

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22-24 giugno 2022



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE:** Figuring It Out: Crises and Resistance in Graphic Novels, Comics, and Cartoons

**PROPONENTS:** VALENTINA MARCELLA AND PIERRE HECKER

**ABSTRACT:**

### **Figuring It Out: Crises and Resistance in Graphic Novels, Comics, and Cartoons**

In the new millennium, the visual and graphic arts have acquired an increasingly prominent role as sites of political expression and participation. This is particularly true for the Middle East and North Africa. During the pro-democracy movements commonly known as the 'Arab Spring', the Iranian 'Green Movement', and the Turkish 'Gezi Park Protests' the visual and graphic arts have functioned as a key means of political engagement. Yet, this trend has not been limited to the protests themselves. Artistic practices have indeed served to create new spaces of political struggle and resistance in the mostly authoritarian states of the MENA region.

Among the graphic arts, comic books, graphic novels, and cartoons have been prominent vehicles for popularizing alternative views and narratives. They have contributed to forming popular counter-publics that consciously (or unconsciously) resist and challenge right-wing populism and the anti-democratic encroachments of the authoritarian state. Especially through these genres not only artists but a wide array of social actors – including activists, students, journalists – have been responding to different dimensions of social and political crises, challenging hegemonic discourses, established norms, censorship, and taboos.

This panel aims to bring together scholars working on MENA countries from different disciplines and perspectives (historical, sociological, anthropological, political, religious, literary, cultural studies, and area studies) to discuss how the graphic arts produced in the MENA region and its diaspora are changing in response to these crises. In particular, the panel focuses on comics, cartoons, and graphic novels - artistic expressions that boast a well-established tradition -, without neglecting relatively new phenomena such as, for instance, graphic journalism. Through specific case studies, the panel seeks to investigate how these graphic art forms are asserting themselves as valuable sites for critical thinking, contestation, and resistance, therefore how they contribute to the spread of a dynamic subversive culture.

The language of the panel is English.

**Chairs:** *Valentina Marcella (L'Orientale University of Naples); Pierre Hecker (Philipps-Universität Marburg)*

**Discussant:** *Valentina Marcella (L'Orientale University of Naples)*

**Papers:**

1)

**Reinventing societies: the contemporary Arab comics scene**

*Luce Lacquaniti (independent researcher)*

Over the past decade, a new scene of comics has emerged in the Arab world, mainly shaped by independent collectives of local writers and artists who self-publish magazines of short stories for adult readers. Graphic novels also begin to surface. It is an experimental, underground scene, still struggling to find its place in the publishing market, at the same time enjoying great artistic freedom and independence by being “outside”. It is by no coincidence that it blossoms in concomitance with history-changing events: the first issue of the pioneer magazine *Samandal* is released in Lebanon in 2007, shortly after the 2006 war with Israel, while many other magazines see the light simultaneously or immediately after the 2011 Arab revolutions (Tok Tok in Egypt, Lab619 in Tunisia, Skefkef in Morocco...).

I will argue that, while these comics do sometimes comment on current events, challenging the narrative of traditional media and institutions, they are especially political in a broader sense. They discuss social and cultural issues, including the ones that were once taboo, such as sexuality. They explore fragmented identities along the past history of the artists' countries, long obscured by the official versions of the regimes, through personal memories, family memories or wider archive researches. They present future scenarios, through dystopian fictions that serve as metaphors for today's crises.

2)

**From the Streets to the Gutter: Sketching Feminism(s) in Contemporary Arab Comics**

*Rasha Chatta (Einstein Foundation, Freie Universität Berlin)*

Throughout what is commonly referred to as the Arab world, comics addressed to adults have especially been booming since 2011 thanks to the efforts of collectives. The comics produced can be considered as one of the outcomes of the Arab Revolutions and although the issues, styles, topics covered and the languages used vary greatly from artist to artist, and from country to country, many are anchored in and reflect everyday realities. This is significant, as the focus on everyday realities reveals how the social becomes the political. The critique of authoritarianism carried throughout the uprisings also included a critique of the patriarchal system. Unequal gender dynamics, the marginalization of women and trans- and non-binary people, topics considered taboo such as sexuality, LGBTQ+ issues, domestic violence have been the subject of a growing number of comics, both within collectives, but

also as special issues published in partnership with various local feminist organizations. This presentation delineates and discusses some of these contributions and argues that the question of gender represents the radical reassessment of public spaces, of notions of belonging and citizenry, and overall a sense of agency in toppling dominant and power-orchestrated systems of value.

3)

**Diasporic drawings: a *graphic* history of the Jews of the Arab world**

*Dario Miccoli (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)*

Up to the 1950s and 1960s, c. 800,000 Jews lived in the Middle East and North Africa: they formed thriving Jewish diasporas, which throughout the centuries played a significant role in the history of the region. However, with the birth of the State of Israel in 1948 and the worsening of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the condition for these diasporas deteriorated and a difficult period – which resulted in expulsions and migrations from the countries of birth – started. Thus, at the core of my paper is the remembrance, by descendants born in the Diaspora, of Jewish worlds nowadays perceived as vanished forever. To do so, I will discuss three graphic novels: *Si je t'oublie Alexandrie* (2018) by Jérémie Dries – born in France in a family of Egyptian Jewish origin; *Ravid ha-zahav* (2017) by the Israelis of Tunisian Jewish ancestry Biniyamin Fennech and Jackie Yarhi and lastly *The Wolf of Baghdad* (2018) by Carol Isaacs, who lives in Britain but is of Iraqi Jewish descent. I will show how these books aim at proposing another paradigm of inter-communal interaction in times of crisis, presenting the past as an alternative to the present or at least as a memory that can improve the relations between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.

4)

**“And God Created Hilal.” Non-Religion and Resistance in Turkish Comic Books**

*Pierre Hecker (Philipps-Universität Marburg)*

Turkey has a long and richly diverse history of comic books, cartoons, and graphic novels that traces its roots back to the late Ottoman and the early Republican era. Since those early days, comic books and satirical magazines have strongly contributed to popularizing alternative views and narratives that otherwise are left little space in public discourse. This talk investigates how Turkish comic artists respond to the cultural hegemony of pious conservatism in present-day Turkey by giving voice to religious skepticism. Comic books have contributed to establishing a non-religious, skeptical counter-public that openly challenges the dominant culture of pious conservatism in Turkey today. Situated within a broader debate about atheism and non-religion in the public sphere, this paper examines the metaphoric implications of blasphemy and religion in Kenan Yazar's comic series *Hilal*.

Yazar's *Hilal* blends in with a whole genre of dystopian comic books from Turkey. Accordingly, the artist creates a dark, dystopian atmosphere full of human ugliness, violent perversion, and repulsive characters. In the midst of this apocalyptic chaos, he places Hilal, a young, lean and sexy blond with a lust for life and a sharp mind who shows no mercy to those who do

her harm. The comic book's narrative evolves around Hilal's relationship with the Devil whom she meets in her sleep and daydreams. Throughout the story, various religious concepts are being renegotiated and reversed (the myth of creation; Satan, the 'great seducer'; religion and gender, etc.) thus posing a challenge to dominant religious norms and narratives.

5)

### **Graphic Politics: Resisting and Community-Building through Comics Activism in Turkey's Diasporas**

*Can T. Yalcinkaya (Macquarie University, Sydney)*

In the early days of the Gezi Park Resistance in Istanbul in June 2013, I was living and working in Sydney, Australia, and following the news from the mass uprising. The physical distance and a sense of exclusion from a powerful, progressive political movement motivated me to engage and be involved in the resistance through creating a comics anthology, titled *Dirençizgiroman/Resist Comics*. Of the six writers and one artist in the core group, three were members of Turkey's diasporas in Germany, France, and Australia, respectively.

In this graphic essay/presentation, I will utilize autographics as an autoethnographic methodology to examine how creative practice, in this instance comics-making, empowers diasporic individuals to participate in the political discourses of their homeland and build lasting transnational communities connected through a shared sense of political and creative identity. Drawing from in-depth interviews with the core members of the *Dirençizgiroman* collective, as well as my own experiences, I will argue that engaging in comics activism as migrants helped us claim political agency and assert ourselves as active citizens through creative practice, as well as reinvigorating our sense of belonging to our homeland.

#### **SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS:**

**Valentina MARCELLA** is a Research Fellow and Lecturer at L'Orientale University of Naples. She obtained her Ph.D. from the European University Institute of Florence, where her dissertation on the political role of satire in the aftermath of Turkey's 1980 coup was awarded the James Kaye Memorial Prize for Best Thesis in History and Visuality. Her research interests cover satire, authoritarian regimes, counterculture, urban development, and Italo-Turkish relations. Her recent publications include 'Between Resistance and Surrender: Counter-Hegemonic Discourses in Turkish Satirical Magazines' (Hecker et al., *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey*, Edinburgh University Press 2021) and '«A Satirical Magazine in Its Own Way»: Politicisation and Dissent in *Gırgır* (1972-1983)' (*Diyâr* 2/2021). She is co-founder of the online magazine *Kaleydoskop - Turchia, cultura e società*.

**Pierre HECKER** is a Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at Philipps-University Marburg, Germany. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig and is the author of the book *Turkish Metal. Music, Meaning, and Morality in a Muslim Society* (Ashgate 2012; Routledge 2016). His recent publications include

the co-edited volume *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey* (Edinburgh University Press 2021) as well as the book chapters 'Tired of Religion: Atheism and Non-belief in "New Turkey" (2021), 'Reading the Signs. Toward a Semiotic Approach in Islamic Studies' (2021), and 'Islam. The Meaning of Style' (2018). He has been the head of the research group 'Ne mutlu ateistim diyene. Atheism and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey' funded by Stiftung Mercator (2017-2020).

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