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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Le crime à l'écran dans le monde arabe

VAUDEVILLE IDEOLOGY AND THE UNCONSCIOUS OF CRIME COMEDY: A POSTCOLONIAL ARAB CONTRIBUTION

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Abstract | Cet article propose deux thèses: 1) La comédie du crime postcoloniale en arabe articule un Inconscient social exprimé dans des “lapsus” cinématographiques. Cet Inconscient porte un désir non-dit de mettre fin à l'autoritarisme et à l'état-policier, matérialisés par l'omniprésence et l'omniscience de la police dans la comédie du crime; 2) La comédie du crime en arabe est le véhicule d'un discours de propagande au service d'une “ idéologie du vaudeville”. Cette idéologie est portée par un discours où le film promet aux citoyens l'accès au luxe vaudevillesque, tels qu'une grande fortune, des femmes sophistiquées, et mêmes de petits péchés de plaisirs, ainsi que l'intégration au tissu social de la nouvelle classe moyenne établie par les politiques de l'état postcolonial, en échange de leur loyauté envers le régime et leur adhésion au discours sur la libération nationale. Deux films égyptiens sont analysés pour soutenir ces propositions: *Qu'as-tu fait de mon père?* de Nizai Mostafa (1970); et *Drôle de crime* également traduisible par *Comédie de crime* de Najdi Hafez (1963). *Qu'as-tu fait de mon père?* “rêve” la mort du Père, qui pourrait être comprise comme une matérialisation de la mort symbolique du Dictateur. *Comédie de crime* met en scène une situation où le personnage principal est littéralement indemne après avoir commis un meurtre. Il est même récompensé par un mariage avec une jeune femme riche, belle, appartenant aux couches supérieures de la classe moyenne, simplement parce qu'étant producteur de télévision, il fait partie de la machine de propagande de l'état postcolonial.

Mots-clés | Cinéma arabe postcolonial, Comédie de crime, Modernité arabe, Idéologie du vaudeville, Classe moyenne

Abstract | This article proposes two theses: 1) Arabic postcolonial crime comedy articulates a social Unconscious expressed in cinematic “lapsus”. This Unconscious bears an unspoken desire of putting and end to authoritarianism and the police state, materialized by the omnipresence and omniscience of police

in crime comedy; 2) Arabic crime comedy is a vehicle for a propaganda discourse at the service of “the ideology of vaudeville”. This ideology is carried by a discourse where the film promises citizens access to vaudevillesque luxury, such as wealth, sophisticated women, and even guilty pleasures, as well as integration into the fabric of the new middle class established by the postcolonial state’s policies, in exchange of their loyalty to the regime and adherence to its discourse of national liberation. Two Egyptian films are analyzed to make this case: Nizai Mostafa’s *You killed My Dad* (1970); and Najdi Hafez’ *The Funny Crime*, also translatable as *Crime Comedy* (1963). *You Killed My Dad* “dreams” of the death of the Father, arguably an unconscious materialization of the symbolic death of the Dictator. *Crime Comedy* stages a situation where the main character can literally get away with murder, be rewarded by marriage to a wealthy, beautiful, upper middle class young woman, simply because as a TV producer, he is part of the postcolonial state propaganda machine.

Keywords | Postcolonial Arab cinema, Crime comedy, Arab modernity, Vaudeville ideology, Middle class

Crime movies have gained unprecedented academic (and critical) attention -particularly among scholars of American and Western cultures- by the dawn of the 21st century. Thomas Leitch published his decisive monograph *Crime Films* in 2002, less than two years into this century¹. Crime movies are usually addressed from the perspective of genre theory and popular culture as a genre that was looked upon condescendingly for decades, and that was finally taken seriously, particularly as it pertains to the understanding of modernity, and more specifically of American modernity. Benoît Tadié has remarkably explained how detective movies and -more broadly- crime movies accompany the emergence of modernity and the transformation of the city and urban culture in the 20th century².

In the context of the Arab world, scant comedy has received scant critical examination of that subgenre of crime novels and crime movies & TV series, and this article attempts to contribute to exploring the field. However, several pioneering studies have recently explored the broader crime genre in Arabic literature, film and TV, about two decades after the emergence of a strong academic interest in the study of crime movies in the West. Katia Ghosn and Benoît Tadié have co-edited *Le récit criminel arabe/Arabic Crime Fiction* in which several contributors have analyzed crime novels and stories from the Mashreq and the Maghreb³. The book establishes the field of crime fiction studies in the Arab-scape, sketches the history of the genre and accounts for its widespread and its engagement with experimental as well as bestseller literatures.

More specifically in relation to crime fiction in visual media, Gianluca Parolin has written about the representation of police and law enforcement authorities in Egyptian TV series⁴. Of particular relevance to this article is the fact that Parolin's study includes an analysis of TV comedies where crime plays a major role in the narrative. His focus is on the way the institutions of the law are represented, and how power relations within society are played out around the agency of representatives of law enforcement.

It can be reasonably argued that comedy as a subgenre come later than crime movies to be the object of scholarly interest. Furthermore, from my perspective, an academic effort entirely devoted to Arabic crime comedy movies as a wholesome topic remains to be wished for. This article purports to contribute to a remedy to that want. As such, crime comedy is not always easy to define, and little has been written about this specific subgenre in the West. It may simply be defined as a film whose narrative is centered around the discovery, the account and/or the solving, of a crime, produced in a comedic mode⁵. In the

1- LEITCH Thomas, *Crime Films*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

2- TADIÉ Benoît, "De la ville-monstre à la ville cauchemar", *Transatlantica* [online], 2012. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5785>

3- GHOSN Katia, TADIÉ Benoît (eds.), *Le récit criminel arabe / Arabic Crime Fiction*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021.

4- PAROLIN Gianluca, "Law Enforcement in Egyptian TV Series", *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 95–111.

5- Cf. LEITCH Thomas, *op. cit.*

following sections, I will address crime comedy as a piece of the puzzle that is the modernization project in the Arabic-speaking world, particularly rendered significant in the postcolonial phase of the modernization process.

Benoît Tadié has astutely pointed to the organic relationship between modernity and crime fiction. He writes:

« 7. Il existe plusieurs théories concurrentes, mais pas forcément incompatibles, pour expliquer la fortune du genre policier dans le monde occidental : théories qui suivant les cas privilégient des facteurs historiques (institution de forces de police, comme la Sûreté à Paris et les « Bow Street Runners » à Londres, épistémologiques (essor de la pensée scientifique ou triomphe d'une société hyper-rationaliste en occident), politiques (émergence de l'Etat-nation et mise à l'épreuve de son « projet d'organiser et d'unifier la réalité »). D'autres enfin, que nous suivrons ici, suggèrent que le récit criminel exprime le sentiment d'angoisse et, parfois, d'émerveillement engendré par la ville moderne »⁶.

Within the broad context of modernization which started in the Arabic-speaking countries at the beginning of the 19th century and is still ongoing today, the complexity of urban life and of the institution of police seem to have reached a milestone with Arab societies' access to independence and the ushering of the postcolonial era. This is certainly the case of Egypt. In the following sections, I focus on the way cinematic crime comedy was one of the scenes where the state's discourse and propaganda played out. In the last section, the state's discourse of self-praise as a modernizing force will be highlighted through crime comedy's play on the alleged superiority of urban life on rural life.

In this article, I argue that postcolonial crime comedies, particularly in the Arabic-speaking countries, have historically played a major social and political role. In the Arab world at least, they are a window into a collective unconscious materializing repressed social and political criticism of postcolonial modern Arab societies, and the Egyptian context is a case in point. I propose two theses: first, that Arabic postcolonial crime comedy articulates a social unconscious expressed in cinematic "lapses"; and second, that it is the expression of a propaganda discourse at the service of what I have called elsewhere "the ideology of vaudeville". In the following sections, I will analyze two films to make my case: one where the cinematic unconscious dominates the narrative, with a psychoanalytic-loaded implication: Nizai Mostafa's *You killed My Dad*, translated in the film's subtitles as *Qu'as-tu fait de mon père?* (أنت اللي قتلت بابايا), released in 1970; and a second one directed by Najdi Hafez, eloquently entitled *Crime Comedy*, or literally *The Funny Crime* (الجريمة الضاحكة) released in 1963, a film that sums up major characteristics of the vaudeville ideology.

6- Cf. TADIÉ Benoît, *op. cit.*

The Postcolonial Unconscious of Crime

At the end of 2022, I have published a book in Arabic, in which I examine the works of major Arab comedy star Fouad el Mohandes titled (مهندس البهجة) which title could be fully translated as *The Engineer of Joy. Fouad el Mohandes and the Unconscious of (Egyptian) Cinema*⁷. For Arabic speakers, there is an obvious pun, as the literal meaning of El Mohandes' family name is "The Engineer", which is not a mere play with words. I opted for "Engineer of Joy" as the English translation of mybook's title, instead of "Architect of Joy" because the former phrase underscores El Mohandes' contribution to the overarching project of social engineering adopted by the national liberation regime established in Cairo, after the Free Officers lead by colonel Nasser assumed power in 1952. As if El Mohandes was contributing to the engineering of comedy as part of the state's use of cultural production, -including that of comedy, among others- to engineer society, within its project of modernizing all aspects of social production.

Fouad el Mohandes was the leading star of comedy in Egypt in the 1960s during the Nasser era, following the independence from British domination. He has often been accused of presiding over an escapist farcical production aimed at distracting the population and divert their attention from the hardships of the autocratic rule of Colonel Nasser. It certainly can be argued that El Mohandes was part of a concerted plan to use comedy to alleviate the national trauma, after the overwhelming defeat of the Egyptian army in the 1967 war with Israel. However, a close analysis of some of El Mohandes' recurrent themes reveals that his comedies sometimes unintentionally offer a pointed critique of the police-state. This is a salient characteristic of Egyptian postcolonial crime comedy. Egyptian crime films from the fifties and sixties, or those where crime is the main theme, make the film dominated by an all-powerful police force. The agency of the genre often contributes to the propaganda about the far-reaching arm of the postcolonial state, both proving to guarantee law and order, and to ensure that any crime -or any opposition for that matter- are completely under control. Nevertheless, in some crime comedies, particularly those starring Fouad el Mohandes, the very comedic nature of the crime film contribute to an unconscious criticism of the police's overwhelming presence, either because they show that police is overbearing and materialize the idea of a police-state, or because the police is shown to be ineffective, that ineffectiveness being a major source of laughter in a crime comedy. Some crime comedies starring El Mohandes go even further than presenting a criticism of the police-state, whether consciously or unconsciously. El Mohandes' 1970 film *You Killed My Dad* bears the paradoxical characteristics just outlined, of showing the strength of the police's grip over crime, as well as showing their shortcomings. However, as per the film's title, this work can be seen as "dreaming" of the death of the Father, arguably a symbolic death of the Dictator.

7- EL KHACHAB Walid, *The Engineer of Joy: Fouad el Mohandes and the Unconscious of Cinema*. Cairo, Dar Maraya, 2022.

Freud has famously theorized how the lapsus, or slip of the tongue, reveal one's unconscious, one's dark desire. In the case of cinema, a film may also unintentionally utter a lapsus, which one may call a Freudian slip of the "film". El Mohandes' 1970 film *You Killed My Dad*, is where one such cinematic lapsus manifests itself. The film was released only 6 weeks after the death of Nasser, arguably the Father of the postcolonial Egyptian nation. It could be viewed somehow as dreaming of, or predicting, the death of Nasser.

The Glass Threshold (also known in English as *The Song of Courage*) (العتبة جازار) and *Ladies' Assassin* (سفاح النساء) -which were released a couple of years before *You Killed*- seem to confirm that crime comedies, and "murder comedies" in particular, were more than a trend in the Egyptian film industry in the 1960s. Crime comedy here carries the allegorical implication of the theme of murder, either as an unconscious hint to the widespread repression and state-violence prevailing in society, or as a prelude to the desire to be liberated from the Dictator as a Father figure, through a symbolic death.

In the *Engineer of Joy* I argue that Fouad el Mohandes materializes a social unconscious that contradicts some major narratives on the cultural scene. Crime comedy (and spy comedy), both of which are major aspects of El Mohandes' production, were the space where certain fears and a malaise materialized. The insistence on crime comedy was an unconscious avowal of the predominance of police presence in society⁸. Contrarily to the common wisdom about state-sponsored cultural production during the Nasser years, viewed as promoting nationalism and the cult of the leader, a careful analysis of El Mohandes' crime and spy comedies prove that even state-sponsored production of films and plays included unconscious condemnations of certain aspects of the postcolonial social order, particularly that of the cult of the Father/Leader, and that of the omnipresence of police in every aspect of social organization and production.

In the book *The Engineer of Joy*, I argue that crime comedy has unconsciously predicted, even prophesized the death of the Dictator. One may conclude that Walter Benjamin's insights about the optical unconscious, or -by extension- the cinematic one, are powerfully at play in Egyptian postcolonial crime comedy, as exemplified by Fouad el Mohandes' ⁹. Interestingly, Benjamin articulates his notion of the optical unconscious when commenting on the picture of a mother who would harm her children a few weeks after the photo was taken. Benjamin argues that the camera captured in the woman's gaze the signs of her future action which was unconsciously expressed at the time of the photo shoot. This is what he called the "optical unconscious"¹⁰.

It is therefore appropriate to explore Unconscious materialized in crime comedy that Benjamin had articulated his idea when reflecting on a crime that was going

8- *Ibid.*, p.136-137.

9- *Ibid.*, p. 127-129.

10- "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis", (BENJAMIN Walter, "Little History of Photography", in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, trans. LIVINGSTONE Rodney et Al., Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 510-512).

to be committed by the mother featured in the photo. In *You Killed My Dad*, one may argue that the repeated mention of the killing of the father by the comically bereaved daughter, and the making light of it, because of the title's tone and the entire comedic register of the genre, are unconsciously expressing the desire of seeing the dictator dying, and somehow predicting that death. Coincidence or not, it is a fact that the radio serial forming the basis of the cinematic screenplay of *You Killed* was aired during the last weeks of Nasser's life on state radio, and that its cinematic adaptation into the famous crime comedy by the same title was released in movie theatres six weeks after the death of the Rais.

In Benjaminian terms, the subgenre of crime comedy has dreamt of the Dictator's death, as if predicting it¹¹. Nevertheless, in the following paragraphs, I attempt to nuance this claim. The death of the Dictator in *Qu'as tu fait de mon père?* expresses a Freudian type of desire to kill the Dictator which lurks in the unconscious, together with the desire to identify with the figure of the Father. There is also a nuance I would like to introduce to the representation of Father in the film. The character Mostafa, played by actor Salah Nazmy, father of Nabila, the female lead, played by the star Shouicar, is not projected in all aspects onto the figure of the "father of the nation". Rather it is a complex father-figure, who is often absent, and who therefore bears a significant responsibility in causing his daughter's anxieties. However, it is noteworthy that the father's name is Mostafa, which literally means in Arabic: "The Chosen One", and that when he hides under the fake identity of a crime novel author, he takes the name Kamal Zohny, literally meaning "Perfection of the Mind". Both are powerfully symbolic references to a superhuman aspect of the character.

The film traces the tribulations of Nabila who returns to Cairo from a sojourn of many years in London, after the alleged murder of her father, whom she has not seen since her toddler years. She plans to uncover the identity of his assassin, and enlists the help of a young admirer, Mazloun, played by Fouad el Mohandes, and that of a mature author of crime novels, whom we realize, at the very end, is none other than her father in disguise. In one eloquent scene, Nabila is abducted by the gang who are responsible for murdering her father. After a car and bike chase, Kamal manages to free Nabila from her captors. She expresses her gratitude to him, not realizing he is her actual father, and she calls him her "angel" who descended from Heavens to save her.

The dialogue introduces the father literally as the savior, and endows him of an aura, that of the angels. Since the nature of the father's intervention is related to security (delivering a kidnapped woman from the hands of the Bad Guys), one can safely assume that the father figure here is also a political one: that of the ultimate guardian of security, i.e. the police, or the state. The film does not simply produce a secular holy nationalist trinity: the father-dictator-Nasser, the

11- Benjamin quotes Michelet who writes: "Each epoch dreams of the one to follow", (BENJAMIN Walter, "Paris, The Capital of the 19th Century", in *The Arcades Project*, trans. EILAND Howard and McLAUGHLIN Kevin, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 4). Based on this thesis, one can argue that cinema dreams the events to follow the release of a film.

son-citizen-Fouad el Mohandes, and the holy ghost of Arab socialism, Nasser's ultimate stage of ideological discourse. It is a more fluid model where Salah Nazmy is both an earthly father and a holy ghost, or an angel coming from heaven.

Here the unconscious of crime comedy is reinvesting the figure of God the Father, because it turns out at the end of the film that God-the father was there all the time, visible but not entirely, materialized but not recognized, all-knowing, omniscient, contrarily to the very essence of mystery movies and to the crust of crime movies: one would rather be spared the knowledge that at the end, someone knew it all and just did not want to spoil the fun. The realization of that knowledge does spoil the fun, though. But the very fact that the idea of the Father being killed was introduced in such a comedic tone is indicative of a breach of the taboo surrounding the status of the Father. I submit that this breach undermines patriarchy, and therefore is a symbolic attack on the status of the Dictator.

The Vaudeville Ideology

This section builds upon a conceptual and theoretical framework and a thesis which I introduced in *The Engineer of Joy*: the concept of "Vaudeville Ideology". I claim that the widespread -maybe even overwhelming- presence of Arab crime movies in the postcolonial era in the 1950s and 1960s was an unconscious materialization of the malaise with the overwhelming police presence in post national liberation Arab societies, particularly in Egypt¹². This ideology is associated with vaudeville in general and not specifically with crime comedy, but both genres display similar characteristics regarding the correlation between accessing vaudevillesque pleasures, such as wealth and sophisticated women, and being integrated into the fabric of the new middle class established by the postcolonial state's policies of expanding bureaucracy, public sector companies and liberal professions.

Crime comedy serves as one of the comedic vehicles of what I call the "Vaudeville Ideology" or the "Ideology of Vaudeville". I named this ideology after vaudeville, simply because it seems to be best represented in that genre. However, in *The Engineer of Joy*, I specifically make the argument that that ideology is produced within a variety of comedy subgenres and of media. Crime comedies, action comedies and spy comedies, especially those starring Fouad el Mohandes, I argue, are vehicles of the Vaudeville Ideology, and film, television and theatrical comedies of the postcolonial era often carry that ideology.

I suggest that as of the 1950s and the 1960s, postcolonial comedy in the Arabic-speaking world promoted the Vaudeville Ideology. The institutionalized national liberation movement becoming a postcolonial regime did not just promote modernization as understood in the mid 20th century. It produced a major

12- EL KHACHAB Walid, *op. cit.*

discourse which I find to be articulating the Ideology of Vaudeville. The crust of that discourse could be summarized as follows: the state will widen the access to the middle class and to the pleasures enjoyed by members of that class, in exchange of the citizens' adherence to the discourse of national liberation and of allegiance to the postcolonial regime. That access to pleasure is part of what I have called a merry secularism.

This "social contract" does not just purport to widen access to vacations on the Mediterranean beaches of Alexandria -as in El Mohandes' romantic comedy *Romance in August*-, or to internal air trips to enjoy local tourism -as in the vaudeville starring El Mohandes *Confessions of a Husband*-, or the promise of having a luxurious lifestyle and marrying a beautiful upper class woman -as in El Mohandes's crime comedy *Ladies Assassin* and spy comedy *Glass Threshold*. In all the latter films, every narrative outcome mentioned here is conditional upon the lead character joining the middle class and expressing allegiance to the regime. These are always two intertwined, simultaneous sociopolitical events associated with access to a job in the state bureaucracy or to liberal professions, booming only thanks to the policies implemented by the new postcolonial regime. The concept of Vaudeville ideology revolves around getting potential access to the middle class and its women, or to higher strata within the middle class. It is also about giving access to the illicit pleasures of romantic affairs, hence the importance of the word "vaudeville", which is the genre whose plots are the most dedicated to extramarital affairs.

Writing in the sixties, at the same time when the Vaudeville ideology was deployed in full-blown mode in Egypt, Guy Debord describes in *La société du spectacle* the advent of the society of spectacle as one where the arts witness the destruction of an older language common to all members of society, and the advent of an artificial recomposed language used in the spectacle. The latter also becomes a trader, a spectacle-merchant (spectacle marchand), a spectacle which the author calls an "illusionary representation of the non-lived".

Debord writes that :

« (...) dans tous les aspects des représentations sensibles- dans ce qui était l'art au sens le plus général. (...) s'opposent l'autodestruction critique de l'ancien langage commun de la société et sa recomposition artificielle dans le spectacle marchand, la représentation illusoire du non-vécu. »¹³.

Debord envisages here a situation where common language in society self destructs because of the critique it is subjected to, only to be artificially recomposed within the mercantile spectacle. The Vaudeville Ideology is produced by a language that is part of the spectacle staged by the regime-merchant. The main commodity sold here is the regime itself, as producer and guarantor of the pleasures it provides. In Debordian terms, these goods are simply illusory representations and are in a

13- DEBORD Guy, *La société du spectacle*. Paris, Gallimard, 1992 [1st ed. 1967, Éditions Buchet/Chastel], pp. 180-181, frag. 185.

non-lived state. *La société du spectacle* includes paragraphs which are specifically critical of the military dictatorship in the Egypt of the fifties and the sixties. But the previous quote best illustrates how the active production of comedies in post-independence Egypt contribute to strengthen the propositions of the Vaudeville ideology, thus contributing to the omnipresence of a spectacle-merchant in the country and its sphere of influence in the Arabic-speaking world. Crime comedy is a case in point when it comes to illustrating the immense privileges and the large benefits a man is given, simply by integrating the state's bureaucracy, particularly its cultural propaganda apparatus.

Crime Comedy: Al-Jarima al-Daheka

In 1963, an Arabic adaptation of the Hollywood little gem: *The Gazebo*, directed by George Marshall, starring Glenn Ford and Debbie Reynolds (1959) was released in Cairo under the title: *Al Jarima Al Daheka*. The film's title could be translated as "The Funny Crime", "The Comedic Crime", or simply: "Crime Comedy". The film is a reminder of Benjamin's position on German Trauerspiel: "bad works" best represent a genre¹⁴. The Egyptian film *Crime Comedy*, directed by Nagdy Hafez, is a case in point: it best represents the agency of Arabic speaking postcolonial crime comedies, without being the funniest, the most popular, or the best executed member of the genre. *Crime Comedy* has survived until today in the collective visual memory of Arabic speaking audiences only because of the status of the duo Soad Hosny and Ahmed Mazhar who play the lead roles in the film. Hosny and Mazhar have starred in a series of films which made them legendary stars and connected them as a well-liked movie couple. Hosny and Mazhar were a movie couple between the early 1960s and the late 1970s: playing a young woman married to a mature man in *Crime Comedy* (1963), and in *Wedding Night* (1966); they were a young Courtesan and a middle-aged lover in *New Cairo* (1969), and in *Shafiqah and Metwali* (1978).

The film *Crime Comedy* credits the story to Kathryn Cook, thus admitting it is adapted from a western source. The film is indeed an adaptation, a quasi translation, of the American film: *The Gazebo*. But the Arabic film intriguingly omits that Alec Coppel is the actual author of the play and of the story, both of which formed the basis of the screenplay of the original 1959 film, written by George Welles. It may be that the Egyptian authorities did not want to acknowledge adapting an American film. As if a film titled *Crime Comedy* wanted to hide the traces of a process which may have been construed as a crime, namely the plagiarism of another comedy: *The Gazebo*. Another irony at play here is that the spearhead of national independences in the Arabic-speaking world, Egypt, is producing "indigenous" cultural products which are in fact repackaged copies of those products circulated globally by the very cultural imperialism postcolonial Egypt purports to fight, namely American film hegemony¹⁵.

14- BENJAMIN Walter, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London, Verso, 1998.

15- EL KHACHAB Walid, "The Adaptation of Crime Comedy", *Al Thaqafa Al Jadida Journal*, Cairo, February 2023.

If the Vaudeville ideology is about experiencing pleasure -that may be illicitly simply by gaining access to the middle class, *Crime Comedy* is about going the extra mile to preserve the privileged access to these middle-class pleasures. *Crime Comedy* showcases the protection of postcolonial subjects loyal to the Vaudeville ideology, even if the protected subject/targeted object of that ideology is an individual committing a crime. Their ultimate reward is to let them get away with it and keep enjoying the vaudevillesque pleasures. *The Gazebo* tells the story of an actress blackmailed by a Mafia boss who threatens to publish compromising photos of herself she had accepted to pose for in the early days of her career. Her husband, a television film director, kills the Mafia boss to end the potentially endless cycle of blackmail, and buries the body under the gazebo in their home's lawn, hence the film's title.

In the Arabic adaptation, *Crime Comedy*, an alliteration occurs in the erasure of the narrative line about the mafioso possessing nude photos of the wife. Arab audiences in the 1950s and 1960s would not have been sympathetic to such a female character with such liberal mores. In *Crime Comedy*, the wife is the perfect beautiful, elegant, sexy, kind, homemaker whose sole agency is to be the spouse of the film director. The film shifts the motive of the murder: it becomes self-defence. The first 30 minutes, amounting to a third of the entire film, are devoted to creating a background story about the lead male character, the television film director. He leaves his native village in Southern Egypt at a very young age and refuses to embrace the "uncivilized" traditional mores of the region, namely, he refuses to engage in vendetta after his father was killed by the Head of a rival local family. The male lead then gets the chance to gain access to the upper middle-class: he becomes a major film director at the prestigious propaganda central nervous system of the regime, the national television, and he marries a wealthy gorgeous young woman. He settles with his wife in the prestigious Heliopolis neighborhood, whose Arabic name is very telling: *Misr al Jadida*, i.e. New Egypt. But the uncivilized South catches up with the film director: the new Head of the rival family sends an assassin to kill him before he could potentially avenge the death of his own father. Hence, the film director kills that assassin in self-defence and buries his body in the house's lawn.

Crime Comedy is not merely concerned with the comedic portrayal of a morally ambiguous murder and a body which keeps resurfacing because of bad plumbing in the garden, as in *The Gazebo*. It creates a scene where the murder is cultural. It literally stages the killing of the representative of non-modernity. The uncivilized turban-wearing man, who does not abide by the modern laws of the new independent nation-state, who only follows the traditional, backward laws of vendetta "has" to be killed for society to progress towards modernity. The film is on the side of the killer, the white-collar, television director, who works for the prestigious "Arab Television". That was the official name of the national Egyptian television, which had started broadcasting its first programs in 1960, only three years before the release of *Crime Comedy*. At the end, when the police discover the body of the slain man, it turns out that that victim had died a few

seconds before being shot by the film director, from a sudden, “miraculous”, heart attack.

In *The Gazebo*, that is just a comedic coincidence destined to restore the optimism of audiences and to preserve the image of their beloved stars, Glen Ford, and Debbie Reynolds, who could not possibly be the villains in a comedy. In the Arabic adaptation, *Crime Comedy*, this ending is an exalted embodiment of the Vaudeville ideology. The lead male played by Ahmed Mazhar is a new member of the elite, whose job puts him at the heart of the postcolonial state propaganda machine and factory for cultural production, i.e. the largest and one of the oldest television broadcasters in the Arabic-speaking world. He commits a crime for “a good cause”: protecting his own life, but also protecting the privileges he reaps because of his work within the new nation-state apparatus and therefore, his access to the middle-class.

Allegorically, the character of the film director also performs a ritual murder of the past, the backward traditions (of vendetta), embodied by the assassin from the South. By surviving the bloody confrontation with the “uncivilized”, the film director allegorically contributes to giving life to modernization. that the irony as I will demonstrate lies in this ritual/allegorical murder is done in the name of refusing a pre-modern social order that does not yield to the rule of law and order exemplified by the modern independent nation-state. Yet, the film ending subverts that rule of the law, because its morale can be interpreted as: when being a white-collar loyal to the postcolonial state, one can get away with anything illegal.

In his brief overview of the historical role played by crime narrative in discussing the social effects of the rapid urbanization, Tadié argues that the genre has historically questioned the modern urban society in the West, at a time when the rapid expansion of cities triggered anxiety about the future and the coherence of that society. He states that the crime story:

«(...) se focalise sur un événement suprême et suprêmement négatif, le meurtre, et pose la question de la société urbaine moderne à son point de rupture, à une époque où l'expansion rapide des villes européennes et, surtout, américaines suscite des inquiétudes quant à la cohésion et au devenir de la société urbanisée. »¹⁶.

That understanding of the historical role of crime narrative and crime movies is relevant to an analysis of the history of Arab crime movies, including crime comedy. Crime movies in Arabic are essentially -but far from being exclusively- urban films. They tend not to address urban anxieties per se, but rather to negotiate modernity in general. Arabic crime movies reflect on the destabilizing effects of modernization -of which urbanization is only a part- on the existing value system prevailing in society, challenged by western norms, products and norms imported into the Arab world.

An ultimate scene of confrontation between the old and the new, and of the

16- TADIÉ Benoît, *op. cit.*

fictional cathartic discreditation of tradition in *Crime Comedy* occurs toward the end of the film. The new Head of the Southern family cast as the ultimate villain, travels to Cairo, manages to identify the film director's villa and takes his wife as hostage. He cumulates all the clichés about the uncivilized Southern Egyptian: he wears the traditional Arab men's robe, he has a thick Southern accent, he is so naïve and so unused to modern technology that he imagines that the film director is hiding within the box that is the TV set, when told that the filmmaker is in the television (building). The wife takes advantage of the limited intelligence of the Southern man. She directs him to the wrong address where he wanted to ambush his urban rival, the film director, and he leaves her in peace. The postcolonial Arabic crime comedy genre appears to be adamant about systematically ridiculing, or -in this scene-, literally dismissing, even eliminating symbols of tradition, in favor of those of modernity, particularly when agents of modernity are supported by the ideology of Vaudeville.

Conclusion

If one were to reverse the question formulated by the crime comedy *Qu'as-tu fais de mon père?*, where the father is the representative of tradition, and would ask: what has Arabic crime comedy done to society in the early postcolonial times, of the fifties and sixties of the 20th century? The answer is that it may have partaken to the consolidation of the state propaganda and helped disseminate a frivolous apolitical entertainment. But it has also contributed to exposing the police state nature of the postcolonial social and political organization in the newly independent modern Arab world. The very nature of the genre helped exposing the overwhelming presence of police in the functioning of society. Crime comedy also was a high place where the unspoken desire of putting and end to the Dictator's grip on society was finally formulated, as evidenced by the very title of the film: *You Killed My Dad*. This film, like most of postcolonial Arab crime comedies, was a strong vehicle of the Vaudeville ideology.

That ideology is at work in *Crime Comedy*, and it introduces an ultimate case in point: the possibility of literally getting away even with murder, if one enrolls in the state's institutions and fulfills the regime's expectations from loyal middle-class men. The lead male in the film plays the character of a television film director, who as such, is a prominent employee at the service of the very newly inaugurated state Television. He kills a man, but is found to be innocent, since the deceased had died of a heart attack, seconds before he was hit by the magic bullet, shot by the film director. The white-collar artist thus keeps the rewards bestowed upon him by the system put in place by the state: a marriage into a wealthy family, to a beautiful woman, and a residence in his wife's posh neighborhood villa. Crime comedy thus summarizes the agency of the Vaudeville Ideology: enroll in state institutions and show allegiance, in exchange get the most outrageous breaks, including escaping punishment for murder.

This quick investigation of postcolonial cinematic crime comedy may seem to be simply yet another instance of the critique of state authoritarianism in the years following national liberation in the Arab world. I hope to have shown that cultural production, and particularly that of comedy, has a life and an agency of its own. Even if it is instrumentalized to be a vehicle of state propaganda, as in the case of the above described Vaudeville Ideology, it proves to constantly exceed the original intent, because it carries an unconscious dimension which lets through glimpses of critique that undermine the discourse of state's power and beneficence, and points to the contradictions within the postcolonial state's discourse: one of liberation, yet of manipulation and overwhelming policing at the same time. Cultural production seems to be inherently difficult to control, particularly when it takes the comedic mode, which seems to be in essence, or at least potentially, one of critique that unmasks contradictions.

ملخص | يطرح هذا المقال فرضيتين: الأولى، أن كوميديا الجريمة في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار العربية تفصل لاوعياً اجتماعياً وتعبر عنه في زلات لسان سينمائية. يحمل ذلك اللاوعي آثار رغبة دفينية في التخلص من السلطوية والدولة البوليسية وقبضة الشرطة عليها، وهي سمات تتجلى في الحضور الطاغي للشرطة في كوميديا الجريمة وفي معرفتها بأدق الأسرار. الفرضية الثانية هي أن كوميديا الجريمة وعاء لخطاب دعائي في خدمة «أيديولوجية الفودفيل». تتجلى هذه الأيديولوجية في خطاب يعد المواطنين بالحصول على ملذات تشبه الملذات التي يتمتع بها أبطال كوميديا الفودفيل: الترف، والنسوة الراقيات، بل والمتع المحرمة، والحق في الاندماج في نسيج الطبقة الوسطى الجديدة التي أنشأتها سياسات دولة التحرر الوطني، في مقابل ولاء المواطنين للنظام وانضواءهم تحت لواء خطاب التحرر الوطني.

يتعرض المقال بالتحليل لفيلمين مصريين للتثبت من تلك الفرضية: «أنت اللي قتلت بابايا» من إخراج نيازي مصطفى (١٩٧٠) و «الجريمة الضاحكة» من إخراج نجدي حافظ (١٩٦٣). «أنت اللي قتلت بابايا» «يحلم» بموت الأب، وهو ما يمكن تأويله على أنه تجسيد لموت الديكتاتور موتاً رمزياً. أما «الجريمة الضاحكة» فهو يصور البطل وهو ينجو من العقاب بعد ارتكابه جريمة قتل، بل وتكافئه الأحداث بالزواج من فتاة جميلة، ثرية، تنتمي إلى الشرائع العليا من الطبقة الوسطى، وذلك لمجرد أنه جزء من آلة الدعاية لدولة ما بعد الاستعمار، بحكم عمله كمخرج بالتلفزيون.

كلمات مفتاحية | السينما العربية ما بعد الاستعمارية، كوميديا الجريمة، الحادثة العربية، أيديولوجية الفودفيل، الطبقة الوسطى.

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قهقهة فوق النيل: اقتباس الكوميديا في السينما