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Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow: social justice and the rise of dystopian art and literature post-Arab Uprisings

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ABSTRACT

The Arab uprisings ushered an unrealistic level of euphoria across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); however, ten years on, most of the same dictatorships continue to rule and reactionary forces have only become more powerful. For many, the Arab street has become a more dangerous, even dystopic, place. With democracy curtailed and economic prosperity an unlikely possibility in the near future, some writers and artists in the MENA region are turning away from the nightmares of the present towards the futuristic lands of science fiction and fantasy, imaginary places where they have the freedom to openly reflect upon their predicament. Indeed, it is reported that dystopian literature in Arabic fiction has proliferated in recent years. The same trend can be seen in art: a 2016 exhibition in London billed itself as 'a dazzling journey into the future of Palestine—through both utopian and dystopian visions of what lies ahead'. In this article, I first briefly detail the recent oppression in Egypt and Palestine—what I call the dystopian present—including against artists and writers. I then look at the contemporary role of art and literature as social critique.

Introduction

The idealism that accompanied the 2009/2010 Arab uprisings ushered an unrealistic level of euphoria across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Many scholars, including myself, were also inspired by the audacity of the mass street protests. Ebrahim Moosa celebrated their aesthetics, claiming that 'sheer people-power undid the autocratic regimes'.[1] Meanwhile, Alain Badiou argued that the 'rising up' was 'the rising up of existence itself.'[2] Although the concept of dignity, or *karama*, had not been very prominent in most pro-democracy movements since the fall of Communism,[3] it was a core theme of the Arab uprisings.[4] However, dignity requires not only a just government, but also some measure of social equality, requiring fundamental changes to the neoliberal economic system. Thus, perhaps it is not surprising that the rapture of the protesters was

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[1]Moosa, Ebrahim. 'Aesthetics and Transcendence in the Arab Uprisings,' *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3, 2011: 171–180. 173.

[2]Quoted in Sakr, R. *'Anticipating' the 2011 Arab Uprisings: Revolutionary Literatures and Political Geographies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013). 2.

[3]However, of course, prior to the collapse of communism, dignity was often an important revolutionary theme.

[4]Hashemi, Nader. 'The Arab Spring Two Years On: Reflections on Dignity, Democracy, and Devotion,' *Ethics & International Affairs*, 27(2), (2013): 207–221. 209.

soon followed by despair; ever since the uprisings, reactionary forces have consolidated their power and brutally cracked down on the freedoms of speech and protest. Ten years on, the same elite networks and dictatorships continue to rule across the MENA region; unemployment and economic hardships continue for the masses; and, in some cases, the Arab street has become an even more dangerous place, with reactionary forces' grip on power almost unfettered now. Furthermore, the continuing effects of the 2013 military coup in Egypt, Libya's failing state, the ongoing bloody civil war in Syria and the Saudi-led war in Yemen, as well as Israel's tightening military grip over the occupied Palestinian territories, have all made it more difficult for the citizens of MENA to come together to collectively demand social justice.

Today, many Arabs cannot freely engage in political demonstrations or traditional and new media; they are often targeted just for working in non-governmental organizations, academia and the arts. With democracy curtailed and dignity so difficult to realize under a faltering neoliberal global economy, many dreamers in MENA have turned away from realism and the nightmares of the present towards the futuristic lands of science fiction and fantasy, imaginary places where they have the freedom to openly reflect on their disappointing social predicament. Indeed, dystopian literature in Arabic fiction has proliferated in recent years.[5] The same trend can also be seen in the arts: a summer 2016 exhibition in London billed itself as 'a dazzling journey into the future of Palestine—through both utopian and dystopian visions of what lies ahead'.[6] This event in the United Kingdom took place against the backdrop of a particularly bizarre spectacle in the occupied West Bank: the official Palestinian Museum launching in Birzeit without any exhibitions or artwork.[7] Thus, it is important to stress that this dystopic turn is also an artistic choice, an expression of the dystopian realities on the ground today.

First laying out what I call the dystopian present, this article addresses the oppression and abuses in Egypt and occupied Palestine after the uprisings, and then explores how the Arab imagination is negotiating political and social realities through art and literature. Drawing upon the insights of critical theory, I focus in particular on the work of: Basma Abdel Aziz, whose debut dystopian novel *The Queue* is a critique of the Egyptian government's inability to provide basic services[8]; Mohammed Rabie, whose novel *Otared* portrays a former Egyptian police officer joining the fight against a mysterious occupying power ruling the country in 2025[9]; and *Chapter 31: An Odd Piece of Research on the Many Virtues of the Oriental Imagination*, a 2016 exhibition of mostly Palestinian artists inspired by the 1974 science fiction novel by Emile Habiby. The discussion is informed by email correspondences with Aziz, Rabie and the curators of *Chapter 31*.[10] I conclude by considering what the turn to artistic spaces might mean for the shape and potential of future social mobilizations across the MENA region.

[5]Altermay, Alexandra. 'Middle Eastern Writers Find Refuge in the Dystopian Novel,' *The New York Times*, 29 May 2016.
[6]The year before, in 2015, seven Arab artists contributed to *Dismaland*, a dystopian exhibition curated by Banksy in the British seaside resort town of Weston-super-Mare. See Priest, Matthew. 'The 7 Arab Artists at Banksy's "Dismaland,"' *Esquire*, 9 September 2015.
[7]Glanz, James and Rami Nazzal. 'Palestinian Museum Prepares to Open, Minus Exhibitions,' *The New York Times*, 16 May 2016.
[8]First published in Arabic as *Al Tabour*.
[9]First published in Arabic under the same title.
[10]I rely on the English translations of both novels, but my correspondences were either English or Arabic.

Social injustices in Egypt and Palestine

Many Arab populations across MENA are suffering today, despite the high hopes of activists and scholars ten years ago. The situation in Egypt has continued to deteriorate, especially since the July 2013 coup against President Mohamed Morsi and his government. Under the autocratic leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Egyptian security forces have brutally clamped down, initially targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, but ultimately going after anybody opposing the military regime, leaving thousands dead and tens of thousands jailed. Although two sets of elections have since taken place, the first round of the parliamentary vote in autumn 2015 achieved a turnout of only 10%[11]; while 97% of voters reportedly re-elected Sisi as president in 2018.[12] Public demonstrations have long been banned and free speech is frequently punished; 33 journalists were detained in April 2016 when Egyptians attempted protests against the government's unpopular decision to hand over control of two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia.[13] During this time, security forces were also deployed to key areas of Egypt's main cities, with agents reportedly rounding up dozens of activists and lawyers from their homes and cafes in Cairo.[14] This level of oppression was widespread; reports published by Human Rights Watch around this time include: 'We Are in Tombs,' documenting the abuses in Egypt's notorious Scorpion Prison; and 'Look for Another Homeland,' about the forced evictions in Egypt's Rafah. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in 2019, Egypt was the fourth worst jailer of journalists worldwide, with the number charged with 'false news' rising.[15]

Under the leadership of al-Sisi, Egyptians have been prosecuted for a variety of dystopic reasons. For example, in December 2013, a 15-year-old boy was arrested after a teacher discovered a ruler and notebook of his with the Rabaa sign,[16] a symbol of opposition to Morsi's overthrow[17]; and Egyptian judges issued a mass death sentence against 529 people for the alleged killing of a single police officer in May 2015.[18] The following year, in February 2016, in a case of mistaken identity a 3-year-old Egyptian boy was sentenced to life in prison after a court found him and 115 other people guilty of killing three people and sabotaging public and private property during a political demonstration in January 2014—the boy was just 16 months old at the time of his alleged crime.[19] More recently, an Egyptian gender and human rights researcher for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights was arrested and tortured, a reminder of the murder of Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old Italian PhD student who disappeared in Cairo in January 2016.[20]

Life in the occupied Palestinian territories has been equally bleak. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Israeli settlements

[11]Agence France Presse, 'Low turnout as Egyptians shun elections designed to shore up Sisi,' *The Guardian*, 19 October 2015.
[12]Davison, John and Ahmed Tolba, 'Egypt's Sisi wins 97% in election with no real opposition,' Reuters, 2 April 2018.
[13]'Journalist covering protests in Egypt jailed for two years,' Committee to Project Journalists, 16 May 2016.
[14]'Egypt unrest: Sisi warns over anti-government protests,' *BBC*, 25 April 2016.
[15]Beiser, Elana. 'China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt are world's worst jailers of journalists,' Committee to Protect Journalists, 11 December 2019.
[16]In August 2013, Egyptian security forces massacred pro-Morsi demonstrators in Rabaa Square, Cairo, killing up to 1,000 people in just one day. See Haddad. Nadine, 'Blood, death and flames: Memories of Egypt's Rabaa massacre,' Amnesty International, 14 August 2015.
[17]Kingsley, Patrick. 'Egyptian boy arrested after teacher finds stationery with pro-Morsi symbol,' *The Guardian*, 10 December 2013.
[18]Elmasry, Mohamed. 'Egypt's injustice system', *Al Jazeera English*, 18 May 2015.
[19]Sirgany, Sarah El. 'Egypt: Officials claim mistaken identity after toddler sentenced to life,' *CNN*, 23 February 2016.
[20]'Egypt arrests, tortures human rights advocate: Rights group,' *Al Jazeera English*, 9 February 2020.

continue to expand in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. In 2016, 'an unprecedented wave of seizures of Palestinian properties by private settler associations in the old city of Jerusalem and adjacent neighbourhoods [was] reported,' including 'the forced evictions of Palestinian families from their homes.'[21] The same year, Israeli occupation forces demolished a record number of Palestinian homes and structures.[22] According to Israel's security agency, Shin Bet, there were 295 documented incidents of 'Jewish terror' in 2018, a 40% increase from the previous year.[23] Palestinian children are particularly vulnerable to settler attacks, and Israeli forces often arrest any minors who resist. Furthermore, surveillance is always ever present; Israel even created a cybercrime unit to monitor and control what is being published on the internet. In 2017 alone, there were around 300 arrests on charges of online 'incitement,' including posts that merely criticize Israeli government policy.[24] The private sector has taken a dystopic step further: in May 2016, a Tel Aviv company called Faception announced that it had 'signed up a homeland agency to help spot terrorists' with technology that can purportedly identify character traits with up to 80% accuracy [simply] by analysing a person's face.'[25]

Israeli occupation forces have met recent waves of protests in Gaza, which began in 2018, with shocking levels of violence.[26] Over 200 Palestinians have now been killed and about 8,000 injured, with one occupation soldier later bragging that he had 52 definite hits on only one day.[27] It was even reported that Israeli forces have disguised themselves as aid workers to carry out an attempted assassination.[28] Meanwhile, Hamas, the ruling authority in Gaza, has also cracked down on their own people.[29] Incidentally, the Palestinian people themselves have not voted in elections since 2006, when Hamas secured victory over Fatah at the polls. In November 2016, Supreme Court judges in Ramallah, appointed by an unpopular President Mahmoud Abbas, postponed the vote only one month before local elections were scheduled.[30]

The limitations on freedoms in Palestine and Egypt, however, go even further. While the arts played a distinctive role in the Egyptian uprising, from rap music to street theatre to poetry to graffiti, artists have become increasingly suppressed under the post-coup regime. Following the fall of Mubarak, the Independent Culture Coalition launched *El-Fan Midan* (Art is a Public Square) to bring art, music and theatre to the streets of Egypt on a regular basis, thus creating 'cultural and political awareness through a street festival that would tour all governorates of Egypt'.[31] But in April 2014, security forces shut down one of its monthly concerts in Cairo, arresting some of the organizers and activists who attended. Police reportedly 'said that the name of the festival "aroused suspicions" because of the

[21]'Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem and the Occupied Syrian Golan,' United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, October 2016: 3.
[22]Silver, Charlotte. 'Israeli home demolitions break records, shatter lives in 2016,' *Electronic Intifada*, 30 December 2016.
[23]Morris, L oveday and Ruth Eglash. 'Attacks by Israeli settlers surge as West Bank tensions boil,' *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2019.
[24]'Arrests on charges of "incitement" on social media platforms and Israeli government policy: A Facebook case study,' Addameer, 7 January 2019.
[25]'Israeli startup claims to spot terrorists with facial recognition,' *Haaretz*, 26 May 2016.
[26]Lieber, Dov. 'U.N. Slams Israel Over Violent Crackdown on Gaza Protesters,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 February 2019.
[27]Glazer, Hilo "42 Knees in One Day': Israeli Snipers Open Up About Shooting Gaza Protesters,' *Haaretz*, 6 March 2020.
[28]White, Ben. 'Israel's alleged impersonation of Gaza aid workers raises concern,' *Al Jazeera English*, 11 December 2018.
[29]Nidal al-Mughrabi, 'U.N. official condemns Hamas crackdown on Gaza protests,' *Reuters*, 17 March 2019.
[30]Greenwald, Diana B. 'Next month's Palestinian local elections aren't happening. Here's why,' *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2016.
[31]Montasser, Farah. 'A year of El-Fan Midan in Egypt,' *Ahram Online*,' 10 April 2012.

word "*midan*"'.[32] After al-Sisi's inauguration in June of that same year, Egyptian security forces tried to prevent *El-Fan Midan* from holding any further events, despite having secured an 'agreement with the Ministry of Culture guaranteeing government clearance to put on a monthly event'.[33] With of the support of the ministry, the July festival was eventually held, but police prevented the event from being staged in August, September and ever since. This crackdown also extended to other arts, including the arrest of singers,[34] the censorship of publishing houses,[35] and the banning of television series.[36] In January 2016, writer Fatima Naoot was sentenced to three years in prison for criticizing an Islamic ritual on Facebook[37]; the next month, writer 'Ahmed Naji was sentenced to two years in prison for "violating public decency" after "sexually explicit" excerpts from his novel, *The Use Of Life*, were published in a state-run literary magazine;'[38] and the following May, members of the performance group Awlad al-Shawarea (Street Children) were arrested for 'inciting protests and insulting state institutions'.[39] The six youths were detained without charges for 150 days before finally being released.[40] More recently, Egyptian poet, lyricist and activist Galal el-Behairy was incarcerated for writing the song 'Balaha,' or stupidity, which was recorded by recorded by Rami Essam and is critical of al-Sisi; he has been in detention in Tora Prison in Cairo since March 2018.[41]

Meanwhile, artistic efforts in Palestine seem to face suppression from all sides. In 2013, Israeli forces arrested cartoonist Mohammad Saba'aneh at the Allenby Bridge checkpoint and detained him for five months, apparently because his brother is affiliated with Hamas.[42] Two years later, President Abbas ordered an investigation after he published a cartoon portraying Muslims carrying out the Prophet Mohammed's message.[43] A Saudi Arabian court delivered a death sentence in November 2015 to Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh for apostasy; however, a panel of judges later downgraded his punishment to eight years in prison and 800 lashes.[44] The Israelis arrested Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour in October 2015 for a Facebook post and a YouTube video of her poem entitled '*Qawim ya sha'abi, qawimhum*' ('Resist, my people, resist them'). After years under house arrest, she was finally sentenced to five months in prison.[45] In summer 2016, Israeli authorities prevented a children's choir from leaving Gaza, despite their having official invitations to perform in Bethlehem and Ramallah.[46] Back in December 2015, the Israelis even arrested a 23-year-old Palestinian clown, Mohammed Abu Sakha, allegedly for supporting

[32]'Al-Fan Midan street art festival shut down by security forces,' *The Cairo Post*, 8 April 2014.
[33]Morgan, Marwa. 'Security forces block "Art is a Public Square" street festival,' *Daily News Egypt*, 4 August 2014.
[34]In September 2014, members of the rap group 'Art Revolution' were arrested for 'chanting hostile phrases against the military and the police. See '"Art Revolution" rap group released on bail,' *Daily News Egypt*, 13 September 2014.
[35]Morgan, Marwa. 'Censorship authorities confiscate three books on arrival,' *Daily News Egypt*, 3 September 2014.
[36]Morgan, Marwa. 'Ramadan TV series: Political power and control,' *Daily News Egypt*, 24 June 2014.
[37]Tantawi, Ghada and Mariam Rizk. 'Egypt takes harsh line towards artists and authors,' *BBC Monitoring*, 20 April 2016.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Shaw, Anny. 'Members of Egyptian performance group arrested for mocking president,' *The Art Newspaper*, 11 May 2016,
[40]Youssef, Adham. 'Street Children' band members released, *Daily News Egypt*, 7 September 2016.
[41]'Galal El-Behairy,' PEN America, n.d. https://pen.org/advocacy-case/galal-el-behairy/. Accessed 16 March 2020.
[42]Kane, Alex. 'Political cartoonist Mohammad Saba'aneh: Art can change how people view Palestine, *Mondoweiss*, 27 April 2015.
[43]Abunimah, Ali. 'Cartoonist once jailed by Israel now targeted by Palestinian Authority, *Electronic Intifada*, 4 February 2015.
[44]Batty, David and Mona Mahmood. 'Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh's death sentence quashed by Saudi court,' *The Guardian*, 2 February 2016.
[45]'Dareen Tatour sentenced to five months in prison over poem,' *Al Jazeera English*, 31 July 2018.
[46]Tawfiq, Mousa. 'Gaza artists not allowed to leave Strip: "We just want to sing for love,"' *Middle East Eye*, 23 August 2016.

the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.[47] The Israeli authorities held him without charge for two years under Administrative detention,[48] which is only permitted under international law in exceptional circumstances; but, as of the end of December 2019, 464 Palestinians were being held by Israel in administrative detention, including four minors.[49]

Literature and art as social critique

These extraordinary human circumstances—a dystopian present that is a history without end, not the end of history[50]—shape not only the writers and artists in MENA, but also their work, providing another archaeological layer to help us decode what they are experiencing and how they are trying to make sense of it. As Jayussi points out, 'What one is dealing with in literature is not necessarily the recounting of events in their normal sequence, but the description of their *effect* on the characters of a fictional mode.'[51] For instance, in Habiby's novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*,[52] what is experienced is how 'a mechanised force is seen at work, blindly executing a policy of mass evictions, mass arrests, usurpation of property, and physical torture'.[53] Other examples include: the overwhelming repetition of Palestinians recounting from where they were exiled[54]; the occupation forces seen to be monitoring even 'what you whisper in your dreams;' and actual people being considered as state property—all these illustrate the spiritual effects of war, exile and occupation on the Palestinians of that time.[55]

Habiby's novel shows how literature can become a social critique, or in the least a way to inspire readers to seriously question how society has arrived at any political moment. This offers the possibility of resistance in post-colonial contexts where the colonized have long been ascribed a narrative, whether by the colonizer or the corrupt elites who reproduced colonization, as is so often the case within the MENA region. Even the imposition of naming the uprisings the 'Arab Spring' is one example. Drawing upon the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said was the first to develop a sophisticated concept of Orientalism to describe this phenomenon in relation to Western encounters with the Middle East and Islam. By surveying the chronicle of Western representations of what was named the Orient in the arts and sciences, Said deconstructed the hegemonic ways of knowing the Middle East and Islam today. In his book *Orientalism*, Said described the European post-Enlightenment project to create 'the Orient' into an object of study, using scientific methodology to claim objectivity.[56] He argued that when Europeans were confronted with the Orient, the experience

[47]Agencies, 'Amnesty makes appeal for Palestinian clown detained by Israel,' *The Times of Israel*, 5 March 2016.
[48]'Israel finally frees Palestinian circus performer,' Amnesty International, 16 April 2018.
[49]'Statistics on Administrative Detention,' B'Tselem, 19 January 2020.
[50]By 'the end of history,' I am referring to the thesis promoted by American neoconservative scholar Francis Fukuyama, who argued that after the fall of Communism, the advent of Western liberal democracy was the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution and thus the ideal form of human government. The recent rise of extreme right-wing movements in the United States and Europe has proven otherwise. As Palestinian political prisoner Waleed Nimer Duka has written, 'we are part of a history, and history is a state of mind … a verb in past tense that ended … a past verb that extends endlessly … ' Hence, this is a history that never ends. See Duka, Waleed Nimer. 'Parallel Time,' DEZzz.ME, 5 November 2012.
[51]Jayussi, Salma K. 'Introduction' to *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003). xi.
[52]First published in Arabic as *Al-Waqa'i' al-Gharibah fi Ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi-l-Nahs al- Mutasha'il*.
[53]Jayussi, 'Introduction'. xix.
[54]Habiby, Emile. *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, Salma K. Jayussi and Trevor LeGassick (Trans). (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003). 22.
[55]Ibid. 52:96.
[56]Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

was always framed by comparisons vis à vis the West, as if Orientals did not exist before this encounter with their own histories, narratives and ways of knowing and being. As Gregory adds, representations are not only mimetic, but also constructive; thus, when 18th and 19th century Western 'explorers' framed reality as something naturally given in the visual or material sense, accessible only through the eyes of the viewer, 'the native, the peasant [becomes] *part* of the landscape'.[57] However, what is truly being represented here is the dark side of the colonizer. Accordingly, it is difficult to read novels outside of the historical circumstances in which they are produced—novels are a dialectical product of contrapuntal narratives and experiences.

By the end of nineteenth century, Said believed Orientalism had established a certain coherence that was unchallenged, where 'the word *Oriental* was a reference for the reader sufficient to identify a specific body of information about the Orient. This information seemed to be morally neutral and objectively valid …'[58] Sadly, even today, this remains a struggle for the colonized to narrate their own histories. As S. Sayyid explains, 'People become without history not because they lack a past but because, paradoxically, they cannot narrate themselves into the future. People without a history are either nameless (and thus not really a people) or they are named by others.'[59] Whether this narrative is fact or fiction, oral or written, utopian or dystopian, does not really matter; it simply must be one's own. The genre may be of relevance, but it is not overly determinative of the location or experience that it aims to express—although the novel developed as a genre in Western Europe precisely during the peak of colonialism, Arabic literature is also rich in literary precedent. Indeed, Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi argues that the Arabic novel is an 'awakening genre,' adding that while Egyptian writer and Nobel Laureate Najib Mahfuz (1911–2006) is considered the founding father of the Arabic novel, the fictional figure of Scheherazade long precedes him in the telling of stories.[60]

Al-Musawi further argues that the Arab narratives within the post-Mahfuzian novel have a postcolonial quality, because they often present 'an awareness that looks upon experience in its present manifestations with an interrogating and debating mind'.[61] This was a time when many Arabs were dealing with the humiliating shock of losing Palestine in 1948 and another defeat in 1967, both at the hands of Israeli colonizers. Novelists searched to explain and come to terms with this loss and disappointment, spawning works like Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, first published in 1974, a comic tragedy about a Palestinian informant for the Zionist state of Israel who comes to learn the importance of resistance and yet cannot bring himself to play out that role, and so instead chooses to go into outerspace. This example beautifully illustrates Al-Musawi's point that 'the urgency and the immediacy' of a history traumatized by colonialism and occupation:

> entangle [Arab writers] in poetic techniques, rhetoric, grand and mythical architexts, and analogy. In due time, the burgeoning consciousness acts on the creative to go beyond intellectualised responses or the early ones of mere registration or overt documentation. This consciousness entails attention to detail human desires and practices that could have been bypassed by narratives of great cultural and ideological visions.[62]

[57]Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2004). 8:42.
[58]Said, *Orientalism*, 205.
[59]Sayyid, S. *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order* (London: Hurst, 2014). 2.
[60]Al-Musawi, Muhsin Jassim. *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). 22.
[61]Ibid. 23.
[62]Al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, 26.

While idealized conceptions of tomorrow are often dismissed as immature, Keith M. Booker explains that Marxist critics have long distanced 'themselves from the more naïve versions of utopian thought,' embracing it for the work it does in changing society and arguing that a 'desirable alternative future is necessary to empower meaningful political action in the present'.[63] Furthermore, the distance between utopia and dystopia is often quite negligible. As Booker also notes:

> Not only is one man's utopia another man's dystopia, but utopian visions of an ideal society often inherently suggest a criticism of the current order of things as nonideal, while dystopian warnings of the dangers of "bad" utopias still allow for the possibility of "good" utopias, especially since dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality. Moreover, dystopian critiques of existing systems would be pointless unless a better system appeared conceivable. One might, in fact, see dystopian and utopian visions not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project.[64]

Quoting dystopian literary critic Mark Hillegas, Booker adds that 'the modern turn to literary visions of "the future as nightmare" is one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age'.[65] The rapid emergence of post-apocalyptic art in this age of global warming is telling.[66] After 'people power' in Egypt consecutively delivered rupture (a revolution) and continuity (a coup), both through popular street protests, it should not be surprising that Egyptians may be particularly anxious. A mock Facebook event called 'Mass suicide in a week,' inviting people to kill themselves starting on 11 November 2016, the declared day of the *Ghalaba* (Revolution of the Poor), attracted tens of thousands of followers.[67] For the Palestinians, a nation without borders is already a living nightmare. The rise of dystopic configurations of the future is a direct response to this dystopian present. As Raffaella Baccolini remarks, 'Far from being mere aesthetic markers … [literary] genres are [themselves] "drenched in ideologies",' adding that the rise of the American and British right during the 1980s and 1990s, which silenced or co-opted ideas of utopia, also led to a 'dystopian turn' in Anglo-American science fiction.[68] Recent political history in the MENA region has arguably ushered a similar turn in Arabic fiction. Celebrated Lebanese writer Elias Khoury explains that, 'Writing in times of transition takes the form of a journey towards what we do not know and towards the shock of writing what we [do] know, which will lead us to discover how writing changes things and does not only reflect them.'[69] Ultimately, according to Khoury, this can open doors to social change.

Writing tomorrow

Reflecting upon what is known as well as unknown, a number of Arabic dystopian works of art have been published since 2011, including an anthology entitled *Iraq + 100: Stories*

[63]Booker, M. Keith. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994). 3–4.
[64]Ibid. 15.
[65]Ibid. 16.
[66]King, Matthew. 'Can post-apocalyptic art be a force for social change? *Pacific Standard*, 16 December 2016.
[67]'Absurd Egyptian Facebook Event Calling for Mass Suicide on 11/11 Amasses Huge Following,' *CairoScene*, 6 November 2016.
[68]Baccolini, Raffaella. 'The persistence of hope in dystopian science fiction,' *PMLA*, 119 (3) 2004: 518–521. 519–520.
[69]Khoury, Elias. 'The Unfolding of Modern Fiction and Arab Memory,' *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 23(1) 1990: 1–8. 8.

from Another Iraq, edited by Hassan Blasim; a darkly satirical futuristic Egyptian novel entitled *Women of Karantina*, by Nael Eltoukhy; a novel about homosexuality and revolution entitled *Guapa*, by Kuwait-born Saleem Haddad; and even a sci-fi musical comedy called *Topaz Duo: Cosmic Phoenix*, co-created by Qatari writer and filmmaker Sophia al-Maria. Here I focus on two Egyptian novels, which have already garnered academic interest.[70] The first is *The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz, an Egyptian writer and psychiatrist who counsels torture victims. According to *The New York Times*, her inspiration for the novel, her first, occurred in late 2012 while she was 'walking in downtown Cairo one morning when she saw a long line of people standing in front of a closed government building. Returning hours later, she passed the same people still waiting listlessly—a young woman and an elderly man, a mother holding her baby. The building remained closed.'[71]

Aziz was amongst *Foreign Policy*'s 100 Leading Global Thinkers in 2016, the year *The Queue* was published in English.[72] She herself was arrested in Egypt three times for protesting. Previously, she had published only short stories and non-fiction accounts of the psycho-social aspects of torture in Egypt and the system that embraces it, but after Mubarak's fall:

> writing a factual account felt like an inadequate way to capture the surreal experience of ordinary Egyptians who lived through the uprisings and subsequent crackdown, she said. Instead, she aimed to write a universal story that reflected what was unfolding around her but transcended geography and current events … "Fiction gave me a very wide space to say what I wanted to say about totalitarian authority."[73]

Aziz explained to me that she was compelled to write fiction 'not because I was trying to escape from the authority's punishment, but [because] it was an artistic choice.' She further added that by the end of 2012, 'I felt that the reality [was] becoming a kind of absurdity and that documentation of the actual events [was neither] available nor even fruitful or satisfying to me.'[74]

Aziz subsequently wrote for twelve hours a day over two months to complete *The Queue*.[75] The satirical novel recounts the deterioration of the mind, body and spirit under a totalitarian social and political regime. As she explained, she wanted to imagine how we could:

> build in our imagination an exaggerated conception regarding the smartness, the strength and the cleverness of a totalitarian authority, how would we use this conception to resolve our internal conflict, saying: Oh, it is that strong so we can't face it. Oh, it is that smart and clever so we can't defeat it. The sum of this is: let's surrender and give up, no need to resist, we will keep waiting.[76]

[70]For example, see the chapters by Stephan Milich on 'The Politics of Terror and Traumatization: State Violence and Dehumanization in Basma Abd al-Azīz's al-Ṭābūr' (145–164) and Walaa' Said on 'Dystopianizing the "Revolution": Muḥammad Rabī's Uṭārid' (193–208), in the book *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World*, edited by Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Harrassowitz-Verlag 2019).
[71]Alexandra Altermay, *The New York Times*, 29 May 2016.
[72]'Egypt's Basma Abdel Aziz among Foreign Policy's 100 Leading Global Thinkers,' *Aswat Masriya*, 12 December 2016.
[73]Altermay, *The New York Times*, 2016.
[74]Author interview with Basma Abdel-Aziz, 28 December 2016.
[75]Ibid.
[76]Ibid.

The novel, set in the distant future, begins with a short summary of the political turmoil in an undisclosed Arab country that resembles developments in Egypt. The disturbance is centred around what is called the Disgraceful Events, 'when a small group of people held a protest' against a shadowy entity known as the Gate 'on a street leading to the square'.[77] Although the protests soon swelled, security forces brutally cracked down. The Gate had come into power after an earlier uprising called the First Storm, when popular protests successfully challenged the security forces but then 'fractured before [the movement] was able to overthrow the regime'.[78] The latter appears to represent Mubarak's fall, but the former is actually an insightful prediction of what was to come—Aziz wrote the novel before the 2013 military coup. As she explained, back in 2012 she 'had a strong feeling that Mubarak's system [had not] fallen yet and that the military institute is going [to come] back to catch the political authority.'[79]

The second novel is *Otared* by Egyptian writer Mohammed Rabie; its superfluous violence is anything but satire. The dystopian future that Rabie predicts is literally hell; and one made by men more than women. Rabie told *The New York Times* that he wrote the novel, his third, 'in response to the "successive defeats" that advocates of democracy faced after the 2011 demonstrations that ended President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule. While there are parallels to present-day Egyptian society, setting the story in the near future allowed him to write more freely, without drawing explicit connections to Egypt's current ruler.'[80] However, much like Aziz, Rabie barely disguises his critical engagement with the Egyptian experience, even referencing the bloody events during the uprising in January 2011, when snipers killed hundreds of Egyptians,[81] and the crushing of pro-Morsi protesters in Rabaa Square in August 2013.[82] Of course, Rabie also includes additional acts of fictional brutality committed by Egyptian security forces, including the slaughter of thousands of peaceful protesters at al-Azhar Park.

Killing is the predominant theme of *Otared*, followed only by rape, drugs, and the loss of all hope. The key characters, who are no longer even willing to wait for redemption but instead feel compelled to kill, are almost exclusively male; the only exceptions are the faceless Zahra and the abused prostitute Farida. The novel takes place in Cairo, mostly in 2025, centring around the character of Ahmed Otared, a former Interior Ministry officer and mass murderer. He is a member of the resistance against mysterious forces occupying Egypt called the Knights of Malta, the same name of the order established by Christian European elites in Jerusalem during the Crusades,[83] which is also mentioned in Habiby's novel.[84] Rabie details, in an excruciating manner, mass killings. The literality of hell is repeated over and again, not to mention its centrality to the plot (the characters are in hell). And yet despite the gruesome subject matter, the narrative reads like a child encountering something unbelievable; for example, the repetition of Otared questioning if Farida, his girlfriend, and others know that they are living in hell. The absence of female

[77]Aziz, Basma Abdel. *The Queue*. (London: Melville House, 2016). 7.
[78]Aziz, *The Queue*, 9.
[79]Author interview with Basma Abdel-Aziz, 28 December 2016.
[80]Altermay, *The New York Times*, 2016.
[81]Kingsley, Patrick. 'Egyptian police 'killed almost 900 protesters in 2011 in Cairo,' *The Guardian*, 14 March 2013.
[82]Rabie, Mohammed. *Otared*. Martin Moger (Trans.) (New York: Hoopoe, (2016). 68:71.
[83]'Knights of Malta,' Order of Malta, n.d. https://www.orderofmalta.int/sovereign-order-of-malta/knights-of-malta/. Accessed 16 March 2020.
[84]Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, 74.

characters within the resistance is itself a death sentence for humans, a bit reminiscent of director Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, and signals something more important about the dystopian future being imagined here—one where reality is so bleak that the only kind of resistance is through brute force.

But even in hell, Rabie still introduces the possibility of love. Otared falls in love with Farida the moment he sees her in a brothel, and there is the strong comradery developing between him and the resistance member known only as the Saint, who despite never killing anybody himself, certainly does facilitate many murders without ever articulating any of his political goals. And finally, there is the character of Insal, who appears in a flashback to 2011 during the Egyptian uprising. Insal is an expectant father and school worker who ends up losing both his wife and child while looking after an abandoned 4-year-old girl. The love and devotion that he develops for this child is extremely touching, especially because she has a cryptic condition that causes her to lose her mouth, ears and eyes, and eventually all sense of touch. She is the faceless Zahra. We soon learn that this condition persists in the future without any cure; I read this as a metaphor for the ambivalence of the Egyptian people today, who have remained silent even during spates of extreme state violence and oppression; only ten per cent of Egyptians even bothered voting in parliamentary elections in 2015.

Indeed, many of the Egyptians we encounter in Cairo's apocalyptic future are zombie-like, wearing masks and either craving death or mindlessly inflicting it upon others. A drug epidemic is what allows people to function in everyday life. Known as Karbon, the drug creates a mental darkness and makes one disappear into the unconscious, so that one cannot remember anything afterwards. During the high, one is perfectly pleasant and functional, capable of doing daily work, like sweeping the streets without experiencing any boredom, seeing patients die in hospital without suffering from depression, and prostituting oneself without falling into despair. This is the perfect drug for a neoliberal postmodern future, where human worth is not determined by religious or ethical values, but by efficiency and usefulness at work alone. French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard called this goal performivity, or the best possible input and output option, as if members of any society functioned like a machine.[85] Here, the Egyptian society in 2025 is so powerless, hopeless and tired that it can only function by becoming a machine by using Karbon, even after the occupying forces have left and the security state is home grown. Thus, while the effects of Karbon are dissimilar to those of Soma in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, both drugs play the same role in society: preserving the status quo.

On the other hand, the characters in *The Queue* are not only still willing to wait, but also trying to engage with the powerful, even if they are not very successful. Unlike Rabie's zombies, Aziz's characters are alive and over the top, quite similar to those in the 1950s theatre of the absurd. But with her imagination, the possibilities are even wider, from Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* to Franz Kafka's *The Castle* to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* to Iraj Pezeshkzad's *My Uncle Napoleon*, the latter a comic coming of age novel poking fun of Iranians' tendency to blame the British [or Americans] for every contemporary ill that the country faces. Aziz's dystopian story revolves around Yeyha, who is only peripherally caught up in the Disgraceful Events but is still shot in the stomach. He is carried to a clinic and Tarek, the

[85]Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984). 46.

attending surgeon, examines him before notifying him of his injury and the need to operate. However, Yeyha is instead sent to the official Zephyr Hospital and released without them removing the bullet from his intestine.

Meanwhile, his x-ray is seized by an authority and the Gate makes a series of public announcements to cover up its brutality. At first, it prohibits surgical operations to remove bullets, then it requires official permission for x-rays, before attempting to completely rewrite the Disgraceful Events as an international movie set where fake bullets and actors were involved. Under these circumstances, Yehya and his friend Nagy are forced to wait in a queue to the Gate, which they are told will open but never does, in order to request his x-ray and secure permission to remove the bullet. In fact, everybody waiting in the queue seeks an official declaration to make sense of the suffering in their lives. Nevertheless, a whole social economy soon develops around the queue: a woman named Um Mabrouk sets up a café, a man in a *galabeya* starts daily religious sermons in support of the ruling regime; and a woman with short hair unsuccessfully attempts to rally a boycott against Violet Telecom, a mobile phone operator that is giving away free phones to provide surveillance of those waiting in the queue. Throughout it all, Yehya is in great pain and Tarek becomes obsessed with his case, despite not acting.

Another central character in *The Queue* is Amani, Yehya's girlfriend. Although she does not wait in the queue with him, she does attempt to retrieve his x-ray from Zephyr Hospital and is caught. In a chilling scene, she finds herself naked and possibly raped—unlike the grotesque detail that Rabie forces upon the reader, Aziz never actually indicates for sure whether these fears have been realized or not. However, we do know that Amani's life unravels from there; she loses her job, becomes distanced from her friends, and even starts to believe the Gate's propaganda that Yeyha is not actually dying from a bullet wound. Meanwhile, Tarek's life is also disintegrating from his inaction and dependence on drugs; however, he eventually decides to operate on Yehya without a permit in Nagy's house. After revealing that the authorities have been tracking Tarek's every move and are recording it in Yehya's file, Aziz leaves the ending open—Tarek's visits to Nagy's house and his intention to remove the bullet are not recorded in the file. Does a sympathetic intelligence agent create an opening for Tarek to conduct the illicit surgery? Or is this a trap, where Yehya will succumb to his wounds? In the end, we do not know.

While senseless violence is a recurrent theme in *Otared*, pain is ever present in *The Queue*. Both leave disturbing effects on the reader. Do we fight a repressive, illogical system while suffering in pain, or do we deliver ourselves from this hell only through destroying others, like those mass killings? Aziz points out that normally, those who are waging resistance against tyranny 'believe in certain doctrines or have specific beliefs to defend,'[86] and so can withstand pain. However, in the dystopian present, any coherent ideology becomes a luxury. On the mass suicide Facebook page, Egyptian followers shared posts describing:

> how death does not seem so bad for those who are living in Egypt, since they consider themselves "in hell already". While all users expressed their depression in what seems to be funny posts, most of them agreed that they actually have – joking aside – considered committing suicide several times. "God says if I kill myself I will go to hell. It doesn't seem fair to live in Egypt in this life, and go to hell after that!" one user said.[87]

[86]Author interview with Basma Abdel-Aziz, 28 December 2016.
[87]Deyaa, Nada. 'Facebook event calls for mass suicide on 11/11,' *Daily New Egypt*, 9 November 2016.

With the failure of neoliberalism to deliver equitable 'development' around the world, the possibility of economic survival under authoritarianism—'acting as if' the leader is powerful, what Wedeen observed in Syria before the horrific civil-international war (2011-present) that continues to destroy the country—seems to be increasingly more difficult when the capitalist system is not delivering upon its promises of 'progress'.[88] However, the imperative to continue 'doing,' while in a queue that, in fact, never progresses, does inspire hope. Yehya's stubborn persistence may not be rewarded, but he still carries on. And while Otared tells us that hell is 'eternal and unbroken,' and that he 'belonged there,'[89] perhaps a person with more respect for human life could, in fact, escape hell. If the reader had any access to the mind of Farida, who was raped and abandoned as a child, or to Insal, who selflessly loves a faceless child, would we still be without hope? Aziz creates a world where the system overpowers the individual, but the characters in her story do persist collectively as humans (although Amani pays the ultimate price). There are Riffraffs who argue that, 'People should unite and forget the Gate,' even though 'they couldn't offer any convincing alternatives, so everyone in the queue—those behind the barriers and the rest—refused to give up hope' in the queue and justice under the ruling regime.[90] The fact remains that convincing arguments may still be possible, but perhaps tomorrow. Nagy, a former revolutionary who appears to have given up hope, still 'wonder[s] what made people so attached to their new lives of spinning in orbit around the queue, unable to venture beyond it. People hadn't been idiots before they came to the Gate with their paperwork. There were women and men, young and old people, professionals and the working class.'[91] While death is the only deliverance that a moral degenerate like Otared can imagine, Tarek still wonders about life.

Visualizing tomorrow

Of course, literature is not the only medium to communicate dystopia. In summer 2016, P21 Gallery in London held an exhibition on the future of Palestine, featuring 15 artists' response to the dismal state of affairs in occupied Palestine today. The work spans various media, including video, audio, photography, sculpture, installations and paintings, and the artists are primarily from Palestine, Syria, and Jordan, but also from the wider diaspora and include three non-Palestinians. *Chapter 31: An Odd Piece of Research on the Many Virtues of the Oriental Imagination* takes its name from the chapter in Habiby's satirical novel, in which Saeed the Pessoptimist explains how resilience is a form of resistance under occupation only made possible by the Arab imagination. The exhibition was curated by the Sarha collective, an interdisciplinary platform created by Nadia Jaglom, a visual anthropologist, and Mai Kanaaneh, who has a background in philosophy. The artists tackle themes of resistance, oppression, confinement and violence, as well as geography, time and space. They illustrate how occupation is internalized and becomes a suffocating despair or even boredom, as

[88]Wedeen engages in ethnography to show how public symbols and rituals reproduce authoritarian power in Syria. See Wedeen, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).
[89]Rabie, *Otared*, 34.
[90]Aziz, *The Queue*, 90.
[91]Ibid.

well as show another layer of dispossession through the corrosive effects of neoliberal capitalism. However, they often do so with humour; the back cover of the exhibition catalogue states that while the London 'show was largely unsuccessful … receiving criticism for its "unsubtle portrayal" of the future of Palestine,' after what subsequently transpired in the region, as if predicting the events of the future, 'the exhibition took on some historic and ethnographic importance offering a window into the sentiments of the native peoples of the time'.[92]

Perhaps this is because the artists featured in *Chapter 31* have themselves all experienced oppression, confinement and violence—nearly all are refugees from 1948 and 1967; two are still living in camps in Jordan and Lebanon. And this oppression continues; the curators explained that although they 'wanted to open the show with all our artists [attending the London exhibition], numerous obstacles to their freedom of movement and the very challenging circumstances under which many of them are working prevented them from coming to the United Kingdom.'[93] The exhibition itself was curated in Palestine during the recent wave of knife violence, what Kanaaneh and Jaglom say 'is often pessimistically … or optimistically … referred to as 'The third intifada"'.[94] This reminds one of Habiby's ill-fated character Saeed the Pessoptimist, who voices neither hope nor expectation while living under horrific circumstances, which he also recognizes as absurd. The curators further remark that:

> [A] common thread in our discussions with the artists we met during our stay in Ramallah was that they were all tired of feeling as though they always had to justify their worth – and, at times, their very existence – by reiterating their historical belonging to the land. Most felt that they were up against competing narratives which collectively stripped them of their agency and ability to speak on their own terms about the complexity of Palestinian identity – and indeed [their] freedom to speak freely and without judgment about the future.[95]

Edward Said was also concerned about the invention of memory and place in relation to Palestine. He warned that memory is 'very much something to be used, misused and exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there for each person to possess and contain'.[96] He wondered how 'After hundreds of years of living in Europe … Zionist Jews could still feel that Palestine had stood still in time and was theirs, again despite millennia of history and the presence of actual inhabitants'.[97] Said further questioned why the desire for conquest and domination is so intrinsically linked with memory and geography, suggesting that perhaps it is because together they make 'possible the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography.'[98] *Chapter 31* challenges the dominant Israeli conceptions of time and space vis-à-vis Palestine—reaffirmed by Western colonialism and imperialism—by dislocating and then reconfiguring them.

[92] *Chapter 31: An Odd Piece of Research on the Many Virtues of the Oriental Imagination* (London: P21 Gallery, 2016).
[93] Email correspondence with Mai Kanaaneh and Nadia Jaglom on 16 August 2016.
[94] *Chapter 31*, 2016. 2.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Said, Edward. 'Invention, Memory, and Place' *Critical Inquiry*, 26(2) 2000: 175–192. 179.
[97] Ibid, 180.
[98] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 78.

Image 1. Utopia floor installation view, Chapter 31, P21 Gallery.

The Palestinian experience of simultaneously always being on your way somewhere and always being trapped is reflected in the artists' works, thus the curators divided the exhibition into general themes of utopian and dystopian, the former featured on the ground floor of the gallery and the latter in the basement.[99] Nevertheless, any distinction between utopia and dystopia breaks down under the weight of occupation, exile and the commodification of space, with one artist featured on both floors and others in-between. Furthermore, the utopian works are often more to do with reclaiming Palestine, even while unpacking the romanticism and idealization of its past.

Still, the utopian works are contradictory, reflecting both a desire for and a lack of agency amongst the artists. For example, take Samah Hijawi's 'Paradise Series,' which includes four collages, 'each compiled from personal photographs, images of classical Palestinian paintings, and magazine cut outs of exotic landscapes'.[100] This is not the retelling of an idyllic past, but the painful intersection of memory and loss as the foundations for an unstable future. 'An accompanying audio-track accentuates this harsh reality—an account of the defeated revolution through the experience of a martyred freedom fighter, Laila.'[101] As the curators explain, 'Utopia, then, takes on a unique form in our exhibition. This floor is not about falsifying the past, the present or the future as much as a leaving a space—however small it might seem—for hope and for change amidst the seemingly never-ending ending darkness.'[102]

[99]*Chapter 31*, 2016. 4.
[100]Sharaf, Rawan. 'Chapter 31 at P21 Gallery, London: An Odd Piece of Research on the Many Virtues of Oriental Imagination,' *Ibraaz*, 24 September 2016.
[101]Sharaf, *Ibraaz*, 2016
[102]*Chapter 31*, 2016. 4.

Image 2. Samah Hijawi, Paradise Series, 2013.

This kind of disruption is intentional, because any imaginary future also requires an imaginary past. Throughout the exhibition space:

> Visual cues pointed towards an intended time-shift, with the curators fixing extra CCTV cameras around the gallery space, which in turn was peppered with fabricated artefacts, from stamps and souvenir sculptures to excavated stones, all referred to as relics from a hypothetical "past" located in an equally hypothetical future.[103]

The curators of *Chapter 31* even imagined a past where Saeed the Pessoptimist is not the only Palestinian to have reached outerspace. As one reviewer remarks, the caption for a staged set of four butterfly stamps indicated that the insects were 'released by the Palestinian Authority to commemorate the safe return of the first Palestinian space exploration team … '[104]

The future that many of the dystopian works in *Chapter 31* imagine is critically engaged with the present; perhaps a reflection of the limited political space that Israeli and Palestinian leaders currently allow for political dissent. For example, a particularly bleak feeling of entrapment is 'explored in Rafat Asad's painting of an enormous black billboard blocking the view to a beautiful spring landscape, a horizon no longer visible beyond an advertisement that has no aspirational lifestyle to sell.'[105] A powerful statement on the bleak Palestinian future, it is also a painfully honest representation of neoliberal capitalism. Rose and Miller argue that neoliberalism's claim to neutrality means that any structural injustices are not accounted for, instead placing the agency (and thus also

[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid. 5.

the blame) on the individual.[106] Therefore, as Khalidi and Samour point out, the Palestinian Authority's attempt at neoliberal state-building during a time of occupation only undermines the national liberation agenda, leaving Palestinians without any hope for self-determination.[107] According to Merz, the same holds true of civil society: non-governmental organizations' 'emphasis on individualism, as well as the organization of the social domain around the notion of "enterprise," often leads to the further depoliticization and fragmentation of social relations and, in the case of Palestine, also to the potential further weakening of the collective resistance movement.'[108] In this way, Asad's painting illustrates that under neoliberalism, the dream of Palestinian nationhood is eclipsed by the ruling class's encouragement of empty capitalist consumption.

While Asad and several artists offer a more literal visualization of a future Palestine, others admitted that they struggled to realize a coherent future. As the curators explain:

> Amjad Ghannam's work "Forgotten in Parallel Time," for example, began as a figurative image of a caged man looking out to Al-Aqsa [Mosque], dedicated to a friend who has been detained for almost forty years in an Israeli jail (where Amjad also spent many years of his life). Gradually, however, he started adding more and more layers to the canvas, abstracting

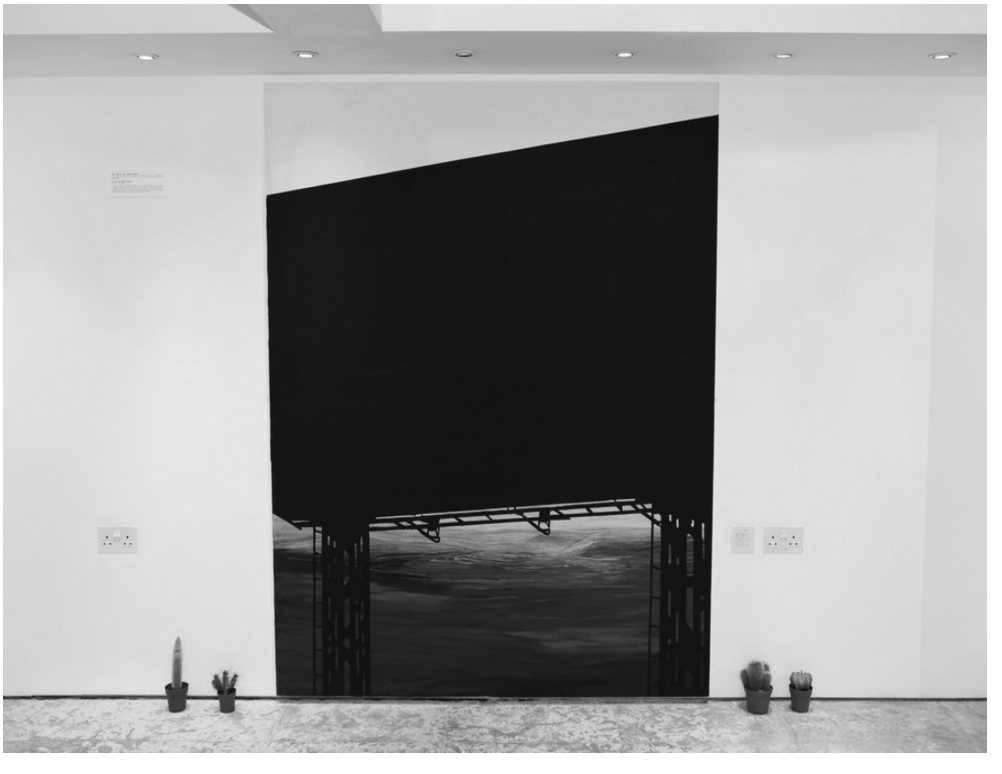

Image 3. Rafat Asad, Eltifaf Number 13, 2016.

[106]Rose, Nikolas and Peter Miller. 'Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government." The British Journal of Sociology 43(2) (June1992). 173–205.
[107]Khalidi, Raja and Sobhi Samour. 'Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement,' *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 40:2 (Winter 2011). 6–25.
[108]Merz, Sibille. '"Missionaries of the new era": Neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine,' *Race & Class*, 54(1) 2012: 50–66. 52.

> the image until the painting became what you see today: an image almost entirely consumed by a text which speaks of defeat, obscurity and dehumanisation.[109]

The most prominent feature of Ghannam's painting is a text written by fellow political prisoner Waleed Nimer Duka, including the words: 'Time flows in boxed spaces, is eaten away bit by bit, but the river of imprisonment is crossed thousands of times cutting through our bodies like a knife.'

Alaa Abu Asad's contribution includes a series of eight photographs that capture the contradictions of human sexuality and life under occupation: 'The scenes could just as easily be of torture, as of post-coital lethargy. The photographer's gaze is quietly oppressive as we find people turning away from the camera and struggling to remain hidden. There is an overtone of voyeurism through the grainy Qalandia shot, jarringly undercut by the artist's fear of being seen by a car which may or may not belong to a settler.'[110] Furthermore, Asad confronts head on some of the common stereotypes of Arab masculinity, particularly virility. 'A macabre, almost post-apocalyptic atmosphere is felt through images of various unpeopled sites in Palestine, which make reference not only to ethnically cleansed villages but [also] to a newly neoliberal Ramallah in which so many buildings are—in fact—empty.'[111] This series reminds the viewer of the Zionist propaganda that historically called Palestine 'a land without a people'.[112] By reinventing that myth as a critique of neoliberalism as well as the Palestinian political and economic elite, Asad is engaging in a powerful act of narration.

Reflections on the future

The writers and artists discussed above help to illustrate that, in hindsight, the Arab uprisings were more like spectacles than revolutions. Fawaz Gerges remarks in an early

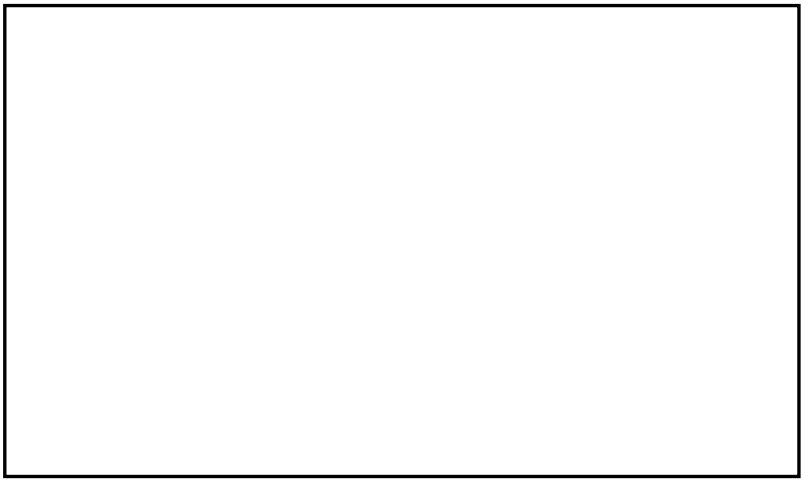

Image 4. Amjad Ghannam, Forgotten in Parallel Time, 2016.

[109]Ibid. 3.
[110]Ibid. 11.
[111]Ibid.
[112]Brownfeld, Allan C. 'Zionism at 100: The myth of Palestine as "A Land Without People,"' *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 1998.

Image 5. Alaa Abu Asad, Dystopia Series, 2016.

edited collection on the Arab Uprisings that revolutionary moments take time.[113] However, ten years on, that moment has arguably passed in the MENA region, with the exception of Tunisia, a country that has become a more successful democracy, but which is still waiting for social and economic empowerment.[114] In the case of Egypt, the neoliberal agenda still dominates state policy.[115] In the case of Palestine, occupation has only been further normalized by Israel's rapprochement with authoritarian Gulf states. While the mass public protests defied all odds, giving Arabs a sense of freedom and euphoria, not only did the totalitarian infrastructure in the region remain largely intact, but also the neoliberal paradigm. French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord argued that modern life itself is nothing but a collection of spectacles, where 'everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation'.[116] This rupture, or detachment, upsets the unity of life, although the fragments reconnect to create a '*separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at'.[117] Debord, however, also clarified that 'the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.'[118] This relation is only represented as the dominant model because the spectacle is an 'omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have *already been made*'.[119] Thus, there is a passive acceptance of the spectacle, which in turn 'aims at nothing other than itself'.[120] While literature and art may have a disruptive potential, the Arab uprisings themselves did little to transform the social relations of capitalism, showing how mass

[113]Gerges, Fawaz A. 'Introduction in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* edited by Ibid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[114]Tielens, Joris. 'Democracy isn't built in a day: The case of Tunisia,' Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 4 February-2020.
[115]Seee, for example, Joya, Angela. 'Neoliberalism, the state and economic policy outcomes in the Post-Arab Uprisings: The case of Egypt,' *Mediterranean Politics*, 22(3), 2017. 339–361
[116]Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (Trans.) (New York: Zone Books, 1994). 1.
[117]Ibid. 2.
[118]Ibid. 4.
[119]Ibid. 6.
[120]Ibid. 14.

protests alone cannot change a complex totalitarian infrastructure, even if these revolutionary acts were, in fact, able to transform the Arab psyche in profound ways. They were the ideal expression of a never-ending neoliberal present: as Debord noted: 'The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it itself is contradicted by a reversal of meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unitary it presents is divided'.[121] The spectacle prevails because even though our consumption unites us by dividing us into individuals, as consumers we are a unity that is disengaged from the production of social life. This results in a particular form of alienation that can appear to be active, when in reality it is passive.

The problem with euphoria is what comes next when things do not work out as planned: feelings of alienation and helplessness, as apparent in the proposed Egyptian mass suicide on Facebook. What is so striking about the novels selected is that choices in the imagined future are so limited. For those unwilling to resist, it is either death or waiting for the impossible (or in Habiby's case, outerspace is always a possibility). One continues to exist either by taking drugs or acting 'as if' the Gate was, in fact, benevolent and powerful, even though this hegemony is particularly unstable. The persistence of those waiting in the queue each day is perhaps the only real legitimation for the Gate to even continue in power. The future that Rabie portrays is certainly bleaker, because it offers nothing to wait for, despite love. Resistance is reduced to killing; even the popular music being produced in his dystopic future is based on the sounds of the mass slaughter of pigs.[122] Whereas in the future that Aziz imagines, everyday resistance is still possible—even within the queue—and people's desire to cope feeds the imagination. Although convincing arguments are still out of one's reach in her dystopia, they *could* one day be articulated. Ironically, because of their long history of loss and dispossession, the Palestinian artists in *Chapter 31* appear to be better positioned to imagine a more hopeful or utopian future. As Basma Ghalayini writes in the introduction to the recently published futuristic collection *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba*, despite 'the cruel present (and the traumatic past)' which holds such a grip over Palestinian lives, 'the disguise of science fiction,' the ability to escape, is not a dramatic change for Palestinians when their 'everyday life … is a kind of dystopia.'[123] Even the *Chapter 31* artists who do not have a clear visualization of the future of Palestine still partake in the effort to imagine a tomorrow, albeit a confused one.

Nevertheless, when all of these future dystopias are replete of violence, loss and oppression, the purpose of humanity looks bleak. One is reminded of the soliloquy in MacBeth (Act 5, Scene 5), when upon hearing about the death of his wife, the eponymous character indicates his indifference to everything:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

[121]Ibid. 54.
[122]Rabie, *Otared*, 78–80.
[123]Ghalayini, Basma. 'Introduction' in *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2019). x–xii.

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[124]

Of course, Macbeth is guilty of murder and tyranny and the Egyptian and Palestinian people are not; however, the quotation still resonates in the dystopias that the above authors and artists imagine. The publics' internalization of the Egyptian uprising's failure and the Palestinians' inability to secure liberation through war or diplomacy is clear in these artistic visions of the future. There appears to be a collective guilt that emerges in these works. Although extremely painful, this also indicates the possibility of a better future that can be co-constructed collectively. Since the arts allow for spaces to be created for both political engagement and social reflection, it is imperative to harness them as meaningful constructive spaces that are fortunately still open to most (but sadly not all) Egyptians and Palestinians.

Comparing these dystopias indicates that the Egyptian uprising was not, in fact, enough to sustain the kind revolutionary moment that Gerges refers to. Gramsci's approach to revolution is that it first requires a war of position to be waged in civil society, which includes not only social institutions like schools, mosques, media and the arts, but also the ideas that are refracted through them and how they are likely to be interpreted. Activists and scholars who were surprised at the repeated electoral successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, with its strong connections to civil society, obviously failed to appreciate the importance of this first revolutionary step. Because Gramcsi argued that only after the war of position is won, can a war of manoeuvre successfully take place:

> The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. The same thing happens in politics[125]

As Aziz wisely realized, the military regime in Egypt always maintained its line of defence. Furthermore, the moral legitimacy of religious institutions was eroded when al-Azhar and the Coptic Church failed to support the revolutionary movement. The Muslim Brotherhood's subsequent abuse of power and these formal religious institutions' support for the coup have turned many Egyptians away from religion, despite their needs. One young Egyptian woman told me that the youth no longer have any figure to look to for spiritual guidance, leaving them desperate.[126] Aziz believes that Egyptians 'will discover spiritual power inside themselves'.[127] However, it is unlikely that any revolutionary movement will ever be successful without working through civil society first, engaging with both religion and the arts.

[124]'Speech: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" by William Shakespeare,' Poetry Foundation, n.d. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56964/speech-tomorrow-and-tomorrow-and-tomorrow. Accessed 16 March 2020.
[125]Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers 2005). 235.
[126]Conversation with an Egyptian PhD student in Washington DC, 10 August 2016.
[127]Author interview with Basma Abdel-Aziz, 28 December 2016.