

In 2016

How it felt to live in the Arab World
five years after the «Arab Spring»

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Garbage

By STEPHAN GUTH

“Revolutionary,” “ingenious,” “groundbreaking”—these are some of the superlatives used in the online magazine *CairoScene*’s retrospective on the most influential “16 of 2016,” to describe *Environ Reform*, an app with which its two young Egyptian initiators, ‘Amr Faṭḥī and Muṣṭafā Khayrat, are “making a positive impact on Egypt” and “redesigning the country’s human landscape,” as *CairoScene* has it. In a situation where litter is everywhere and the notorious garbage problem is felt to have reached its “boiling point,” the app “allows people to report accumulated street garbage to *Environ Reform* which then sends someone to clean it up.” “Residents simply have to take a photo of the mess, the app then tracks it” and communicates the need for cleaning up to one of the local waste collectors, the *zabbālin*. In the event that the latter are unable to respond in due course, *Environ Reform* sends out “an emergency truck to deal with the matter.” At the same time, the app notifies the authorities about refuse collecting activities in the area and in this way gives them “a much-needed tool for waste management oversight” (HOSNY & PRIMO). After the completion, in September, of a one-year pilot phase during which the app was tested in the ‘Umrāniyya district in Gizeh with great success, a solution to the ugly sight of ubiquitous garbage and its penetrating smell which have become an almost ‘natural’, normal aspect of life in most parts of the country, finally seems to have been found, and it looks as if everyday life in the megalopolis will regain, with the cleanliness of public space and better air, some of its basic dignity. An advertising poster of *Environ Reform* proudly demonstrates the difference between *qabl* “Before”—garbage bags filling the streets of an average neighbourhood—and *ba‘d* “After”—a nice clean bench, inviting to sit down and relax in the shadow of a green tree (BORAIE), all this thanks to the inventiveness of two smart compatriots who saw what was needed and how new technologies could easily be utilized to repair a deplorable state of affairs. [↗Normality = Heroism (Surviving)]. [Cf. also ↗Uber].

Indeed, there is a common feeling that the garbage problem has become considerably aggravated during recent years—and not only in Egypt. Like traffic jams and polluted air [↗*aḥma*], litter filling the streets and stinky garbage, irresponsibly thrown away, or burning, have become so commonplace that they figure as quasi-omnipresent default setting in all kinds of assessments of, and comments on, the situation in the country. And that not only in the poor slums (as in *Abadan lam nakun atfālan* or ‘*Alī Mi‘za wa-Ibrāhīm*) [↗‘*Ashwā’iyyāt*], but also in other parts of the cities: portrayals especially of the urban landscape, like Tāmīr Sa‘īd’s *Ākhir ayyām al-madīna*, or polit-thrillers that have this cosmos as their background, like *The Nile Hilton Incident*, always show, drastically and unvarnished, heaps of litter and garbage as typical aspects of a world in ruins, of which also car wrecks, decaying houses, and dust and dirt, as well as widespread misery, crippled people and beggars form part. Often these conditions are associated with rampant neoliberal consumerism—all kinds of cheap commodities displayed in the showcases of the big warehouses or by street vendors [↗Downtown/Centre-ville]—, and while the camera is panning over such landscapes, typically during a ride in a taxi or on a motorcycle (*Ākhir*

ayyām al-madīna, *The Nile Hilton Incident*, *Nawwāra*), the accompanying sound track almost cynically contrasts the view of misery and decay with the latest news from the radio, heralding the Government's recent laudable achievements and the President's always beneficial deeds [↗**The Voice from Above**, ↗**Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**]. In Tāmir Sa'īd's film, close-ups and slow-motion express the high attention the protagonist gives to all the filthy details in this environment, and calm music underlines the contemplative mood with which he registers the data he will need to pursue his project of an overall assessment, which in turn shall help him decide whether he should stay or leave. For Ayman, the boy-friend of the director of the documentary *Nihāyāt sa'īda*, the garbage he spots everywhere in Alexandria is among the many things that eventually let him make up his mind: he will not stay here, but return to Europe where he has been studying in the years following the Revolution [↗**Migration**]. Of course, if you can afford it [↗**Affluence vs. Destitution**], you can also buy yourself out of the waste to live in a clean green compound in one of the new quarters for the rich [↗**Gated Communities / Compounds**]: what a contrast between "La vie en vert" (ABAZA), advertised on huge roadside billboards (or shown in various films, like *Nawwāra*, or Ramadan serials, like *Fawq mustawā al-shubuhāt*), and the grey or muddy brown, dusty, filthy and stinky environments in which the billboards are erected! [↗**Beautiful vs. Ugly**].

The sight and smell of garbage have become so overwhelming that they regularly evoke dystopian, quasi-apocalyptic visions of the future. One of these, Muḥammad RABĪ's *Uṭārid*, though published already in 2014, is shortlisted in spring for the 2016 International Prize of Arabic Fiction as one of the most authentic, still 'valid' expressions of contemporary sensitivities—"painfully plausible," as an article in *madāMasr* in June labels it because it depicts "a world we seem to already partially inhabit" (EL GIBALY). Parts of this novel are set in a not all too distant—2025—nightmarish future, and one of its protagonists is the "garbage man" (*rajul al-zibāla*) who lives on, and from, the garbage that piles up within the "ruins of a shattered Cairo" (IPAF). With his dream of building a spacious home and having a family, he represents, in a way, today's average citizen; in 2025, however, the home that will house this citizen and his family will be carved out from an immense garbage pyramid, like an ancient Pharaoh's burial chamber. In this text, again, garbage goes along with misery, but also with the evanescence of all notions of humanity: While the "garbage man" initially grants two orphaned girls a kind of asylum (though only as workers in his garbage business, and abusing the eldest as his sex slave), he cannot prevent marauding thugs from raping the girls he had taken under his protection; when the thugs are done, he rapes the eldest a last time before killing himself with a rusty knife—evidently out of guilt, shame, and disgust of himself [↗**Suicide**]. – Rabī's vision is not all too far-fetched: as the Tunisian short film *Khal'a* (2016) shows, there *are* people, already now, living in similar conditions.

Here, as elsewhere, garbage is not only a problem of logistics. It is seen as a marker of the country's backwardness and/or decline, and it serves as an indicator of critical assessment that determines one's confidence in, or rather deep concern about, the country's future [↗**Hope vs. Hell**, ↗**Hope = Hell (Dystopia)**].

However, garbage is not only ugly and makes public space that could be used for relaxing, gathering and amusement inaccessible, particularly also due to the acrid smell emanating from it; nor is garbage only a source of doubt about one's own society's degree

of development and civilization and, hence, a pessimistic look into the future. Garbage is rather also a source of national shame and a feeling of cultural inferiority as soon as Westerners take notice of and point to it [**Inferiority vs. Superiority**]. Moreover, the image of a ‘dirty’ country can have alarming economic consequences: When the German Ambassador to Tunisia in August tells the leading radio station *Mosaique FM* that German tourists have said that “if the garbage is still piled up in Djerba, they will not return” [**Tourist Resorts**], this is immediately taken up by *Tunisia Live* and made into an issue, titled “German Tourists Put Off Tunisia by Waste and ‘Poor Service’” (BEN TAIEB). Even though both the ambassador and his interviewer agree that also “security concerns had played a role in discouraging German tourists from visiting the country” [**Security vs. Fear**], the perceived lack of cleanliness still seems to be among the factors that, according to *Tunisia Live*, nevertheless are responsible for the dramatic decrease in the number of foreign visitors—21.5 percent over the previous year, according to statistics released by the Ministry of Tourism in June (BEN TAIEB Aug. 10, 2016).

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Apart from such economic aspects, there are also severe health problems caused through garbage, particularly for those who live—and for lack of alternatives *have* to live—close to the enormous landfills that the state operates, especially in Tunisia. “Skin issues are just one of the health hazards that allegedly come with life next to Borj Chakir,” *Tunisia Live* reports in August about by far the country’s largest garbage dump that receives more than 200 truckloads, over 3,000 tons per day, sometimes—during the cleanliness campaigns—even up to 4,000 tons, of garbage from the Greater Tunis area with its population of ca. 3 million. The landfill has eleven leachate ponds (400,000 m³), all in open air, on which the magazine continues:

Exposure to the odors of leachate—a liquid of chemically hazardous substances—as well as the daily inhalation of bio-gas can cause severe respiratory issues. Many residents suffer from asthma. Worse developments are said to include lung cancer, which is reported to have already killed one of the town’s residents [...], who worked on the landfill for almost a decade. Another resident [...] had his leg amputated after stepping on an infected syringe while working on the site. (*Tunisia Live*)

Like a number of other landfills in which the larger cities dispose of their waste [**Center vs. Periphery**], Borj Chakir, too, is located “in the middle of thousands of hectares of fertile agricultural areas,” and poor management and inadequate treatment capacity have resulted in the contamination of the groundwater in a radius of 5 km of the ponds, so that not only more than 50,000 people have to endure the bad odours but also many families were deprived of water for their animals or to irrigate their fields (*ibid.*).

How could the garbage problem reach such critical dimensions?, observers and reporters ask—and come up with a number of explanations. Partly, the problem is not new and has to do with the habits of a society that was catapulted into neoliberal capitalist consumerism without being alerted to the negative consequences of a throwaway mentality. Nowadays, however, most people should know better, and this is why Mona Abāza, in her personal report about life in a middle-class Cairo neighbourhood (Dokki), cannot forgive the young women who frequent her building once a month to collect their salaries their carelessness and lack of responsibility in simply dropping litter and chewing-gum in the staircase (ABAZA 244) [**Young vs. Settled**]. To a large degree, however, the garbage

problems are the result of more recent developments. Partly, they go back to the times of the old, pre-revolutionary regimes who had negotiated contracts, lucrative also for themselves, with foreign companies, replacing old, organically grown ways of dealing with the country's waste with more 'modern,' but much less effective ones. Thus, while traditional garbage collectors in Egypt, the *zabbālīn*, had over decades managed to effectively dispose of most of the country's organic waste using pigs—the *zabbālīn* are Copts and have no problem with that—the Mubārak regime had seized, in 2010, the pretext of an allegedly imminent spread of the swine flu to have all pigs in Egypt slaughtered (which pleased the anti-Coptic Muslim Brotherhood) and then “reached out to a foreign company named *Onyx*” to deal with the garbage, after the *zabbālīn* had been deprived of their method to deal with organic waste and were now foregoing its collection. *Onyx*, however, “didn't work” because “there was no structure to this system” and “corruption ran rampant,” so that “it became noticeable to many that waste management was better under the ‘*zabaleen*’ than under *Onyx*” (BORAIE). In Tunisia, too, the *ancien régime* had ‘outsourced’ waste management to a foreign company, the French *Pizzorno Environnement*. Its association with the dictator was probably among the reasons why “close to 60% of municipal government trash equipment was burned or destroyed during the revolution” (*Tunisia Live*). Faced with the challenge of having to deal with the collapse of the previous system of waste management, the new government, still inexperienced and struggling with many other issues that had to be taken care of in the troubled post-revolutionary period, went for a fast solution and decided to concentrate on only a few landfills, the biggest among them Borj Chakir, without taking the steps that would have been necessary to monitor and control such huge garbage ‘monocultures’. In addition, garbage-related legislation had to be renewed, but the process was all too slow and faint-hearted, while efficient regulations about penalties to be fined against offenders or to prevent corruption would have been needed.

Dystopian visions like Rabī's garbage landscape notwithstanding, and irrespective also of undeniable stagnation and widespread frustration over ongoing pollution and obstacles on the way to possible solutions [**Present = Past (Stuck)**], there are also a lot of hope-inspiring, encouraging developments [**Hope vs. Hell**]. They all are the result of the activity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or the initiatives of individuals with a “passion” for a cleaner, healthier and more beautiful environment. Like the Tunisian *SOS Bīaa* (Arabic *bī'a* ‘environment’), they work towards the creation of a new awareness, especially among the youth, of the detrimental effects of a negligent, irresponsible attitude towards waste, and they act as critical observers and alerters as well as advocates of the victims of pollution. Sometimes, they also try, as the Egyptian duo behind *Environ Reform*, to step in with own (non-profit) enterprises that bring together parties involved who, until now, have communicated too little with each other, like residents, garbage collectors, and the government, to re-unite individual and collective interests [**Freedom vs. Constraint (Individual vs. Collective)**]. Both *SOS Bīaa* and *Environ Reform* underline that they even do what otherwise the state might be expected to do: fundraising. Thus, *Environ Reform* is trying to raise some monies for the smartphones that are needed for their garbage management app to function properly (Boraie, *SOS Bīaa*). [cf. **Crowdfunding**]

Art also comes in. With his—again: self-funded—project, *Idrāk / Perception*, the Tunisian painter eL Seed (working in Egypt this time) aims to attract people's attention to

the importance of the job of the *zabbālīn*, whom many disrespectfully call ‘those of the pigpens (*zarāyib*)’ but whose indispensable contribution to society’s well-being everybody should be aware of and appreciate [↗**Normality vs. Heroism**]. eL Seed tries to achieve such awareness and appreciation with the help of a monumental *calligraffito*, covering more than fifty houses in the Manshiyat Nāšir district where many *zabbālīn* live, an artwork that contrasts the beauty and colours of his calligraphy with the bleak uniform appearance of the mud brick buildings [↗**Beautiful vs. Ugly**] and can only be viewed in its entirety from one specific point at the top of the neighboring Mokattam hill (DAWSON, EL SEED at TEDSummit, GALALAH), in this way underlining the idea that the well-being of society as a whole will not be achieved unless all individual groups work together under one perspective; then, however, also the functionality of each individual element within the great whole will be obvious [↗**Freedom vs. Constraint** (Individual vs. Collective)].

With the idea that you are not doomed, as it seems to many, to passively endure what is happening, but rather *can* do something, and that you also *have* to do it *on your own*—don’t wait for the government! [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**]*—*the NGOs’ and artists’ initiatives resemble, in their essence, the spirit that is speaking from the many self-help books [↗**Self-help**], and projects like Faṭḥī’s Khayrat’s *Environ Reform* are announced like the successful enterprises of smart private entrepreneurs, worth taking as a model to follow. NGOs and artists thereby also take the roles of quasi-psychiatrists who diagnose their patients’ diseases and critically monitor their development [↗**Psychiatrists**].

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *Ashwā’iyyāt* ♦ Crowdfunding ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Gated Communities / Compounds ♦ Migration ♦ Psychiatrists ♦ Self-help ♦ Suicide ♦ Tourist Resorts ♦ The Voice from Above ♦ Uber ♦ *aḥma*

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Center vs. Periphery ♦ Freedom vs. Constraint (Individual vs. Collective) ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority | Maṣr/Tūnis vs. Barraḥ ♦ Normality vs. Heroism ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ Young vs. Settled

CODES COLLAPSED – Hope = Hell (Dystopia) ♦ Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Normality = Heroism (Surviving) ♦ Present = Past (Stuck)

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Movies

- Abadan lam nakun atfālan* (We have never been kids). Documentary by Maḥmūd Sulaymān (Mahmood Soliman). Egypt, U.A.E., Qatar, Lebanon 2016.
- Ākhir ayyām al-madīna* (In the last days of the city). By Tāmīr al-Sa'īd (Tamer el Said). Egypt, Germany, UK, U.A.E. 2016.
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- Khal'a* (Khalaa). Short film by Māhir Ḥasnāwī (Maher Hasnaoui). Tunisia 2016.
- Nawwāra* (Nawara). By Hāla Khalīl (Hala Khalil). Egypt 2016.
- Nihāyāt sa'īda* (Happily Ever After). Documentary by Nadā Riyāḍ (Nada Riyadh) and Ayman al-Amīr (Ayman El Amir). Egypt 2016.
- The Nile Hilton Incident*. By Tāriq Ṣāliḥ (Tarik Saleh). Egypt, Germany, Sweden, Denmark 2017.

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