

A FEARLESS HERO: THE PUPPET IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT: Since the beginning of the 21st century, the countries of the Middle East have experienced several episodes of revolt and revolution. Art in general has both been affected by and has influenced these events. With this in mind, my essay examines the art of puppet theatre as an epic narrative approach in the sense of both epic-political and epic-adventurous. To explore this phenomenon in historical context, I first trace puppetry's past in the Middle East and then discuss in more detail its important contemporary role. My contention is that the Middle Eastern puppet becomes a narrative schema of the socio-political field, going beyond the limits imposed on the rest of society with skill, like a hero who acts to save his beloved at the end of the story.

KEY-WORDS: epic puppetry, Middle East, Middle Eastern theatre, political theatre

RIASSUNTO: Dall'inizio del XXI secolo, i paesi del Medio Oriente hanno vissuto diversi episodi di rivolta e rivoluzione. L'arte in generale è stata influenzata e ha influenzato questi eventi. A questo proposito, il mio saggio esamina l'arte del teatro delle marionette come approccio narrativo epico sia nel senso epico-politico che in quello epico-avventuroso. Per esplorare questo fenomeno nel contesto storico, ripercorrerò innanzitutto il passato del teatro di figura in Medio Oriente e poi discuterò più in dettaglio il suo importante ruolo contemporaneo. La mia tesi è che il burattino mediorientale diventi uno schema narrativo del campo sociale-politico, andando oltre i limiti imposti al resto della società nel suo procedere come un eroe che agisce per salvare la sua amata alla fine della storia.

PAROLE CHIAVE: marionette epiche, Medio Oriente, teatro del Medio Oriente, teatro politico



In a situation where social and political pressure is imposing itself on societies, socio-political expression through art becomes a natural reaction. It takes the form of a cry or a call to protest. But in oppressive situations, freedom of speech and expression almost always become problematic. Some arts are more targeted than others, some are more controlled than others, but in the midst of all this, there are mediums that are better able to adapt and find ways to express themselves while circumventing the limits. In such tormented environments, puppet theatre is an apt forum for expressing ideas not easy to communicate in other venues. The puppet often finds itself body and soul at the heart of an ineffable story that man cannot tell.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the countries of the Middle East have been through numerous revolts, revolutions and protests. Some of them have reached the forefront of international news, such as the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, in 2011, the Gezi protest movement of 2013 in Turkey, the demonstrations of 2019 known as the “Revolution” in Lebanon, and the Woman Life Freedom movement in Iran in 2022. In these circumstances, puppet theatre has shifted its framework to engage critically with socio-political issues characteristic of the epic sphere, even while adapting to new constraints. These new puppet productions can be defined within the framework of an epic narrative approach in two senses: epic-political and epic-adventure. To explain this dual approach that places puppetry between the two fields of activism and entertainment, I propose to study the art through the lens of history rather than focus exclusively on contemporary times. Indeed, I think that to better understand the contemporary place of puppetry and its function, it is important to know how this place was acquired.

If we follow the history of puppet arts, we discover that the puppet has frequently had this double role in one way or another. In Middle Eastern society, where it seems difficult to separate art, current affairs, and religion, puppet arts resist and, while retaining their characteristics, transform themselves at every opportunity in order to respect the law of survival. In the process, puppetry branches out and permeates society, adapting to each era, its strategies changing from time to time. It can be camouflaged within folk culture, or boldly assert itself on television. This intermediary character defines the place of puppetry within the living arts; this hybridity, this mixture of “living” and “dead”,

distinguishes it within the theatrical world (see the works of Tadeusz Kantor). This singularity can be seen as a scenic constraint and can reduce these shows to the rank of minor art, as they are often understood by contemporary audiences as puerile, naïve, and banal. And yet its expressive power and popular success lie precisely in these characteristics and provocations: that's why dead beings come alive and become credible. This paradoxical approach – which denies the puppet any life, but at the same time raises questions about its real presence on stage – reveals the particular way in which this object functions. It is also important to specify that this study is interested in puppetry in a theatrical sense, focusing as much on its aesthetic aspect as on its semantics. Accordingly, it does not study the puppet as dependent on its technique of manufacture and performance, but rather the puppet as a language of representation.

This relationship with the puppet is perhaps less obvious in a Western society such as France, where this art form is supported institutionally through cultural, artistic and heritage policies. But in Middle Eastern society, where the relationship between “living creatures” is always confronted with the “unsaid” and the “un-done”, the “dead” being is better suited to expressing himself and performing in front of an audience. This is how puppetry asserts itself as an intriguing object that transcends the codes and limits imposed by both the State and traditional morality. The traditional puppet theatre of certain countries in the region, such as Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, can therefore be seen as a national heritage that has withstood the many socio-political changes that have taken place. Today, puppetry is coming back, existing and being practiced in an astonishing way through a young generation that did not learn these arts in the traditional way. This phenomenon needs to be studied to show how far traditional puppetry has come: a form of cultural expression that has never been officially supported, but which has advanced thanks to its «natural» strength.

1. THE PAST OF PUPPETRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)

The puppetry past in the Middle East suffers from the same lack of documentation as the history of other forms of theatre in this region. In order to reconstruct it, therefore, we

must seek its traces in other fields, notably classical literature, or draw inspiration from archaeological discoveries, such as the terracotta figurines with articulated arms and legs, the work of the Jiroft civilisation, dating from 5000 BC and located in the Kerman region in south-west Iran. There are no documents describing puppet shows prior to the 11th century. The earliest references in Arabic appear in poems attributed to Ibn Hadjāj, which mention a form of shadow play (*Zilliāt*, ‘shadows’). Subsequently, in 1282, Ibn Ḥellikan reports that the governor of Mosul Mūzaffar ed-dīn Kūkabūrī ordered a shadow show that was performed by a specialised troupe to celebrate the commemoration of the birth of the prophet Muḥammad.¹ Among the Persians, we see the appearance of words related to puppetry among thinkers, philosophers, and poets likewise from the 11th century onwards. This puppet vocabulary is often used symbolically to talk about Man and the universe. The fact that authors used puppet theatre techniques to talk about complex concepts shows that people were familiar with this practice well before the 11th century. The most quoted poem in this field is one of the quatrains of Omar Khayyām, philosopher, mathematician and poet (1050-1123). It evokes the fact that Man is no more than a puppet manipulated by fate. Khayyām uses the following words in Persian: *Lowbatak*, ‘the little puppet’, *lowbat bāz*, ‘the puppeteer’, *bassāt*, his ‘working tools’, including *sandogh*, the ‘chest’ that can also be used as a stage. Here is an English translation of this poem: «We are puppets that the wheel makes move / Such is the naked truth / It pushes us onto the stage of existence, / Then precipitates us one by one into the coffer of nothingness».² In another quatrain, he offers another glimpse of these puppet shows: «This wheel on which we turn is like a magic lantern / The sun is the lamp / The world, the screen / We are the images that pass by».³ Here we find more or less the same paradigm, in this case the vulnerability of Man compared to shadow theatre. But whatever Khayyām’s approach, we can deduce from it the existence of puppet theatre, which seems invaluable in the construction of the puppet past in the region. From the 17th century onwards, a number of Western travellers to the East, such as Jean Chardin and Tavernier, bear witness to acrobatic practices, particularly in Esfahan, the capital of the Safavid dynasty. It was not

¹ TRABELSI 2023: 33-77.

² KHAYYĀM 1998: 83.

³ KHAYYĀM 2013: 144.

until the early 20th century that Western missionaries described the shows in greater detail, providing illustrative information about the technique, the storyline, the characters, and other elements like as the reaction of the audience.

The best-known puppet in the region is Karagoz, who existed from Egypt to Persia, bordering on Ottoman territory. According to some, it seems that the Turks learned about shadow theatre from the Egyptians, and that the name Karagoz is derived from Karaqūš, a minister of Egypt in the Ayyubid era known for his ferocity. He then became the symbol of tyranny, mocked by the people.⁴ Others believe that this theatre came from the Far East and was introduced into the Arab-Muslim world in the eleventh century by the Seljuk Turks.⁵ Adolphe Thalasso writes:

There is every reason to believe that the origins of Persian puppets – and, moreover, of all Iranian theatre, drama and comedy – go back to the earliest antiquity and date from the Macedonian conquest of Persia. It is even more likely that Karagueuz himself was a natural son of Ketchel Pehlivan [Pahlavān Kachal]. There was not much distance between the plains of Iran and the Altai plateau, the cradle of the Turks, whom they were soon to leave to conquer Asia, Africa and Europe.⁶

There are several conflicting hypotheses about the origin of this shadow theatre and the character of Karagoz.⁷ What is important for our purposes is the fact that Karagoz appears as a very clever, extravagant, sometimes cruel, and transgressive character. He attracted the attention not only of the people, but also of Western travellers. In his book *Journey to the Orient*, published in 1851, Gérard de Nerval describes a «Caragueuz» show he saw in Turkey in 1843:

Among these toys is the bizarre puppet called Caragueuz, which the French already know by reputation. It's incredible that this indecent figure should be so unscrupulously placed

⁴ TRABELSI 2023: 33-77.

⁵ CLEVELOT 1944: 131.

⁶ THALASSO 1904: 3.

⁷ KHAJEHI 2020: 157-166.

in the hands of young people. Yet it is the most common gift that a father or mother gives to their children. The Orient has different ideas about education and morality than we do. They seek to develop the senses, just as we seek to extinguish them. I had arrived at the Place du Séraskier: a large crowd was crowding round a shadow puppet theatre marked by an overhead sign bearing the words: CARAGUEZ, victim of his chastity! An appalling paradox for anyone who knows the character... The characteristic and the noun that I have just translated would no doubt howl with horror to find themselves united under such a name. Nevertheless, I went along to the show, braving the odds of being grossly disappointed. At the door of this cheb-bâzi (night play) stood four actors who were to perform in the second play [...].⁸

This passage is an important reference for historians of Karagoz theatre, and has been used in several articles. But we must refer to the last sentence where the author calls this puppet game «Cheb-bâzi». This word is composed of *cheb* (shab) and *bâzi*, meaning in Persian ‘the night game’. Indeed, this expression is used to name puppet theatre in Iran. Clearly, Nerval did not travel to Iran and the word *shab* was pronounced *sheb*, confirming that he heard it with a Turkish accent. We can imagine that this word was used quite frequently in Turkey. This indicates that the neighbouring country, Persia, had this artistic practice, insofar as «night play» in Turkey referred to the shadow theatre of Karagoz. We now know that these shows, whether Karagoz shadow puppets or glove puppets, had both a lyrical and epic dimension. Altan Gökalp also tells us about the linguistic structure and polyglot nature of Karagöz’s theatre, which may confirm this lyrical aspect and the cultural and artistic exchange.⁹

This passage describes Karagoz shadow theatre (or Caragueuz, as Nerval transcribed it) in 19th century Turkey. Its importance is revealed very well in the performances of Pahlāvan Kachal (also mentioned by Thalasso) staged until the second half of the 20th century in Iran, then renewed and taught at the University until today. Pahlāvan kachal, or the bald hero, is the representative of Iranian glove puppet theatre sometimes named *pandj* (meaning ‘five’), the number of main characters. The Pahlavān kachal show we

⁸ Nerval 1998: 613-614.

⁹ Gökalp 2007: 345.

know today tells the story of the conflict between the bald hero and Ververeh djadou, the witch who, with the help of her three demon sons, has imprisoned his beloved Sarvenāz. These characters also have their roots in older cultures such as Zoroastrian tradition, where every form of evil, whether moral or physical, is represented by a demon. Pahlavān kachal is at war with both the symbols of evil and the representatives of power. During his adventures, he also meets the village teacher, a cleric, and invents funny stories often taking place at the time of his marriage to Sarvenaz. Mobārak, the other key character in Iranian string puppet theatre, the black valet, also takes part in the adventures. The existence of a variety of characters, both real and imaginary, gives the show the characteristics of a fairy tale while reflecting socio-political and cultural concerns.

Indeed, through these epic adventures, this character finds ways to challenge and oppose. In Marylie Marcovitch's article, *Le rire dans l'Islam*, published in «La Nouvelle Revue» in 1913, we find an example of this presence of revolt.¹⁰ Always compared to Karagöz, the Persian puppet is presented as the symbol of Iranian characteristics: «An unscrupulous diplomat, Palhavan-Ketchel succeeds by skill where that great devil Kargheuz would use a hard-on». This clever, literate hero knows how to please women: once again, it's a question of opposition in the face of religious force. This article systematically repeats ideas and observations from previous texts on these shows without specifying its sources.¹¹ Yet it also describes a scene with some new details about Pahlavan's relationship with the woman and his role in the adventure:

Pahlavân-Ketchel set his eyes on the wife of the Akhound (religious leader of the parish). He slipped her many declarations of love, which the beautiful woman (Zen) listened to without too many qualms. If she blushed, no one knows, because it was under cover of a veil. The demon of lust kindled its flame in the veins of Pahlavân-Ketchel. How could he get to her? One fine morning, he turned up at her husband's house, dressed as a mulah. He put on all the outward appearances of a pious Muslim, sighed, raised his eyes to heaven, recited verses with the pure pronunciation of a doctor versed in the knowledge of sacred texts. He invented a story from Isfahan to preach Ramadhan, and attracted by the Akhound's reputation for holiness, he insisted on the honour of appearing at his house

¹⁰ MARCOVITCH 1913: 385-387.

¹¹ See KHAJEHI 2020: 129-156.

first. The Akhound, flattered, did not want to be outdone in politeness. The fame of the pious Mullah had also reached him. Their mutual congratulations provoked hilarity in the audience, which was used to the mullahs' obsequious flattery, which more often than not masked secret rivalries. The conversation turns to pious subjects. With calculated skill, Pahlavân-Ketchel steered the conversation in the right direction at the right moment. Little by little, people become animated, heated, sing, dance, drink... until poor Akhound, less used than his partner to such feasts, rolls onto the carpet. It's time for the shepherd. The tapestry is lifted and the beautiful woman, having broken her endaroun, appears before the delighted eyes of her lover. When the unfortunate Akhound, ashamed and confused, emerges from his drunkenness, he finds his companion, devoutly seated at his side, praying his rosary for this sinner Akhound! And no one sees any malice in this, for these are familiar tricks for the master rascal.¹²

We can see that this character takes part in both warlike and chivalrous adventures, but also in episodes of protest to keep his audience happy. This is exactly what happens in Karagoz shows, but also in more recent puppet shows in the countries of the region.

2. THE MONSTER THAT SHOWS, THE MONSTER THAT TELLS

To explain the place of the puppet in a constrained condition, we look at the question of animation in puppet theatre: animating an object to make it resemble the living can be on the borderline between magic, shamanism, and the creation of strange, supernatural



Fig. 1. Pahlavan Kachal of the groupe Derakht e Sib Apple tree, Tehran, 2008.

¹² MARCOVITCH 1913: 385-387.

beings. From a semantic point of view, this approach can indeed explain how the puppet achieves the power discussed in this article. Gilbert Lascault raises these issues in his book *Le monstre dans l'art occidental*. In Chapter II (entitled *Essai d'une classification formelle des monstres dans l'art*), he proposes, in the first order, «to show» [*monster* in Old French] the monster by confusion of kingdoms or genres, which includes, first of all, «Humanised animals and animalised men», then «Animated plants and intelligent plants», and, finally, «Animation of the inanimate», where he develops the idea of monstrosity by animation in six categories.¹³ He then examines the opposite of the animation of natural animate beings in the first two categorisations, that is, manufactured objects and the results of man's technical work evoking a common process of the imagination. In this case, the object no longer serves the purpose for which it was made; it takes on a life of its own, an autonomous life. This idea brings us back to the question of the reproduction of figurative forms with «soul» in Islam. We might even wonder whether the prohibition of this type of creation in Islamic thought is not rooted in an archaic fear of animate objects examined by Lascault. But he also proposes another category that brings us closer to the question of the puppet. What is more common, according to Lascault, is the animation of statues made by man in the likeness of himself or animals. Of course, the automaton itself, the robot that obeys a programme determined by man, is not a monster, at least for the spectator who can reduce its actions to the effects of a mechanism. Here, if we try to replace the robot with the puppet and the programme with the puppeteer's staging or improvisation system, we see that the security of total obedience no longer exists. The puppet therefore becomes more monstrous, and here we also come close to the uncanny valley theory of the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori. In the theatre, we can still refer to the image of the mannequin in Kantor's *Dead Class*, where the monstrosity of these animated beings is strongly felt.

But I also propose to consider the concept of the monster at the heart of the narrative from another point of view. We can look back at the etymology of the word monster, from the middle of the 12th century onwards, from the Latin *monstrum*, 'prodigy that warns of the will of the gods, that shows it', then 'supernatural object or being'

¹³ LASCAULT 2004.

and ‘monster’, a family of *monere* (‘to warn’). *Montrer* belongs to this family, but in Latin (*monstrare*) has already lost the religious meaning of *monstrum* as ‘prodigy’, meaning only ‘to indicate’. This brings to mind the religious controversy and debates about the prohibition or authorisation of figurative production and manipulation in the Islamic religion. From a general point of view, this is an issue linked to imitation and the creation of a figurine of a “living” or “soulful” creature: by creating and imitating, man could take morbid pride in believing himself to be on the same level as God, or else engage in idolatry. These two ideas can lead us towards a conceptual fusion in which we can place greater emphasis on the fact that the puppet can be described as a monster: if its figurative manufacture and animation give it breath and soul, seen as an act comparable to that of God, it can, seen from another angle, become the one that indicates and “shows” the divine will. So, in a symbolic field, it seems that the puppet, like an unrivalled hero, finds a superior place that makes it impervious to the constraints imposed on actors.

3. THE STRENGTH OF A BEAUTIFUL NOTHING AT ALL

The puppet, like the doll, is called in Arabic *'arus*, the word also used for groom and bride, with the earlier meaning of ‘stay’ and then ‘celebrate’. Thus, puppet theatre is called *masraḥu al'arā'isi*, ‘the theatre of brides’. It is also called *masraḥu alddumā*, linked to the term *dumya* in the sense of ‘effigy’, ‘idol’, and a ‘vivacious beauty’ (red face) etymology referring to the word *dam*, ‘blood’ in Arabic¹⁴, which in Persian also means ‘breath’, exactly as in the etymology of the word *anima* in Latin. Today, the word *animation* is used to refer to animated cartoons or stop-motion productions, in which an inanimate image or body is given breath and life to bring it to life. We are therefore closely linked to a creature that is ultimately full of life. The Persian word *'arus* means bride, and with the diminutive suffix of *ak* it becomes *arusak*, meaning ‘puppet’. Having said that, this “little bride” in Persian seems beautiful, innocent, and pure, as does its root in the French word

¹⁴ Almaany and Reverso online dictionaries. I would also like to thank my colleagues specialising in Arabic language and civilisation, Ons Trabelsi, Najmeddine Khalfallah, and Sobhi Boustani, for constructive exchanges.

marionette, meaning *la petite Marie*. It does not threaten anyone, which is why this “toy”, this “doll”, can express itself without being restricted or censored. Because no one is making a fool of themselves by imposing limits on such a harmless little “nothing” creature. It should also be noted that, in Islamic thought, the puppet is considered to be a human creation, and therefore imperfect by definition, unlike man who is created by God, so it should come as no surprise that it has little legitimacy. It is from this kind of illegitimacy, then, that puppeteers often play in a more unveiled manner, while hiding behind a child-like appearance, an animal, even a stuffed toy and a minor object.

This minor form gives Iranian puppetry considerable power, like that of a monster, a supernatural hybrid that is obviously “small”. This enables it to resist the limits imposed on it, making it less constrained by the State than other performing arts: a minority art form, it is less exposed to censorship. It’s worth noting that in the eyes of the powers that be, “this little thing” isn’t even seen and therefore doesn’t deserve to be censored. Indeed, if the “big” powers were to oppose this “little” entity, they would lose their credibility by setting themselves so low.

Finally, we can announce that the Iranian puppet, enriched throughout its history by popular culture and the turbulent history of its country, is growing stronger by the day and surprising its audience on the theatre stage and on television. Small, cunning and agile, it possesses the wisdom that comes with age, and finds its way at every dead end. The hybridity of Iranian puppetry, with its cultural and socio-political cross-fertilisation, combined with the power of this puppet concealed by its minor character, is a phenomenon that we will study more closely through examples. Finally, we must also point out that the puppet, this hybrid half-man, half-object, half-dead, half-alive, half-real, half-imaginary, even possesses the power to hide, camouflage, and protect those who act behind it: its designer, its manipulator, and its vocal performer. Since a puppet performance is made up of a subject, an object, and a voice, we will examine its power against these topics in order to better discover its approach. This will be done first in the revival of traditional forms, then in contemporary or televised forms. In order to grasp puppetry as a hybrid art form, the following pages will respond to the different kinds of questions surrounding the subject. We can therefore also raise the question of a performative presence in the same

way as brides are in the context of a wedding celebration. It is a question of a heightened focus of attention and gaze.

4. PUPPET AND ITS OWN VERSION OF HISTORY

Today, in every MENA country, we can observe the presence of contemporary puppetry based on its traditional characteristics. So much so that the rebellious humour of the puppet that also existed in the West is becoming a form of current affairs in MENA. In Europe today, the characters of Guignol, Kasperle, or Punch belong more to its cultural heritage. But in MENA, the traditional characters are being revived, sometimes adopting a different name, and playing an active part in resistance and the establishment of freedom of speech.

In the Iranian puppetry tradition, the puppets speak, like Punch and Judy in England, with a high-pitched voice produced by a device installed in the puppeteer's mouth. But unlike the English show, in Iran the puppets' words are repeated and/or translated by the Morshed, an actor who stands in front of the *castelet* or puppet booth and interacts with the characters. He begins his dialogue by asking the puppets a few questions to introduce the story. It is at this point that we realise that there are two sides to this show: one produced by the voice distorted by the Safir, the name for a small whistle, and the other by the master reinterpreting the words of the puppets. It is in this discrepancy that the comedy is created, and the audience is delighted by the puppets' rebellion. This is often the case with Mobārak, the black valet at the king's court, dressed in red; an extravagant character who makes fun of everyone, the other characters, the master, and even the spectators. The show is an improvisation based on the main plot, the marriage of the king's son and the preparations for the ceremony, with all its twists and turns. The king is often called Sultan Salim, inspired by the Ottoman king, the enemy of the Persians in the 16th century, but sometimes Ahmad Shah, the Qadjar king of the 20th century. In other words, the king of Kheymeh *shab bāzi* has his origins in history, which gives him a "real" identity, offering his audience greater joy when he is ridiculed by his valet. There are different hypotheses

about the origin of the latter character, as his skin colour is not typical of the inhabitants of Persia.¹⁵

This tradition was revived in the 1990s with the appearance of Kolāh Qermezi, an Iranian puppet celebrity, in the *Sandogh e post* ('The Post Box'), a television show created by the comedians Iraj Tahmasb and Hamid Jebeli in 1992. This daily programme, which featured *āghaye mojri*, the presenter, and puppet characters, brought a number of foreign cartoons to children every afternoon. In this programme, Tahmasb took part in the debate between the characters by acting as a mediator and always trying to find a suitable arrangement. These amusing sketches and the resulting situations enabled the presenter to launch the main theme of the programme: talking about social behaviour, giving moral advice to children, showing them what is "good" in order to avoid what is "bad". This theme is reminiscent of the confrontation between good and evil that stems from the Zoroastrian paradigm of dualism, later influenced by Shiite Islam. However, these characters appear all the freer and at ease in their actions and words because the voices of the two characters were produced by the whistle, as in traditional theatre, or by the distorted voice of the puppeteer. This coded language left a great deal of room for the viewer's imagination and interpretation; as a result, these characters appeared more remarkable, funnier, and closer to the viewer's social reality than the propagandist images generally conveyed on Iranian television. What's more, unlike the television repertoire for young audiences of the same period, this programme did not underestimate the perceptivity of its viewers. This strengthened the bond between the child and everything that was happening in *Sandogh e post*. As a result, this programme became a solid foundation for puppetry on television. Kolāh Qermezi then became the main character in the Iranian New Year programme and returned to Iranian television between 2009 and 2018. Kolāh Qermezi and the other characters offered their own versions of Iranian society. This freer narrative with its twists and turns was obviously obliged to end with a morality that conformed to the country's official discourse, but viewers were used to distancing themselves from this imposed ending and having fun with the freedom taken by the programme's creators. If, in the 12th century, Khayyām expressed himself using puppet vocabulary, to-

¹⁵ For more information and analysis, see KHAJEHI 2020.

day the people express their thoughts and voice their demands using phrases attributed to puppet characters. These characters often have a particular philosophy, such as that of the Fāmil é dour character in the show: «The worst failures of my life were the consequence of the lies I should have told», «You have to make the path to be made, just as you have to close the door for it to be closed», «I am unwell, like an inhabitant of Mashhad (the Iranian religious city) who won a trip to Mashhad in a contest is unwell», «I'm not rude, I have politeness, but I don't plan to use it».

We can see that this double narrative still exists. Sometimes the puppets also intervene on purpose to help the MENA people retell their story. In November 2013, all over the world, several amateur groups tried to make a cover of Pharrell Williams' *Happy* video clip. This movement, which developed thanks to the Internet and the YouTube website, travelled to several countries, including Iran. In May 2014, young Iranians in Tehran posted on YouTube a video showing three men and three women without veils singing and dancing in the streets and on the rooftops of Tehran to the music of the American pop singer. This short film provoked the anger of conservative Iranians who deplored the fact that their compatriots, particularly young people, were abandoning Islamic values in favour of a more Western lifestyle. On May 19, 2014, the young Iranians were arrested by the forces of law and order for «offending the chastity of the public». This immediately gave rise to a dozen other videos of *Happy* made and posted on the Internet by other Iranians, albeit anonymously, in solidarity with the young people arrested. A few days later, a troupe of artists comprised of students and graduates of the puppet arts broadcast a video offering a puppet retelling of these events with their names on the credits, thus making no secret of their identity.¹⁶ The video shows three muppets, including a female character, with their outfits and gestures reminiscent of their counterparts. Although short, the video includes many images, each of which can be interpreted beyond its appearance. It is also shot on the roof of a flat, and the first puppet character appears from behind a satellite dish – an object banned in Iran because of its ability to pick up foreign channels – behind which hides the manipulator. This staging shows that the puppets are not being manipulated by Westerners and suggests the existence of this device on some roof, thus al-

¹⁶ <<https://www.aparat.com/v/w2WSH>> [website consulted and verified in July 2023].

lowing Iranians to hear *Happy* like the rest of the world. We then see the female character who, unlike the young girls whose outfits cover their whole body, is dressed in a top that shows off her generous cleavage, highlighted by a close-up.

Towards the end, this same puppet body, this time without a head, is still in the same position, dancing in the wind. This image – the last appearance of the female character during the broadcast of the song – precedes the final shot of the clip, which shows the disappearance of one of the male characters. The muppet retreats and apparently falls from the roof. At the same time we see the two performer-manipulators, two young people, a woman and a man, each entering from one side of the frame. They hold out their hands to retrieve the muppet, but the only thing they manage to catch is the head scarf. We also quickly see that the young man is holding the female character under his arm, but in the form of an object rather than a puppet. At this point, the song *Happy* is replaced by the sound of a police flashing light and the credits begin to roll. Finally, we see the puppet characters back at home; hearing the flashing light approaching, they start to get agitated and frightened. The headless female puppet, still dancing to the music, free as a bird, represents a social reality and a reference to current events in Iran beyond the arrest of these young people. The male character sings until, exhausted, he falls: he sacrifices himself as a sign of his claim to be *Happy*. The presence of the manipulators, which may at first appear to be an act of rescue, does not change the situation: they are there simply to save what they can later use. In the end, the puppets never die. They may be decapitated or fall, but then live again in their home. They may panic when they hear the police flashing their lights, but they resist, they survive. These puppets, who oppose even their manipulators, may refer to a lost generation in search of its destiny. This short film directed by Mehdi Ali beygi cleverly explores the ability of puppets to express themselves and give a more honest version of events in Iran without being arrested and condemned by the forces of law and order.

We can also see such storytelling in other MENA countries. Simon Dubois explains that the Syrian artist Raafat Al Zakout became involved in the revolution in 2011 by staging the three-story play, *talāt qiṣaṣ*, about the revolution itself.¹⁷ He quickly real-

¹⁷ DUBOIS 2023.

ised that while the demonstrations brought together tens of thousands of participants, his show of support for the mobilised Syrian street protests was only seen by a circle of people with links to the artistic world. He then opted, with a group of artists, to use puppets. As they were still in Syria, using puppets allowed them to express themselves without putting themselves in danger. For wider distribution, for example, in Iran and Turkey, the puppets were filmed and the video broadcast on the Internet. Raafat Al Zakout founded the *Maṣṣāṣit mattih* collective, which created a series of ten-minute videos featuring the president's puppets, his bloodthirsty henchman, and the protester, in satirical sketches in which those in power were ridiculed and even insulted. The project began in the summer of 2011, with the sketches filmed in Syria and then edited in Lebanon for greater security. The first season was broadcast on YouTube in November 2011 and on Orient TV, an opposition television channel. The series, whose name has been translated as 'Top Goon', has been very well received by the foreign press.¹⁸ This puppet series features fairly simple glove puppets bearing the faces of politicians. On the *Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution* digital platform,¹⁹ founded in 2013 to archive creative expression, art, and culture in times of revolution and war in Syria, we can find an episode of Top Goon presenting Bashar al Assad and his association with Russia to maintain peace and security in accordance with the principles and objectives of the United Nations. The show's humorous and surreal dimension allows it to denounce the situation in Syria and its links with the outside world, and to deal with both hard and ugly subjects from a distance. In the second episode, for example, we see retired former dictators from the MENA region on the sky track, discussing and confessing their crimes, and talking about their punishments, which is still quite caricatural, but is very liberating for a people who themselves cannot see or tell such a version of events.²⁰

Today we can also see an active presence of puppetry in Palestine. Puppets help human beings in the act of resistance and education. Palestinian artist Diana al-Suwaiti is part of this movement. From 2019, she has been touring with her minibus and creat-

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ <https://beta.creativememory.org/fr/archive/?_archives_search=top%20goon> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

²⁰ <<https://youtu.be/Go1ZBOie9Cw>> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

ing mobile puppet theatre scenes to make up for the lack of cultural and artistic venues due to the sporadic tensions and conflicts between the Palestinians and the Israeli army. She says «For years, we have been suffering from a decline in cultural life, which negatively affected children's attitudes, given they are indulged in



Fig. 2. Screenshot of Top Goon Reloaded - Episode 2 - Hold on to my beard. Source: YouTube@MasasitMati (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Go1ZBOie9CW>>).

smartphones to have entertainment».²¹ Even if technically and aesthetically the work of the group of five puppeteers remains simple, it brings a lot to children and families in the West Bank, as if the puppets give their own version of a world in conflict and create a reassuring and culturally rich place for families.²²

In Lebanon, this educational and cultural use of puppets is aimed at the Lebanese, but also at Syrian and Palestinian exiles and immigrants. This is the case of the Khayal (Shadows) Association, which federates and promotes the performing arts and puppetry for educational and psychological purposes, under the direction of Karim Dakroub, who now works as a Clinical Psychologist in Beirut.²³ These creations often revolve around a narrative that carries a fairly clear message in the sphere of education. For example, he created a show to raise awareness of the dangers of the mines and cluster bombs that were dropped by the Israeli army in 2006. In his article entitled *Puppetry, a psychosocial support tool in a war-torn country*, Kardim Dakroub explains the use of puppetry in therapy for post-traumatic syndromes.²⁴ When he put on his very first show for his diploma, Dakroub used, in his words, the story of «Kalila and Dimna», that is to say, not a story

²¹ <<https://english.news.cn/20220531/3b6f4e2725c2440eb23bbf9764b15a24/c.html>> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GNkBeC1V8c&ab_channel=NewChinaTV> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

²³ I would like to thank Abdo Nawar, director, curator and teacher of the Shams association, for speaking with me in May 2023 in Beirut about this.

²⁴ DAKROUB 2010: 22; <<http://marionnettetherapie.free.fr/IMG/file/MT%20B%202010.pdf>>.

taken from the book «but the story of the story of this book», the way in which it was written and passed on in the Eastern and then the Western world. Through his puppet show, he looks back at the history of the transmission of these animal fables, recounting how the book was translated before being passed on from India to Persia, as well as the aims of disseminating this work: «The story of my show was a mixture of the story of the book and the idea of immortality».²⁵ In fact, it's a collection of ancient oriental tales from India via Persia that, according to some, date back to the 3rd century BC. In this work, the animals adopt human behaviour to evoke moral, societal, and political issues. This form of storytelling seems ideally suited to puppetry. Here the puppet becomes the main actor in an ancient narrative form while allowing it to update and travel, as Dakroub did from Lebanon. In this case, the puppet undertakes an epic struggle with a precise goal, not only to speak and express itself by gaining freedom, but to give its audience a form of liberation from its ills and suffering.

In Lebanon and in a more political context, yet somehow still therapeutic or cathartic, cardboard puppets are given the roles of the country's leading political figures. They are there to take part in a fictitious court in the public square to be condemned as those responsible for the explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020, a catastrophic event that shook and seriously weakened Lebanese society. These Middle Eastern puppets also played an active part in the protests and demonstrations during the Arab Spring in Egypt in 2011.²⁶ For example, playwright and activist Muhammad Marros, together with a troupe of actors and musicians, invented a sardonic puppet show about the failure of the Mubarak regime. Marros and his ensemble rehearsed feverishly for twelve hours in an abandoned office near Tahrir and presented their storytelling spectacle on the revolutionary artists' stage, one of several performance platforms that had been erected in the square.²⁷

We can also see that this puppet presence is becoming a well-known form of demonstration in Egypt given that a year later, in 2012, the giant puppets of the Kousha puppet troupe representing the Egyptian military took to the streets: «The move of giant

²⁵ YOUSSEF 2021: 136.

²⁶ I would like to thank Pauline Donizeau, a lecturer at Lyon 2 University, for the exchange on this subject.

²⁷ ALBAKRY - MAGGOR 2016: 11.

puppets with political messages towards the street, with direct impact on the audience and a simple theatrical backbone, is one of the important indications of changes that are taking place in the artistic field in Egypt».²⁸ This “tradition” of the presence of giant puppets that raise public awareness of socio-political events in the MENA region is also reflected in the character of Little Amal, a large puppet representing a young Syrian refugee whose name means hope in Arabic and who embarks on a long journey across Turkey and Europe to find her mother. The project, called “The Walk”, was launched in 2021 and has raised awareness among people in over fifteen countries.²⁹ Her walk is sometimes broadcast via live videos on Instagram, and people can follow her on-screen.



Fig. 3. Fresco at Sahat al Shouhada, Martyrs' Square in Beirut. Photo taken in November 2022 by Yassaman Khajehi.

5. PUPPET NARRATION, FROM IDEA TO BODY: A CONCLUSION?

The puppet, or the idea of the puppet, is part of the narrative scheme of the socio-political field. In other words, the question of manipulation and the relationship of power are

²⁸ <<https://atimetwaly.com/2012/03/10/procession-of-giant-scaf-characters-steals-the-show-in-tahrir-square/>> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

²⁹ Official project site: <<https://www.walkwithamal.org>> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

very easily shown through puppets. Walter Benjamin, for example, in his *One-Way Street* (1928), discusses the use of small figurines and automata representing great powers such as those of Françoise-Joseph, Queen Helena of Italy, Napoleon III, et al.³⁰ This custom is still very much alive in MENA. If you look in newspapers, on television, or in the theatre, you can easily find traces of how puppets and politics are woven together to tell the story of a hectic daily life that sometimes has no end in sight. In Martyrs' Square, Sāḥāt ash-Shuhadā in downtown Beirut, deserted following the explosion of the port, at the same time as the presidential election campaigns of 2022, we can see a fresco showing a sad Lebanese manipulated by a hand. From each finger of the hand a different coloured thread descends and attaches itself to the sad, manipulated man, who seems lost by these varied and sometimes divergent forces that nevertheless come from a single hand. Here, as in the examples discussed in this article, the artist uses the puppet as a creature that gives him the strength to tell his story. Whether in the field of aerotherapy or the socio-political framework, artists often agree on the liberating force of the puppet. It can at the same time protect, hide, and bring anonymity to its maker, sometimes functioning as a mask, which itself has sometimes been treated as a political object, but which also possesses a body beyond a face.³¹ We are then in a form of face-to-face encounter with a form of narrative that ultimately encompasses the epic dimension. In other words, whether the puppets are telling a story from the repertoire of folk tales or showing themselves to demonstrators in the streets of MENA, they are creating a movement that encourages both puppeteers and their audience to take action on behalf of themselves and their larger communities. Social networks and digital platforms have also lent their support to puppets, as in the Syrian Top Goon example, but also the Turkish puppet character Dayı ('Uncle' in Turkish)³² and his talk show on YouTube, or the Iranian character Loghmeh created by Mohammad Loghmanian on Instagram.³³

³⁰ BENJAMIN 1988: 203.

³¹ BJØRN - RIISSGAARD 2023: 90-267.

³² <<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLo9gmeup3bXj69btrtNxUQgoDI3RsIkOL>>. I would also like to thank Zeynep Ugur PhD candidate in Political Science at EHESS for his advice.

³³ <<https://www.instagram.com/loghmeshow>> [website consulted and verified in May 2023].

This Middle Eastern puppet, then, skilfully goes beyond the limits, like a hero who goes to save his beloved at the end of the story. It overturns the conventional framework and produces a minor disorder, which results in a new societal order based on the functioning of the puppet, diverting it from the limits of Middle Eastern societies. This order arouses and develops the audience's systematic attention to what is "said" and "shown" by the puppets. Being in a form of direct address, in the street



Fig. 4. Screenshot of Mohammad Loghmanian's June 2021 Loghmeshow post, President Rowhani's puppet Lip-sync in Iran. Source: Instagram & YouTube @loghmeshow.

or behind the puppet booth, and having a very simple and basic aesthetic (as we have discussed in the previous examples), puppetry becomes a form of radicalism as proposed by Peter Schumann.³⁴ In this approach, the puppet form, with its hybrid characteristics, protects the main message until it is received by the audience. The puppet's power as a mode of communication and narration can also be seen by those in power as "marginal agitation", a kind of safety valve that allows the minor disorders of the official discourse to escape. However, underestimated in this way, these puppet elements, these agitations, and these minor disorders manage to push back the margins of freedom and move the limits of censorship in an underlying way: these puppets are so *not serious* that we forget to *see* them, and therefore to beat, censure, or suppress them. It is in this way that the puppet becomes a Middle Eastern hero at the service of artists and society.

³⁴ SCHUMANN 1991: 75-83.

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