

Preface

by

Francesco De Angelis* and Paola Viviani**

The theme “Beyond the Arab Uprisings: rediscovering the MENA region” was the central thread of the XII international conference organised by the SeSaMO (Società Italiana di Studi sul Medio Oriente) at the Università Ca’ Foscari of Venice on January 16th and 17th, 2015. On that occasion, a panel, which was divided into two sessions, on “Arab Sensitivities after the Uprisings. Arab Art and its Perception of Reality: Changes and Innovations”, was presented, the resulting essays of which have been gathered in this double issue of “La rivista di Arablit”. The participants focused their attention on Egypt, Libya and Syria, with the intent of analysing some of the ways through which the uprisings that took place in these countries have affected the relationship between Arab sensitivity/ies and art, as well as the choice of the most appropriate artistic means of the moment. Moreover, these uprisings reinvigorated the educational practices of art itself in all of its forms: in Libya, for instance, the fall of the military regime allowed intellectuals to reveal issues, such as life in jail, that had been hitherto kept silent and to publish works that are imbued with particular dramatic intensity and profound humanity and characterised by a rather concise and efficient style, as Elvira Diana illustrates in her paper.

Not only written and oral literary works have been taken into consideration, but there are also examples from digital creativity which, in many cases, has proven to have efficiently incorporated – and often renovated – previous art forms. Art, in its various declinations, has thus revealed itself once again as a privileged means for the construction and deconstruction not only of containers – be them books, comic books or cyberspace – but also of man as an individual and

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a member of a local and global community. Art helps society narrate about itself and every human being tell one's own story, even when such a story consists in remaining silent in the face of extremely violent scenes. Art, in fact, is capable of translating silence and is "Translated from Silence", if one wished to echo Joë Bousquet's work *Traduit du silence* (1941). Fatima Sai's essay may be inserted within such a context, as she deals with the limits that have been imposed on the representation of reality in Syria throughout the past four years by inquiring into very diverse artistic forms, ranging from biographical memoirs to photographs and designs. She proceeds to overlap products that bounce from the real to the virtual world and viceversa in a continuous and unending pursuit. Digital media are at the center of Ada Barbaro's paper, which provides a reading of some online posts written by Zakariyyā Tāmir, one of the greatest masters of Syrian literature and a narrator (*ḥakawātī*) of the web who uses blogs in an astute and piercing way to create a quicker and more engaging relationship among people belonging to different generations who seemed unable to communicate with one another. His storytelling especially reveals the intimate essence of the types of people that have composed Syrian society for decades by skilfully highlighting peculiar traits that the young population could perhaps not fully grasp. This great wise man of Arab literature thus becomes a sort of mentor for young people, for whom he also represents one of the main spokespeople of the collective memory of an entire nation. After all, since the very beginning and increasingly, the means and techniques of digital communication – from those that may already be considered traditional, to the most modern and innovative ones – have registered, reconsidered, analysed, narrated and conserved the memory of the large and small events that separate us from the first signs of uprising, which is the expression of the uncontainable pain mixed with rage that shook the souls of many people on an individual and collective level for quite some time, but was unable to express itself within a movement of widespread protest. The step itself, from the occurrence of the event to its conscious transmission – and therefore the act of voluntarily leaving a visible trace of it – was a short one, which indicates the felt need to make it part of the collective memory. There are certainly many reasons at the basis of the choice to use digital media, as it was preferred by many in such a context. Such reasons have been singled out and analysed in a vast range of publications which, proliferating in the course of a few years, have positioned the close connection between digitalisation and reality under a magnifying glass to the extent that the products of "digital creativity" in particular have transformed into an icon and metaphor of a new phase of experimentation and expression in which the contemporary state acts and builds bridges that are both immaterial and material with the "Other".

Cultural, ethical, sentimental bridges are always evoked and taken on by the Syrian writer Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, who is one of the main protagonists and symbols of the resilience of his people. Arturo Monaco has found, in the struggle against division and sectarianism that have been fuelled and crystalised, the *fil rouge* that unites acts and the diverse means of communication (essays, journals, novels, reports of memoir biographies, radio) that have alternated one another from the

XIX century until today, thus testifying the dualism of the Syro-Lebanese soul. Such dualism consists in the dilemma between wanting to be a united, compact and supportive population, and not being able to be so due to historical and sociopolitical reasons that are incompatible with people's intimate essence. The witness accounts that are provided by other protagonists of today's Syrian cultural scene, as well as those belonging to the various communities that make up the mosaic of this Arab country, are enlightening in this sense and, once again, in that related to the fundamental figure of the *ḥakawātī*. This paper also discusses a very interesting series of comics for children from Syria. Francesco De Angelis' work, instead, focuses on "Tūk tūk", the first comic magazine published in Egypt for adults. Created by Muḥammad al-Šinnāwī, "Tūk tūk" seems to resume the tradition of late XVIII century and early XIX century Egyptian satirical magazines, which were conceived in pre- and/or post-revolutionary periods in which there was an extensive use of dialect. In fact, al-Šinnāwī and his collaborators believed not only in the therapeutic strength of humor, similarly to what Henri Bergson (1859-1941) theorised in *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, but also in the ability of humour to build consensus around an idea as Sigmund Freud suggested in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*. However, as opposed to magazines such as "Abū nazzārah zarqā" of Ya'qūb Ṣanū' and "al-Tankīt wa 'l-tabkīt" of 'Abd Allāh al-Nadīm, the main target of "Tūk tūk"'s criticism is the Egyptian people and not those in power, thus appearing to propose a social reform that starts at the bottom and not at the top. Finally, Alessandro Buontempo and Cristina Dozio focus on Egyptian novels which, thanks to time skips, indicate guidelines that are necessary in order to interpret the present, denouncing probable revolutionary deviations and disillusionments and attempting to pinpoint the possible warning signs of the Arab Spring. This has been accomplished in the effort to increasingly comprehend its causes and development, to analyse its representation, or the incapability and difficulty to represent or create new canons while not renouncing to aspects of the past, and to understand how the sense and act of rebellion were originated and developed among the Egyptian population.

Art and sensitivity converse, feed each other and evolve without pause. The papers that have been gathered here are a quick flash of light upon Arab art in its ongoing and fruitful dialogue with the sensitivity of a composite population that is formed by numerous elements which, in general, neither want to surrender to segmentation nor want to renounce the idea of an uprising that has implications that are rich in sense and bring consequences that could reveal themselves as positive in the long run.

Will art and sensitivity continue to converse with the same intensity? It is to be hoped for, just as we hope that this debate will continue to be studied.