True vs. False

By STEPHAN GUTH

In November, the Tunisian committee for “Truth and Dignity” (*Hay’at al-ḥaqīqa wa’l-karāma*, Institution Vérité et Dignité, IVD) starts its first **Public Hearings** of the victims of Ben Ali’s dictatorship. Stipulated already three years ago by the new, post-revolutionary Constitution as a pillar of the envisaged process of a “transitional justice,” the hearings are expected to unveil the political repression committed under the authoritarian regime and pave the way for some kind of national reconciliation. As the name of the committee makes clear, access to “the truth” (*al-ḥaqīqa*) is considered a matter of human “dignity” (*karāma*), and both are regarded essential for the envisaged re-building of Tunisian society on a sound and enduring basis. The uprisings of 2010/11 had shown that larger parts of the Arab population were fed up with the lies of their old regimes. Too often had people experienced the discrepancy between what the regimes told them and what they actually were seeing, hearing, feeling, going through, and too often had those who dared to ask for the truth or unveiled it suffered persecution, torture, death. In their revolt they had shown that they were longing for a new beginning based on truth, reliability, honesty, justice and, thus, dignity, rather than on humiliation and oppression and on what everybody anyway knew were fabrications, institutionalized fake representations of reality.

Five years after the “Arab Spring,” many things *can* be said openly—and *are* in fact being said quite frankly now, especially in Tunisia where there is a common understanding that true justice is indispensable and a lively culture of—often heated—discussion has developed. An exhibition like **Éveil d’une nation / Ṣaḥwat umma** even *encourages* public debate on history, historical truth, and, thus, national identity, as these issues have to be negotiated on a broad, democratic basis, without taboos. In a similar vein, the public hearings themselves and the president of the IVD, Mrs Sihem Ben Sedrine, are heavily criticized, as is also the Economic Reconciliation Act, against which a whole opposition movement forms, reproaching it as a false, hypocritical measure, a lie in itself, not really aiming at lifting the veil from silenced truths, which, critics hold, actually do not need to be uncovered as they are known to everybody and obvious anyway; rather, they say, the Act is meant simply to find a pretext to release unpunished those who have done wrong. Instead of dressing the gesture up as a contribution to “national unity” and “tolerance” in society, the culprits should not be forgiven but pay back their guilt [**Manīsh msāmih**].

While debates like this are possible now it has also become more difficult for those in power to conceal the truth and to fabricate narratives that people would buy. Announcements made and information given by **The Voice from Above** or other mighty ones are constantly checked, critically scrutinized and commented on, contested, countered by an ever-growing civil society—too deep is the imprint that the pre-revolutionary era has left on almost everybody. Five years after the “Arab Spring,” doubt is still common and suspicion very widespread, not only concerning ‘trivialities’ one would simply gossip about, such as news circulating about **Football** or TV stars, much of which may be fake [**Celebrities**], but also with regard to much more serious issues, like, for instance, the Coptic girl who first

mysteriously disappears [↗**Disappearances**], then, some weeks later, in a YouTube video, declares her conversion to, and sincere belief in, Islam [↗**Conversions**]. The story provides ample material for speculation: Was she kidnapped or went into hiding herself? Did she convert willingly or was she forced to do so and then also publish the clip?

Awareness of the possible falseness of all kinds of narratives, especially when issued from the authorities [↗**The Voice from Above**], has remained strong, as reality is still widely distorted, especially in Egypt, mostly by those in power (and their collaborators), to deny responsibility in anything that has gone wrong and isn't as it should or could be. When there is a shortage in Egypt in ↗**Baby Milk** and the army is able to remedy the problem by miraculously providing milk from their own holdings (!); when the ↗**Red Sea Islands** quietly disappear from the new school atlas after the regime has “sold” them to Saudi Arabia to get some foreign currency; when the authorities stubbornly deny forced ↗**Disappearances** (Minister of the Interior, Magdī ‘Abd al-Ghaffār: “not even a single case” (BARAKĀT, MICHAELSON, *al-Tahrīr*), continuing to issue such statements even during the Regeni affair, saying that all these cases are false allegations [↗**The Suspect Foreigner**]; when all kinds of reasons are put forward for the notorious traffic constipation instead of pointing to the real cause, the many private automobiles [↗**Zahma**]; when president al-Sīsī blames earlier governments for having failed to correct economic imbalances so that everything could build up and result in the current ↗**Dollar Crisis**; when a simple electrical short is said to have caused the big ‘Ataba fire [↗**Disasters**]...—in all these cases, many voices make themselves heard that call the official narratives in question, sometimes producing hard counter-evidence, sometimes digressing into conspiracy theories. It is clear to almost everybody that the regime has inherited from its predecessors [↗**Past vs. Present**] various techniques of presenting its own doings, re-interpreting facts and blaming others, camouflaging and white-washing, techniques of producing false evidence that are used even in the more liberal Tunisia as pretexts with the aim of containing or silencing opposition, see, e.g., the—invented—accusation of possessing drugs that regularly serves to harass and imprison “rebellious” activists [↗**Hashish**]
—clearly a legacy of Ben ‘Alī’s repressive police state.

Especially in Egypt, hardly anybody believes in the regime’s ‘success stories’ anymore, although they continue to be spread in the media as the ‘truth’ about official great projects. From state-controlled *Radio Maṣr*’s end-of-year review, for instance, one can get the impression that 2016 was a year of amazing achievements and Egypt is striding strong towards a shining future (cf., e.g., also ‘ABD AL-ḤĀFĪZ). However, comments in social media on such boasting reflect deep disbelief and disillusionment. Suspicion and doubt are also recurrent motifs in many movies. Significantly, those who are shown there to be sceptical about official narratives and/or reveal the truth behind them, are not limited to intellectuals, like the smart, unorthodox popular TV preacher, imam Ḥātim (*Mawlānā*), who not only supports a fresh, modern and humane interpretation of Islam instead of a blind belief in old rules that may be based on forged *ḥadīths*, but also finds out that acts of cruel terrorism, like blowing a bomb in a mosque, densely populated during prayer, in reality aren’t the work of fanatic radicals or collaborators of foreign powers seeking to destabilize glorious Egypt [↗**The Suspect Foreigner**], as official media would present it, but plotted by state security (*amn al-dawla*) itself with the aim of having a pretext to come down on all kinds of opposition and critics. Less intellectual, but gifted with an equally unflinching sense for the truth behind

false narratives and façades is the clever police officer Nūr al-Dīn in *The Nile Hilton Incident* who cannot but follow his detective instinct and in this way discovers, bit by bit, the truth about a murdered prostitute and the unholy alliance between the rich businessmen Shafiq Bey—dressed in immaculate white, as though innocent—and the President who is protecting him, the killer, from behind the scenes, always remaining invisible. Nūr al-Dīn’s boss, instead of instructing him to seriously investigate the case, orders him to register the woman’s death as a suicide and, *khalāṣ*, close the file: “The case is too big for us, it will only bring us in trouble.” – Even less educated than imam Ḥātim and police officer Nūr al-Dīn are the protagonists of *Nawwāra* and *Abadan lam nakun affālan*, the first ‘pure’ fiction, the second a documentary, both about women from slum areas [↗*‘Ashwā’iyyāt*] who are struggling hard to survive in the absence of a man providing for them. Neither Nawwāra nor Nādiya belong to that watchful, mostly intellectual opposition that forms the basis of regime-critical activists. And yet, the movies make clear that also those representatives of the broad masses, “the people,” who are toiling to get along in difficult times, experience that the state’s promises cannot be trusted in [↗*“The System” vs. “The People”*]. In Nawwāra’s case, the SCAF’s announcements to redistribute the enormous wealth accumulated by the pre-revolutionary regime turn out to be elusive, and false evidence produced by a rich intrigant will bring the innocent heroine behind the bars of ↗*Prison*. As for the single mother of three, Nādiya, it is the experience of the discrepancy between the colourful descriptions coming from the radio and the harsh reality of everyday life that has taken away from her any illusion that there could be some truth in official discourses—every moment of lived reality proves these discourses to be deceptive. – Most lies seem to be produced by the regime and its representatives, especially also the police [↗*The Policeman Criminal*]. Quite often, however, also religious authorities are shown as producers of lies, luring people into the illusion that there could be another, better world. Normative Islam is shown as all-pervasive for instance in *Ākhir ayyām al-madīna* where downtown Cairo [↗*Downtown/Centre-ville*] is flooded by the roaring of ubiquitous loudspeakers and much public space is covered by prayer mats on Fridays; those who prostrate themselves in devotion seem to think that religion could be a remedy; in fact, however, they simply add to the picture of overall decay, they contribute to producing this decay. *Mawlānā* offers an enlightened version of Islam as an alternative that may save the true spirit of Islam from its unhealthy interpretation by the religious establishment who does not question the reliability of the sources it argues from (authentic *ḥadīths* or forged ones?). In the end, however, also this rationalist—“Mu’tazili”—, ↗*‘Self-help’* alternative is shown to have little chance to win over, as the hero, imam Ḥātim, falls prey to a plot designed by state security in alliance with ‘orthodox’ Islam.

There is widespread awareness also about the standard *techniques* that the authorities as well as the rich and mighty use to disguise the truth and their true—criminal—identities [↗*Dual Identities / Masking*]: it is, as a critical voice has it, a combination of somehow managing to pass off “the true crime of state propaganda” as journalism where the elites can appear as benign benefactors working for the benefit of the people [↗*Father Figures*] and, on the other side, blaming and criminalizing as “forces of the Evil” the numerous alleged enemies of the country (KHALIFA), both external [↗*The Suspect Foreigner*] and internal, those “enviers” (*al-ḥāsidiūn*) who conspire to deprive the people of the trust in their leadership. ‘Evidence’ of their activities is easily found or produced to have a pretext to sack

potentially troublesome elements, and in this way often the true, faithful patriots are accused of being traitors, foreign agents, or conspirators handing the country to the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, Israel, Qatar, the US, ...

Thus, “those on top” are able to create bubbles of faked facts, nets of false information that are as difficult to penetrate as the thick walls of the **↗Gated Communities / Compounds**, which look beautiful from outside but conceal very different truths [**↗Beautiful vs. Ugly**]. The more there is concealed, however, and the more you feel that something is wrong behind those façades, the greater the suspicion and the desire to know the truth. This desire is still widely unbroken in many citizens ever since the uprisings, has perhaps even been assured by the successful toppling of the old mendacious regimes, and so has the courage to search for the truth and protest any attempt to obscure or hide it.

This includes, in Tunisia, unflinching resistance against heavy political-social, and moral, pressure to approve of the work of the Committee for Truth and Dignity, installed by a democratic government. To its critics, reconciliation is not the *Hay'a*'s true aim, and the public hearings aren't a fair deal—a fact that one has to say clearly and openly [**↗Manīsh msāmiḥ**]. In Egypt, too, honesty and frankness are underlined as good character traits, in social media as well as in movies. In *The Nile Hilton Incident*, for instance, Nūr al-Dīn's old father earns the spectators' sympathy by admonishing his son not to lie about his own petty crimes. In *Mawlānā*, TV imam Ḥātim's 'heroism' is based on the fact that he doesn't mince matters, always calls things names, and dares to challenge the political as well as religious establishment. Significantly, honesty is always with the representatives of the people or those siding with them, while falseness, deviousness, and artful deception typically are ascribed to those belonging to the upper classes [**↗“The System” vs. “The People”, ↗Affluence vs. Destitution**]. Human rights activists who draw attention to hasty legal proceedings, the evident suppression of truth and flagrant violations of the right to a fair trial, both in civil and military courts [**↗Court Trials**], operate in this same 'heroic', idealist spirit, as do commentators on **↗Social Media** platforms, like the numerous Twitter hashtags and warning apps, or all those who aim to serve Truth and Justice by documenting lived reality with the help of their **↗Mobile Phones** as evident proof of the falseness of official narratives.

It is important to remain attentive and help the Truth to be heard. In general, its advocates strive to achieve this with non-violent means. In some cases, however, even a feature film like *Mawlānā* shows some understanding for less moderate explosions of indignation. For instance, when the regime-friendly producers of the popular TV show *Ifham dīnak* (“Get to know your religion”) set up a highly sensitive topic—Shia—for live discussion, with the aim of driving imam Ḥātim into a trap so they may get rid of the popular celebrity's provocative analyses, and when they then suddenly interrupt the program when Ḥātim says that God is there for *everybody* and that also Shia is Islam [**↗In Islam, ...**], the spectators are fully on Ḥātim's side when he cannot see another way-out as to strike back against “the System” with his fists, knocking his interlocutor down to prevent the intriguers from silencing *himself*. He has to do so, for giving up resistance would mean to let the regime's intrigues, brainwashing and criminalizing strategies win the battle. Remaining silent would mean to give up one's dignity also when, on the day of the Rāb'a massacre, official discourse denounces the Muslim Brotherhood, again, as the dangerous devil seeking to destabilize the Egyptian nation, while the truth is: “There are no devils among us” (WAGUIH). Steadfast resistance against such

demonization is not only important in dealing with the state, however. Rather, the authorities' practices are replicated by many others, for instance the rich and mighty who manage to trick the eponymous heroine of *Nawwāra* and let her, the innocent and honest, hard-working woman, go to prison, or the anonymous—obviously Islamist—callers in the documentary *al-Ṣalāt wa'l-ma'rakah / La vallée du sel* who come up with allegedly true evidence for a Coptic family's guilt (they shall have forced Muslims into ↗**Conversions** to Christendom), and this false accusation serves them to blackmail the family and to self-authorize death sentences.

Enlightening one's fellow citizens about the truth and alerting them to all kinds of lies and techniques of painting fake pictures of reality—lies and techniques that many evidently still are unaware of—is a major incentive in much of cultural production. Here, the authors frequently rely on satire and/or fiction to highlight the contrast between false appearances and the reality behind them, often by simply juxtaposing or paralleling evidently contradictory impressions. For example, when the protagonists of *Nawwāra*, *The Nile Hilton Incident* or the semi-autobiographical *Ākhir ayyām al-madīna* traverse the city in a taxi or on a motorcycle, the camera typically zooms in on filthy details and shows ubiquitous misery and decay [↗**Garbage**]; at the same time, the accompanying sound track reproduces the latest news from the radio, almost cynically heralding the Government's recent laudable achievements and the President's always beneficial deeds [↗**The Voice from Above**].

The beautiful, modern 'paradises' of the ↗**Gated Communities** / Compounds are shown to be home to evil characters, often close to the regime and/or involved in politics, whose records are not at all as clean as the compounds they inhabit, as they turn out, in the course of the events, to be involved in theft, corruption, murder, ... (*The Nile Hilton Incident*, *Nawwāra*, *Fawqa mustawā 'l-shubuhāt*). When these people speak, their language sounds convincing, smooth, generous, benign—but beware of them, they are clever hypocrites, as cunning and vicious and false as also many 'show-off' Muslims (in *Nawwāra*, for instance, a nurse in a hospital bears the promising name Mu'mina, i.e., the "believer", but her behaviour is far from being an example of Islamic humanism), and, of course, representatives of the government: in *Nawwāra*, the SCAF makes promises to the people (to gain popularity and support) but does not keep these promises; and when, in Tunisia, president Sebsi orders the return of a Bourguiba statue and imitates the popular leader by sitting behind the same desk as the public idol, etc. [↗**Father Figures**], social media are quick to mock such feigned reverence as transpicuous hypocrisy, seeking to ingratiate himself with the people without really working for their well-being.

Satire is practiced particularly in YouTube channels, where official narratives and their lofty language, but also many other established discourses, like that of commercials, or TV dramas and the popular Ramadan series, are constantly played with and exposed to humorous questioning through ironic parody [↗**Alsh**]. They are sites of claiming back the word from those who tend to monopolize it and thus dominate everyday life with *their* versions of reality [↗**Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**]. YouTube channels like Aḥmad Buḥayrī's *Il-Usbū' fī kīs* ("The Week in a Bag") offer witty comments on the top news of the week, including the ↗**Baby Milk** affair or the ↗**Dollar Crisis** in Egypt. Hishām 'Afīfī's YouTube show *al-Taḥlīl al-istrātīgī* ("Strategic Analysis") comes with hilarious parodies of advertisements and video clips that replace the original texts with unrelated content, alerting the audience to the difference between appearance and meaning and disclosing the logic of discourses one tends

to become used to, as potentially deceitful, illusionary, contradictory, absurd. A few even dare to oppose the propaganda depicting Giulio Regeni as a spy [↗[The Suspect Foreigner](#)]. YouTube channels typically also mock Tunisian president Sebsi's attempts to assume the role of the 'father of the nation,' or Egyptian president al-Sīsī's way of addressing the people like a gracious, benevolent patriarch talking to his children [↗[Father Figures](#)]. But the people are not the president's children, they are citizens with rights and obligations! And would such a father put his sons and daughters into jail?! [↗[Prison](#)]. YouTubers also target paternalism in general, and when they imitate and exaggerate they often do so also to inspire self-criticism on the side of the 'children' who often accept such relations as a given and continue to live their double lives [↗[Young vs. Settled](#), ↗[Dual Identities / Masking](#)]. The channels serve as showcases that seek to enlighten and increase transparency—*Shaffāf* "transparent", the title of the online magazine of the Egyptian Universities Network (FAHMI), could be the name of many YouTube channels, too.

Accordingly, the tone in these productions typically tends to be very daring and outspoken. When the government claims to have solved the housing problem, one comment agrees: "Yes, by building more prisons!" Similarly, when Sisi, applauded by masses of "Long live Egypt" shouters, provocatively asks: "Where is the youth?", the answer in an *#al-shabāb fēn* Twitter message is: "Behind bars or buried in their graves!" (TWITTER) [↗[Disappearances](#), ↗[Prison](#)]. In Tunisia, a corresponding audacity is possible now even outside the Internet in the non-virtual public. In Egypt, however, it can unfold only on YT channels that are operated from abroad so that their producers can feel safe.

Those who stay in the country have to resort to more subtle satire or to protect themselves behind the masks of fiction. In fiction, it is right, you use 'avatars' and therefore somehow hide yourself behind a 'false' identity. Nevertheless, you can tell what you think is the truth, as the truth of fiction may even be 'truer' than that of real life. It is for this reason that the young theatre enthusiasts from a poor Tunisian village, portrayed in *al-Hufra* ("The Pit"), do not feel they betray themselves or lie to their audiences when they dress as clowns or jugglers or give puppet plays; on the contrary, "In pantomime, we play [ultimately] what we are, our own experiences, our lives, our suffering" [↗[Dual Identities / Masking](#)]. It is probably for the same reason, the 'truth of fiction', that YouTubers, too, irrespective of whether they are acting from inside the country or from abroad, choose to appear as serious news presenters, scientific consultants, or talk show masters, or use muppets to play 'typical' roles, from the policeman to the jealous fiancée, from the poor witty *shābb* to the President himself. The 'falseness' of fiction allows the agents to address sensitive topics, it empowers the weak and provides immunity for the vulnerable. No wonder, then, that critics of a political system that is experienced as false and criminal frequently resort to *crime fiction* to express their views, and that polit-thrillers like *The Nile Hilton Incident* are flourishing: the detective-hero who takes upon himself the task of investigating and revealing the truth against all attempts of "the system" to conceal it, provides an ideal role model for everyone who is convinced that s/he is being cheated.

With the aim of self-protection, the creative invention of fictional 'alter egos' and fictive plots comes close to what other, less political groups—LGBT, Christians, converts [↗[LGBT](#), ↗[Conversions](#)—have been practicing for a long time already, and continue to practice in real, everyday life: in order to protect themselves against a society that is hostile

to their true identities, many conceal, and have to conceal, their true sexual identity or religious orientation so that their everyday life often is a ‘false’ life, a life lived in travesty in which they practice self-censoring, while their ‘real’ life is their second life, lived out in remote places and/or in hiding, at night, and often only for a short time (*Travesties*).

Reality and fiction both show that there are good reasons to be on one’s guard. It can be extremely dangerous to be too outspoken about one’s political conviction, sexual leanings, religious belonging, and fear is in place indeed. In Egypt, examples of political opposition in prison, disappeared without trace, and/or killed, abound [[↗Disappearances](#), [↗Prison](#)], a situation that is also reflected in a movie like *The Nile Hilton Incident*: the closer detective-hero Nūr al-Dīn comes to the truth the more his life is in danger; luckily, he survives several attempts to assassinate him, but he learns about witnesses who were killed, and finds a colleague tortured because he did not obey his superior’s instructions to close the case. Even in Tunisia where people enjoy unprecedented freedom, political expression is threatened by a politicized and repressive security and juridical system inherited from the Ben Ali era. Moreover, “morally reprehensible” acts such as “cohabitation outside marriage,” “indecent exposure” or “adultery” are still treated as criminal offenses and punished with harsh prison sentences, applying pre-revolutionary law that has remained unchanged. The rappers of *Sawt al-shāri’ / Cloch’Art* are well aware, and afraid, of this, and the story, told in Leyla Bouzid’s *Alà ḥallat ‘aynī* (As I Open My Eyes), of the young rebellious singer Farah who simply wants to be herself and “live life to the full,” but then gets detained and tortured, emerging as a broken person, is all but unrealistic, as police forces in Tunisia still regularly act as “morality police” (BOUKHAYATIA) [[↗Freedom vs. Constraint](#)] and interpreting alternative life-styles as potential threat to national security [[↗Security vs. Fear](#)]. It is in the same spirit that civilians in Egypt act as self-appointed guardians of public morality and, hence, supporters of state authorities [[↗The Honourable Citizen](#)], denouncing ‘offenses’ and providing ‘evidence’ that allows the state to put the ‘culprits’ on trial [[↗Court Trials](#)]. Social pressure and state repression are paralleled by acts of aggression from Islamist groups, as documented in *al-Ṣalāt wa’l-ma’raka / La Vallée du Sel* (Prayer and Battle / The Valley of Salt), where anonymous callers try to blackmail the owner of a Christian guesthouse, or when converts are forced to ‘repent’ [[↗Conversions](#)].

So, it makes sense, in many respects, to continue to hide, live one’s true self in secret, behind a mask that conforms to the norms—political, religious, sexual—of society, the state, religious authorities or violent groups, and to remain silent, practice self-censorship, and think of ways of “tricking the system” [[↗Tricking the System / Tricked by the System](#)]. On the other hand, while self-protection is necessary and legitimate, many think that it is still equally important, or even more so, to insist on the truth and making it visible and heard—how else will it be possible to prevent that larger parts of the people believe in the all-pervasive official narratives and echo them faithfully? And how else can normative society and religion be changed so as to allow the truth to unfold in freedom?

Insisting on the truth is imperative however also for historical reasons. Isn’t authenticity a precondition of national and cultural self-determination, and wouldn’t tacit acceptance of lies and taboos be tantamount to betraying the old ideals of a sovereign nation and those pioneers who made enormous efforts to enhance *real* independence? The great Tahar Cheriaa, for example, incessantly worked to “free the screens” of Tunisian (and Arab)

cinema; for him, romantic and unrealistic movies meant a continuation of unhealthy lying while the countries needed authentic approaches, observing the truths and needs of real life (*Tahar Cheriaa: Taḥt ṣilāl al-bāwbāb/ A l'ombre du baobab*). The cineastic homage to the 'father' of Tunisian cinema comes as a strong reminder of a great tradition that should not be betrayed in the present [↗**Past vs. Present**].

As Tunisia and Egypt are struggling again now, in the post-Arab Spring years, for a new beginning, the historical perspective is at the same time relevant for the future. For the new, post-revolutionary societies, too, should be built on truth, not on lies; the new nations will have to rest on reliable, trustworthy foundations. It is in this spirit that the Committee for Truth and Dignity, in spite of its critics, starts the public hearings in Tunisia, and it is with the similar project of a realistic assessment of the present in mind that Egyptian movies like *Abadan lam nakun atfālān* or *Ākhir ayyām al-madīna* contrast official narrative [↗**The Voice from Above**] with visual evidence, weighing the latter against the former: in order to meet the future we have to know, reliably, where we are now. In the same vein, numerous productions give proof of the wish, on the part of their authors, of knowing yourself and being authentic. Thus, the young men in the Tunisian quasi-documentary *al-Ḥufra / La fosse* underline that playing theater may be difficult, yes; but in order to follow your talent and passion, i.e., truly be yourself, you have to do it, irrespective of all obstacles. ↗**Language**, too, is discussed as a matter of authenticity. For many writers, the local varieties of Arabic—Egyptian *ʿammiyya* and Tunisian *dāriġa*—or even Berber (Tamazight) appear as the more natural language and can, therefore, help to live one's true self. In general, to find out who you really are and to learn to discern "your real self [from] your false self," Egyptian Muḥammad ṬĀHĀ advises *il-Khurūġ ʿan il-naṣṣ*, i.e., to think "out of the box" and look at things, and yourself, not through others' normative lenses but your own, and always be aware that your feelings may simply conform to conventions or to what others expect of you. In contrast, but with the similar aim of helping his fellow citizens to be truly themselves [↗**Self-help**], Muṣṭafā ḤUSNĪ suggests an "Islamic way," given that Islam, as a religion from the East, can certainly claim to be more authentic than imported, Western forms of life. For the same reason, the celebration of ↗**Valentine's Day** is rejected by some as a kind of self-denial, the donning of a false, unauthentic identity. It is, without doubt, also a major reason for the continued success of Tunisian author Khawla ḤAMDĪ's novel *Fī qalbī ʿunthā ʿibriyya* ("A Hebrew Woman in My Heart"). Readers do not mind that the role models offered in the melodramatic text—conversion to Islam, clinging to Islam even in a non-Islamic environment, fighting for the Palestinian cause—testify to a rather traditional understanding of Islam, quite different from the unconventional interpretation of Islam propagated by Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī (and also his fictional counterpart, popular TV imam Ḥātim in *Mawlānā*). However, all three share the fact that they go for Islam rather than some Western philosophy or ideology [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**], and all three also are eager to stimulate in their audience a *conscious*, rationally well-reflected adoption of their suggestions [↗**In Islam, ...**]: they offer concrete and positive examples of 'lived' authenticity, and they all *explain* why their suggestions are good, and better than others. In this way the audiences are also assured of the correctness and superior moral value of 'true, genuine' Islam. Unlike the normative political system and the religious establishment (but also Islamist ideology), who demand unquestioned loyalty and obedience and prescribe specific ways of thinking and

acting, these versions of Islam opt for a smooth, enlightened way, counting on open-minded discussion and insight into the verifiable truth of their arguments—very different from the falseness of the Voice from Above and the blind submission demanded by the ubiquitous roaring loudspeakers.

The need to find and live one's true identity is emphasized together with pointing out the negative consequences of not being able to do so. The Egyptian documentary *Abadan lam nakun atfālan* tells, among others, the story of a boy from a slum area who, when still a child, earned some money as a prostitute, then continued as a gay when reaching puberty. His elder brother, having internalized conservative society's contempt for homosexuals, feels he must restore the family's honour and suffers twice: because of the 'shame' brought about on the family by his gay brother and because he thinks he will have to kill this brother—*his* brother. The gay brother himself, already addicted to drugs, goes into hiding and, perhaps, commits **⚡Suicide**. Many **⚡LGBT** people who, due to social pressure, cannot 'come out' experience similar challenges. And so does young Khālid in *Sheikh Jackson*. He has to conceal his fervent admiration for Michael Jackson because his father calls the pop icon an "effeminate" (*mukhannath*) and forbids the son to dress, sing and dance like the idol he is so fond of. In order to 'cure' the son from his 'aberrance' the father entrusts him to a friend, a devoted shaykh, who instructs him in Islam, and he becomes an imam. The movie stages the psychological trauma arising from the incompatibility of a conservative Islam and Khālid's enduring admiration for Michael Jackson, an unhealthy and painful conflict that is only solved, in the end, with the help of a **⚡Psychiatrists**. The solution consists, for the son as well as for the father, in accepting the possibility, and moral innocuousness, of a 'merged' identity—Muslim imam *and* pop enthusiast—, a solution very much in the spirit of Muḥammad ṬĀHĀ's advice to think "out of the box" (*il-Khurūg 'an il-naṣṣ*): norms of all kind can be harmful and cause a lot of psychological damage because they are artificial and may prevent you from discovering and living your true self.

The reconciliation between father and son at the end of *Sheikh Jackson* shows: In the same way as movies dramatize the negative consequences of social pressure, they also can offer positive examples of how the conflicts between true and false identities can be overcome. The Tunisian movie *Corps étranger* has a **⚡Dancing** scene in which the three dancers—a male and two women—all give in, for a moment, to the natural impulses they feel (and thus allow for the truth of sexual and emotional attraction between them to unfold). For a short moment of freedom from the constraints of society's false norms, an atmosphere of happiness and fulfilment dominates. (But then, the male [!] protagonist the "experiment"/testing out (where are the limits?) is soon interrupted: finds the tension between internalized sexual role models and his actual experience too difficult to bear—and leaves the dancing floor) [**⚡Male vs. Female**]. Similarly, the 25-year-old Tunisian protagonist of *Nhibbik, Hādī / Hēdi* ("I Love You, Hēdi") who, in his 'official' life, is a "lie" because he conceals his true nature, is able to live his true identity and moments of hitherto unknown happiness with a liberal woman in a **⚡Tourist Resorts**; but in the end he, too, the male, does not find the courage to break with his normal, false life and leave the country for France (he is married to a conservative woman, who was his mother's choice, not his own, and has the poorly-paid and little-giving job of a traveling sales representative). The conflict is symbolic of the whole of Tunisia at the crossroads: should one prefer the 'safe' way of tradition or dare to find and

live one's true self? The film shows some understanding for Hédi's decision (especially because a rupture with his previous life would cause much harm to his loving wife); at the same time, however, it insinuates that, in the long run, ignoring one's true feelings and continuing as ever will not pay out and, perhaps, cause even greater harm. And, as also the documentary *Travesties* demonstrates (following cross-dressers into a disco): the act of liberating oneself from the constraints of everyday masking can be truly ecstatic...

Thus, while finding the truth is necessary for several reasons, and can be rewarding in many respects, it may not only be difficult to discover and reveal it, but sometimes also almost impossible. The polit-thriller *The Nile Hilton Incident*, for instance, ends on a pessimistic note: when the detective-policeman Nūr al-Dīn (his name translates as "Light of the World") has successfully gathered all he needed to find out who was the murderer of the woman in the Nile Hilton, and in this way brought light into the details of the whole network of "the system," his superior (who collaborated with the Ancien Régime) uses the revolutionary turmoils to set fire on the car of the killer (a member of the *amn al-dawla*, the security police), so that it burns down together with the latter's body. Other evidence, too, is destroyed in the fire the angry revolting masses set on Nūr al-Dīn's police station. So, how to prove the crimes committed by the old régime? — The truth is controlled by the régime, and thus lost for the common people, also in Aḥmad Khālīd TAWFĪQ's vision *Mithla Ikārūs* ("Like Icarus"). The novel tells the story of a man who can foresee the future. His knowledge about how things will develop due to the mismanagement of affairs by the régime in the present [↗**Hope = Hell (Dystopia)**] is too dangerous for the regime. So the Cassandra-like prophet is kept under custody ("as a strategic treasure") and declared as "mad"—but the intelligence is shared with the Pentagon...

Also, when counter-evidence becomes too overwhelming, the régime may choose to confess that something is not as it should be—but only partially. This makes it difficult for critics to accuse them of denying or distorting the truth, as they may seem transparent, not concealing anything. The Egyptian TV series *Fawqa mustawà 'l-shubuhāt* ("Beyond Doubt"), for example, does have some scenes in a women's prison. The message to the audience: look, Egypt is a liberal country where censorship allows to show such scenes and where women prisoners are treated quite well. What is not said, in the meantime, is that actual prison cells are overcrowded and dirty and that actual inmates definitively aren't in good shape after weeks of detention. — On other occasions, too, the régime is eager to demonstrate that they do not deny obvious shortages, failures, difficulties, crises; rather, they are well aware of that all and take up the challenges with determination. At the Cairo book fair, for example, a series of round-table discussions is arranged under the heading *al-Thaqāfa fī muwājahā* ("Facing the challenges of culture" or "Culture under scrutiny"). It's like stealing potential critics' thunder: nobody will be able to accuse the state (as the fair's organizer) of trying to sweep problems under the carpet. On the podium, however, only selected guests deliver their—long and harmless—speeches, and there are security forces present to prevent any voice from the public (if any) from becoming too critical...

In Tunisia, things look quite different from how they are in Egypt. There are the ↗**Public Hearings** of the victims of Ben Ali's dictatorship, and there is much public discussion also about what is going on in the country right now, about current politics and the developments in post-revolutionary society. Yet the first impression of a—comparatively—open battlefield

may also be deceptive, as the fighters on this battlefield are aware that the battleground is also a minefield: the freer you may feel to raise a topic and/or to accuse someone, the more you become aware of the explosiveness of the issue and the damages your intervention may cause. Thus, there is much self-censorship, as many shy away from becoming the one who may be held responsible for the eruption of a social conflict in a situation where national unity and social harmony are at stake. Nevertheless, many others think that the truth about past injustice and present ills *has* to be confessed, even if this may mean risking to lose things or persons who are dear to you.

The Revolutionaries themselves are no exemption—they, too, may have committed wrong, and if they have done so, this should be confessed, to make discussion about it possible and avoid another form of injustice—the injustice of self-righteousness winners. *Ghadwa hayy* | *Demain dès l'aube* (Burning Hope) makes this point. Its plot re-enacts key scenes from the Revolution and their moral-ethical consequences. During the uprisings, an adolescent activist was trapped by a policeman and subsequently raped. Two young women intervened and prevented the worst. However, in defense of the boy, one of them used an iron bar and, in her turn, almost beat the policeman to death. When the humiliated angry boy wanted to finish him, the other woman activist stopped him, and they left. The policeman survived, but only as a cripple. The movie stages the impact of the past on the present most impressively: the woman who used the iron bar discovers that the man she is in love with, is the son of the policeman she made into a cripple. She feels full of guilt and finally dares to confess the truth to her beloved, knowing that this probably will mean the end of their relationship. Leaving, she kisses the man in a way reminding of the way her friend, the other activist, kissed the infuriated boy to stop him from kicking and finishing the policeman after the rape. Earlier on, the two women had found out about the boy's death: unable to overcome the trauma of the rape, he had first radicalized himself (he considered leaving for the IS in Syria) and was then killed by a mine when training in the desert. – The truth is cruel and hard to deal with, because it reveals responsibilities and raises myriad ethical questions...

But it *has* to be told, nonetheless. And, as, for instance, the Tunisian documentary *Sawt al-shāri'* | *Cloch'Art* makes clear, the younger generation can be an inspiring example for their parents. The film shows that the young rappers whose texts address current issues in a daring, direct manner, meet many obstacles, among which also one of their fathers' strict opposition against the sons' activities. One of the mothers, however, supports her son; she has even composed some lyrics for him. When she sings the corresponding songs she breaks into tears, concluding: "one should be honest, say openly what one thinks and believes in."

Thus, in the youth's fight for the truth, fathers arguing that too much frankness and disrespect for taboos may be harmful to society and corrupt public morals, often become allies, consciously or inadvertently, of those who have an interest in hiding the truth [[↗Young vs. Settled](#)] and demonize them as "devils" and a danger for the country's security and national-social unity [[↗Security vs. Fear](#)], just as they are used to do with critics from the religious camp (like the Brotherhood), or the unruly Ultras whom the police regularly accuses of being thugs causing violence and committing crimes [[↗Football](#)].

In the battle for discourse hegemony, powers are clearly unbalanced [[↗Inferiority vs. Superiority](#)]. Receiving the lion's share of the national budget, the security sectors in Egypt as well as in Tunisia are very mighty and have powerful means to keep opposition and

unwanted leakage of uncomfortable facts or the revelation of compromising truths under control—not complete control, though, but often nearly complete. Judging from the martial terminology used in the context of fighting the “Facebook state” (an allusion, used in Egypt, to the loathsome “Islamic State”?), the internet and social media seem to be the hardest enemy to fight [↗**Social Media**]. Accordingly, state security entertains “digital armies” or “electronic brigades” to meet the challenges of the “attacks” directed at them by the other side’s “social media brigades.” These “combat forces” are there to monitor and undermine regime-critical online activity, to deny accusations, to label Facebook a subversive “conspiracy from the West,” to disseminate false rumours via fake accounts and fake profiles, to criminalize the “enemies of the people,” and to spread all kinds of propaganda. Much of this seems banal and hard to believe for the experienced observer. But many narratives are not easily seen through either, and reliable facts impossible to obtain, so that the search for the truth definitively reaches its limits. In a desperate attempt to save the logic of True and False and find one’s way through the labyrinths of seemingly contradictory data, numerous conspiracy theories seek to reconstruct a plausible truth from the facts that are available and seem reliable (KOERBER). In reality, however, in many cases the truth cannot be distinguished from the lie, and the thicket of fabricated news, rumours, and conspiracy theories turns out to be impenetrable. Slowly, one starts to accept that a decision will have to remain pending, or even is impossible... [↗**True = False (Life in Limbo)**].

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *ʔAlsh* ♦ *ʔAshwāʔiyyāt* ♦ Baby Milk ♦ **Celebrities** ♦ **Conversions** ♦ Court Trials ♦ Dancing ♦ Disappearances ♦ Disasters ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ **Dual Identities / Masking** ♦ Éveil d’une nation / *Ṣaḥwat umma* ♦ Father Figures ♦ Football ♦ Garbage ♦ Gated Communities / Compounds ♦ Hashish ♦ The Honourable Citizen ♦ In Islam, ... ♦ Language ♦ LGBT ♦ *Manīsh msāmiḥ* ♦ Mobile Phones ♦ The Policeman Criminal ♦ Prison ♦ Psychiatrists ♦ Public Hearings ♦ Red Sea Islands ♦ Self-help ♦ Social Media ♦ Suicide ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ Tourist Resorts ♦ Tricking the System / Tricked by the System ♦ Valentine’s Day ♦ The Voice from Above ♦ ID9535 Armbrust Zaḥma: ...in Egypt

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Freedom vs. Constraint ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ Young vs. Settled

CODES COLLAPSED – Hope = Hell (Dystopia) ♦ Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ True = False (Life in Limbo)

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