

## Let's read this article!



### CairoComix: Excavating the political

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“All comics are political,” wrote Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas in their seminal 1994 study *Arab Comic Strips*. But whether for children or adults, the forms of political expression in comics are never straightforward.

Translated editions of [Superman](#) project cultural imperialism as well as the human need for heroes and villains. A comic advertising Stella beer from a 1957 newspaper presents a snapshot of Cairo's cosmopolitan past. Comic memoirs of Beirut's civil war or reportage from Palestine offer frank political points. The art of comics, which ranges from absurdist to hyper-real, gives us the opportunity to ponder big questions about the state of politics and how we talk about politics.

The action-packed CairoComix Festival, held September 30 through October 3 at

the American University in Cairo's Tahrir Campus, convened artists and fans to celebrate the new wave of sequential narratives that has drenched the Arab region. A festival of this magnitude could not have happened five years ago: there was no market or interest, not enough publications or professional output. More than a dozen stalls in AUC's courtyard were a testament to the arrival of Arab comics, among them neo-Pharaonic superheroes (El-Osba), kitschy futuristic serials (Foot Aleina Bokra), literary explorations (Cavafy's), and an array of comic strips and caricaturists. Serving on the jury for the festival's [six awards](#), I was introduced to a whole bookshelf of comics, from amateur ventures to highly professional publications.

The festival was a milestone as regional comics enter a new phase. It's no coincidence that a movement of adult comics in Arabic has transpired in the past decade – it corresponds with political

## COMIX AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

## BEGINNER

change. In 2007, Lebanese artists launched the Arab alt-comix zine *Samandal*, and CairoComix co-founder [Magdy El-Shafee](#) published his comic noir *Metro*. And since the 2011 uprisings, the rest of the region has produced worthy competition, notably Egypt's [Tok Tok](#), Morocco's [Skefkef](#), and Tunisia's [Lab619](#). Defying the hierarchal editorial structures of mainstream publishing, each of these periodic 'zines has been created by a collective of varied artists. The fact that so many new comics have emerged in Egypt and Middle East means we need new methods for reading illustrated stories, and not just to excavate the political from the silly and sober.

One approach is historical, looking at what today's artists were reading as children and how the art form has evolved. Today's generation of comic artists grew up watching Anime dubbed in Arabic, and now Manga is a trend from Algeria to Egypt. Yet very little has been written about the long history of comic art. In his keynote address, Lebanese comic artist George "Jad" Khoury shared images from his vast archive, which is being digitized by [the Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative](#) at the American University of Beirut. Jad noted that the explosion of Arabic comics for children in the 1950s paralleled the rise of the Free Officers

Movement and Egypt's anti-colonial struggle. These illustrated stories, *Sindbad*, *Samir*, and soon enough Mickey Mouse, taught children about Egyptian politics and created new visual languages. Jad quipped about the coincidence of Nasser's pan-Arabism and pan-Arab comics, but perhaps he's onto something big: Just as the politics of comics is never straightforward, so too is the relationship between current events and contemporary publications.

Another approach employs the tools of literary criticism and narratology to explore storytelling tactics. In her presentation to the comics con, *Samandal* co-founder [Lena Merhaj](#) discussed at length the methodologies of her dissertation, in which she used quantitative analysis of content and sequences to map war narratives in Lebanese comics. (Her graphs and charts were detailed and inventive, but I was left asking: Why are artists drawing about the war now? How are their stories different than those Jad and friends drew in the 1980s?)

As comic artists experiment, readers too need to innovate. I propose that we as journalists and scholars consider a variety of techniques, starting with the most important: talking to the artists themselves. Though postmodern literary theory has convinced us that the writer



## COMIX AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

## BEGINNER

is dead, don't make the mistake of ignoring the hand that draws. From there, my recipe for understanding comics is a mix of closely reading aesthetic and verbal content, historical references and influences, production and process, just to name a few. A hybrid approach to studying comics is needed, drawing on each of these tools in response to the specificities of a story.

When I first began researching political cartoons in 2012, my concentration was on [censorship](#). Three years later I have realized that a narrow focus limits the scope of analysis. Though charting the [shifting red lines](#) is instructive, the emphasis on bowdlerized publications has become a tired trope of Western journalism in the Middle East. It's an easy trap to fall into given that [most countries](#) in the region selectively enforce old-fashioned laws that prohibit blasphemy, insults to government institutions, and more. (Of course, various forms of censorship also torment [North America](#) and [Europe](#).) As I flip through sketchbooks and visit galleries in Cairo, I wonder: How can we study the politics of comics without just fixating on their instrumental value as political texts? How can we talk about censorship without only talking about censorship?

For many comic artists, legal considerations are not foremost in their minds while at the drawing board. As anywhere, the key to success is a strong narrative and a singular style. Yes, the red lines are still important markers for analyzing cartoonists' vast

output. [Egyptian authorities confiscated Metro](#) in 2007; this summer the Lebanese collective Samandal was compelled to pay US\$20,000 for its [blasphemous comics](#). (Both Metro and the [contentious issue](#) seven of Samandal were on sale at the CairoComix souq.) Yet Metro and Samandal are influential because of their original aesthetics, rich stories, and elegant publishing. Censorship might have helped them gain notoriety, but the art speaks for itself.

After full days of presentations and workshops at CairoComix, the coterie of practitioners ambled to the Greek Club's terrace to digest it all. Le Institut Français d'Égypte titled the series of evening soirées "On the Roof," and together they composed a small home: the Kitchen (on publishing and marketing), the Bedroom (on taboos) and the Salon (on what it all means).

I had the honor of moderating the Salon evening, along with [Lina Ghaibeh](#), a comics artist, scholar at the American University of Beirut and director of the Sawwaf Arab Comics Initiative. "Must Arab comics be in Arabic or can they be in foreign languages?" Ghaibeh asked in her opening remarks. That seemingly simple question should spark further inquiry as Arabs in the U.S. draw graphic novels in English and as European cartoonists, such as Golo, illustrate Cairo stories. (*And what of Palestinian artists drawing in Hebrew in the Occupied Territories? one audience member astutely asked.*)

This led me to ask: What are comics and who is Arab? Are we using an idiom of colonialism

## COMIX AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

## BEGINNER

to describe a burgeoning movement of art in this diverse region? Each of the Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Moroccan and Tunisian cartoonists on our panel has a singular aesthetic style and narrative approach. They each tell stories in local dialects, and at the Greek Club spoke in colloquial Arabic (which made moderating the crowd a bit difficult for this American!). Yet the shared work of these artists provided a platform to discuss provocative questions about identity that are rarely debated, even in the most academic of forums.

Magdy El-Shafee offered the last word, something about identity and our common language, as Ghaibeh leaned over and told me: "This is why we're here at CairoComix — to talk to one another, to learn from each other, and then invite each other." I'll see her next month in Beirut for the Arab Comics Initiative's first symposium, where the conversation will continue.

**Source:** <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2015/10/12/feature/culture/cairocomix-excavating-the-political/>

### Questions:

1. In what ways is the political tied to comix and graphic novels?
2. During CairoComix, a number of panels took place discussing comix and graphic novels from various view points. What were they? What would have been of interest to you if you were attending?
3. Why is Guyer calling for less of an emphasis on censorship?
4. In the article there are several hyperlinks. Choose to click on one of them and find out what you can about the writer/comic/initiative. (*Report to your classmates on what you found out*)
5. Festivals dedicated to comix and graphic novels take place all over the world. Find out about other festivals that take place in the region and the world, including FIBDA (International comix Festival of Algiers) and then compare them to Cairocomix.