, then, the European Union will not strike Syria because of its ongoing interests with Arab countries (which implies that the Americans and the Israelis do not care enough about their interests to avoid bombing Syria, or that their interests lie precisely in such a strike). Likewise, Egypt is said to be too weak to stand up to the Americans on its own, yet a united Arab League will dissuade American intervention. This implies that a solution to the geopolitical problem starts with a strong Arab union—a historically difficult task. Again, I am not interested in pointing out the extent to which these geopolitical views may be sound or unsound. Rather, I wish to indicate their discursive continuity with mainstream television discourse and internet humor in Egypt, specifically the way in which they tend to transform complex geopolitical events into simple *mawāqef*.

One example on television will serve to illustrate the point. During the 2014 Arab League summit in Kuwait, television pundits were up in arms against the Qatari government, which notoriously backed the fallen Muslim Brotherhood since President Morsi's election in 2012 and even after his fall in 2013. During his address to the summit, the new Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamid al-Thani, briefly mentioned Egypt as the 'big sister' [*al-shaqīqa al-kobra*] and made a generic wish about wanting Egypt to become stable and secure. In a context where all pundits were pushing the narrative that the Muslim Brotherhood is an international terrorist organization and, by implication, that Qatar was the primary sponsor of terror in the region, the emir's inoffensive words were vehemently attacked. On his show *Manchette*, el-Armouti engaged in a series of *ad hominem* attacks on Tamim bin Hamid, addressing him as the 'guy from Qatar' [*el-akh bta' Qatar*]. He added that he was too young to understand

how serious his terrorism was, and pointed to the disdainful look given by then President Adly Mansour to the emir during his address. Similar attacks were launched by pundits Lamis el-Hadidi and Rolla Kharsa, who mocked the mention of Egypt as a 'big sister' by adding that this will be the case no matter what the emir thinks [*ghasben 'annoh*], and pointing again to the disdainful look given by Mansour.

It is possible to read these attacks as occurring on a geopolitical level, where Egyptian actors are irritated by Qatar's favorable policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood. This reading, however, would be missing the way in which the attack is conveyed—for instance as a disdainful glance by President Mansour to the emir, or as a scolding of the youthful emir by the more experienced Egyptian pundits. In these cases, the geopolitical 'situation' between Egypt and Qatar is compressed into a 'situation' between leaders at the Arab League summit, or between pundit-adults scolding the emir-child. This is precisely the image used by the satirist Bassem Youssef on *The Show* [*El-Bernameg*] to mock this event's media coverage. After showing two clips where Lamis el-Hadidi and Rolla Kharsa tell the emir that Egypt is the 'big sister' no matter what he thinks, the camera cuts to Youssef adding, 'And it's not just Egypt, it's *Ms.* Egypt' [*dih abla Masr*]. The tone in which the joke was delivered mimicked the female pundits scolding the young emir, as though they were schoolteachers scolding a pupil (hence the word '*abla*,' which is distinctly associated with teachers). By exaggerating the situational logic of mainstream pundits, Youssef manages to bring to the surface the compression of complex geopolitical issues into a schoolyard 'situation,' thereby showing how official political discourse can itself become a caricature.

A similar move is visible in Egyptian internet comics. Figure 5, for example, was released on the occasion of the 2016 African Summit. Sisi is seen shaking hands with an African leader whose identity I could not ascertain.[43] The speech bubbles, however, make it seem like Sisi is speaking to an Ethiopian counterpart about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a hydroelectric mega-project widely discussed in Egypt for its potentially deleterious effects on the national water and electricity supply. Sisi asks his colleague to swear that the dam will not affect Egypt's water supply, and when the African leader swears, Sisi asks him to swear 'with the whole sentence.' The joke relies on an everyday *mawqef* among urban middle-class Cairenes. When an incredulous friend asks another to swear, yet deems the all-too-brief 'I swear by God' [*wallahi*] insufficient to satisfy his incredulity, it prompts him to ask the friend to swear again with 'the full sentence,' which can be a longer speech pattern like 'I swear by God almighty three times' [*wallahil-'azim talāta*]. Here, a geopolitical situation is collapsed onto this everyday *mawqef*. Sisi cannot believe his Ethiopian counterpart, which is why he asks him to swear twice.

Thus, internet comics playfully highlight the way in which actual political events can become, with little modification, exaggerated fictions. This is again well illustrated in Figure 6, which is headed with the caption: 'When a judge sees a voter entering the voting station.' This image was circulated at the time of Sisi's election in 2014. It reuses a moment in the popular TV serial 'I Shall Never Live in my Father's Clothes' [*Lann a'ish fi-gilbab abi*], where the late star Nour el-Sharif embraces his assistant's loyal son, who comes asking for his boss's daughter's hand in marriage. El-Sharif's emotional reaction is attributed to a judge in a voting station who, at first stunned by the entry of a voter, slowly walks to him, takes

[43] The original pictures were uploaded on Sisi's official Facebook page on January 29, 2016, then relayed on the website of the Egyptian daily *Al-Youm al-Sābe'* [*The Seventh Day*], whose watermark is overlain on the image. The original caption, however, gives no indication as to the specific people represented in the image.

Figure 5. Sisi: *Swear that the Renaissance Dam will not impact Egypt's water share*. African leader: *I swear*. Sisi: *No! Say 'I swear' with the whole sentence.*

him in his arms, and hugs him with joy. The implication, here, is that the judge embraces any voter who comes in, since so few ever come. This juxtaposition creates evident characters—the desperate judge and the loyal voter—while situating each character's position in a wider electoral context, where the judge is comically set on exaggerating his gratefulness toward any voter who comes to the station.

Likewise, with a *mawqef* borrowed in a television commercial by the telecommunications company Etisalat, Figure 7 mocks one of Sisi's electoral promises. The original commercial featured a young man standing by the bedside of his dying father. He asks some nostalgic

Figure 6. When a judge sees a voter entering the voting station.

questions, setting an emotional mood to the father's impending death. Then, the youngster asks the father where he put the Etisalat SIM card (so he may use its latest offers), and he is immediately slapped. The emotional soundtrack is interrupted, and the moment is ruined by the youngster's impertinence. The comic was released on October 3, 2014, some months after Sisi's election. In it, the young man reminds Sisi (whose face is substituted instead of the father's) of the days where the people went to the streets to support his military coup. Nostalgically, he reminds Sisi of his electoral promises to the Egyptian youth, and he asks him where he put the vegetable cart. This was a much-mocked electoral promise in 2014. Sisi promised every unemployed young man a vegetable cart, which he may use in trading at the vegetable market instead of loitering on the streets. As in the commercial, Sisi then slaps the young man, perhaps in imitation of the father's disapproval over the impertinence of the question, or perhaps in order to indicate that Sisi had slapped the Egyptian youth with his inability to deliver on even the most mundane promises. In any case, the intermedial juxtaposition between a familial *mawqef* in a TV commercial and an actual promise by Sisi compresses the analysis of the country's policies toward the Egyptian youth into a slap in the face.

Figure 7. Young man (top right): *Remember... Remember, Sisi, when we put you in charge?* Young man (top left): *When you told us to go out and we had breakfast on the streets?* Sisi (top left): *Yes, I remember...* Young man (middle right): *So you remember when you said we were the most precious thing in your eyes and Egypt is the best country in the world?* Young man (middle left): *Do you remember the project for young people?* Young man (bottom right): *Where is it?* Sisi (bottom right): *What?* Young man (bottom right): *The vegetable cart.*

What should be apparent, by now, is not only the variety of 'situations' mocked by Egyptian political humor, but more importantly, the way in which political conversation and mainstream television are involved in making politics into similar 'situations' as in comics. In all three cases, complex political events can be compressed into identifiable characters with simple enough position-takings to be understood without getting into the nitty-gritty of international relations or state policy. When the relation between Egypt and Qatar is assimilated to the relation between a schoolteacher and a pupil, for instance, the same 'situational' logic is at play: geopolitical actions are understood according to a position-taking typical of a schoolyard. This discursive principle can be transferred beyond the case of geopolitics: as highlighted in Figures 6 and 7, all national political events potentially can be compressed into a local *mawqef*. The characters identified in the joke are seen to act, in real life, according to 'positions' acquired via intermedial juxtapositions with a play, a movie, a TV serial or a commercial. While comics have a specific intermedial capacity to enliven this compression, crucially, they are not unique in enacting it in the wider realm of political discourse in Cairo.

Conclusion

In a recent account about the relationship between social media and activism since the 2011 revolution, Linda Herrera writes a whole chapter devoted to showing how internet memes have been mobilized in an ideological battle among the Egyptian state, the Muslim Brotherhood, and secular social media activists.[44] In her analysis, memes come to illustrate ideological positions taken by each group against the other, both in content and in form. To give a concrete example, she discusses how memes issued by the secret services look like stern Mubarakist propaganda, by contrast with the more playful memes made by activists. The kinds of memes that Herrera examines are different from the ones presented in this article: While I have been describing Egyptian internet 'comics' released on specialized pages like *Asa7be Sarcasm Society*, Herrera is interested in all kinds of visual productions made by Egyptian Facebook users. I have chosen to examine comics in particular because they are underrepresented in existing humor research, and because they make visible certain political assumptions evinced in the more 'serious' realms of everyday political talk and mainstream television. I have examined two common assumptions in this connection. First, I have shown how global, national, and local scales of analysis tend to be collapsed into individual 'characters.' Second, I have illustrated a tendency to understand global, national, and local interactions in terms of 'situations' [*mawāqef*] that reinforce this scalar compression.

I will not go over all the examples detailed to illustrate this argument. What is important to signal, above all, is a need to engage in more extensive research into the conditions under which internet humor is produced, circulated, and consumed. This study would be a necessary complement to the approach proposed in this article, which is to examine discursive forms with the assumption that they have been 'entextualized' in specific social and historical circumstances. With this assumption in mind, this article sheds light on the way in which political conversation, whether serious or humoristic, tends to be imagined among a manageable set of actors engaged in mundane interactions. Complex political events become compressed into simplistic scenarios, which obscure the numerous explanations and motivations that might undergird current events. Thus, internet humor makes visible the extent to which 'official' political discourse can be, in itself, a caricature.

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