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The power of nonsense: humour in Egypt’s counter/revolution

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a popular Mubarak era film series (al-Limby) and a post-uprising satirical television programme (al-Bernameg) to show how humour has a powerful capacity to create nonsense out of the ‘sense’ that authoritarian regimes attempt to impose on society. In the Mubarak years, such films presented criticism of rising economic inequalities and state oppression. Post-2011 uprising satire similarly became a primary site for criticism of state oppression and regime politics. They were examples of a redistribution of the nonsensical (drawing on Rancière) and gradual creative insurgency (drawing on Kraidy). Yet at the same time, even seemingly revolutionary humour can reproduce hegemonic ‘common sense’ that upholds broader social hierarchies, particularly those related to gender, class, and religion. Thus, this article argues that humour can be critical to both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary sense-making.

A thing is funny when … it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.

George Orwell, 1945

The subway train heading to Tahrir Square the evening of 11 February 2011 was packed with youth going to celebrate Mubarak’s downfall after hearing the televised announcement of his resignation. Suddenly, in my car, one young man started yelling spontaneous couplet call and response chants making fun of Mubarak. The other youth in the car joined him, doing the responses while clapping with him to a steady, exuberant beat. The rhyming chant that had everyone cracking up was: ‘Hey Saudi Arabia Saudi Arabia. You’re getting a cow from Minufiyya’ (ya s’aūdiyya ya s’aūdiyya, gaylik ’igl min Minūfiyya). The idea behind the joke was that Mubarak would flee to Saudi Arabia just as Tunisia’s Ben Ali had done during that country’s recent uprising. Its humour operated at multiple levels, apprehended by all who laughed as they chanted in response and clapped along. The chant made fun of Mubarak’s stupidity by relating him to a cow and to the Egyptian province of Minufiyya. For two decades, Mubarak had been the butt of bovine jokes, told in conversations and in cartoons that played on his visual likeness and verbal utterances to the cow in the advertising for the French cheese ‘La vache qui rit.’ Mubarak was often called the laughing cow himself. The fact that Mubarak was from Minufiyya provided additional ammunition, as the province is associated with dim-witted people. But the joke chant on the subway that night

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also made fun of Saudi Arabia—a country often disparaged by Egyptians for, among other things, its perceived lack of culture, laziness of its rich people, severe approach to Islam, and its treatment of the millions of Egyptian migrants who had gone there for work for decades. The shared apprehension of this multi-layered joke, and the collective nature of its performance filled with sound and bodily gestures, drew the subway car celebrators into a solidaristic community—rare in the packed public transportation in the city of 18 million. The Egyptians in the subway car that historic night forged affective bonds by collectively, publicly, and loudly making fun of people, regions, and international relations that were supposed to be taken ‘seriously.’

That raucous humour was one of the first responses to Mubarak’s downfall is not a surprise. The art of being funny is culturally elaborated and highly valued by many in Egypt. Having a good sense of humour, or ‘light blood’ (damm khafif) as it is called, is a positive trait. There is also a robust history and circulation of jokes geared towards political leaders in the post-independence era. And a kind of national pride arises from people’s awareness of Egypt’s fame as the exporter of comedic films and television series throughout the Middle East. Indeed, political imaginaries in the region have, for over 50 years, constructed Egypt as the symbolic locus of regional politics as well as of comic relief. Egyptians were simultaneously positioned as the political heavyweights and the class clowns of the region. The uprising solidified that reputation. Foreign and Egyptian photographers captured and circulated, through news and social media, images of funny protest posters and graffiti made during the uprising. Political cartoon-making blossomed; adult comic books addressing political and social issues also emerged on the scene; and witty political memes flourished. New forms of satire on YouTube and television gained widespread popularity.

This wave of comic production compelled journalistic and scholarly writings on the subject, which have gone far to correct what had been a puzzling dearth of serious attention to this especially culturally prized and elaborated form of creative expression in Egypt. Political comedy flourished in many other countries of the Middle East in 2011 and after, and likewise attracted significant attention. Dozens of news features, and a smaller but significant number of scholarly works, have been written on this fluorescence of political humour across the region, from Syria to Saudi Arabia, and in the most recent 2019 protests in Sudan, Lebanon, and Algeria. The general tone of these writings, as well as of those on Egypt, is often celebratory. In general, they analyse the searing political critique at the heart of this comic outpouring, for example by showing how particular jokes, cartoons, memes, and

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slogans criticize regime leaders, actions, and policies, sometimes drawing on earlier comic forms and genres.\(^6\)

In this article, I affirm with these writers the serious political role of humour in the region. But I seek to further our understanding of how comic political critique works by encouraging us to question the grounds on which, and to whom, comic texts might be considered to be critical. In this way, I join a small group of scholars increasingly taking a more tempered view of humour in the region, who call attention to how humour can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic at the same time.\(^7\) I do so by bringing the concepts of the sensible and the nonsensical (and slapstick) into our studies of humour in the Middle East. Using the case of Egypt, I argue that humour can resist or reinforce hegemonic notions of what makes sense and what does not make sense, to whom and when. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible,\(^8\) media studies scholar Nicholas Holm describes the distribution of the nonsensical as: ‘the shared sense of the implicit and unquestioned seriousness of the existing arrangement of powers and practices, with particular emphasis upon those relations which are perceived to make sense, and those which are not.’ It ‘is concerned with ... the shared impression of what is prudent, sober and wise and what is not.’ I bring this insight into conversation with Marwan Kraidy’s concept of ‘gradual creative insurgency,’ which he finds in popular culture practices before and during the 2011 uprisings, and which he defines as an ‘incremental and cumulative’ means of subverting ‘the norms of sovereign power.’\(^9\) I suggest that humour, when it plays with the distribution of the sensical over time, can be a very powerful example of gradual creative insurgency, for it subverts the norms of the seriousness that sovereign power cultivates. Holm also argues that humour ‘can be thought of as one of the major aesthetic nexuses where the distribution of the nonsensical is expressed, negotiated and fought over.’\(^10\) This means that humour is both a site of serious politics and a double-edged sword. It all depends on ‘whose’ nonsensical wins out in the negotiation.

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In what follows, I analyse plot lines and character actions in a Mubarak-era film series about a working-class buffoon (al-Limby), popular among the lower classes but contested by the upper, to highlight how it questioned (in Holm’s words) ‘the seriousness of the existing arrangement of powers and practices’ nearly a decade before the uprising. In the second half of the article, I provide a close reading of some episodes of the most famous post-Mubarak era satirical television programme, al-Bernameg, which was extremely popular among urban middle and upper class liberals and secular-oriented Egyptians, but was not limited to them. With shifts in the political landscape, however, the show became increasingly contested by Islamists and also by supporters of Field Marshall and later President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Like al-Limby, the show questioned the seriousness of powers and dominant practices. In this way, it also embodied gradual creative surgency, as Kraidy argued in one of the few analyses of specific al-Bernameg content, one that also refreshingly situated the show within the longer history of Egyptians’ satire of rulers.\(^{11}\)

Through similarly close readings, my analysis shows how two of the most popular forms of humour in the past two decades, one a longstanding Egyptian comic genre (slapstick film), and the other a relatively new televusial genre (political satire), were both key sites for gradual creative insurgency and as a disruption in the distribution of the nonsensical. I join other analysts of Egyptian satire in seeing its political potential. Alternatively, my reading of Egyptian slapstick film as politically disruptive is not only largely absent from Egyptian popular culture studies,\(^{12}\) but goes against the sensibilities of the intellectual elite in the country. In this recuperation of slapstick as politically relevant, I am inspired by scholarship highlighting slapstick’s subversive qualities in other locations.\(^{13}\) Yet I also suggest that humour, even that which can challenge power or form a kind of creative insurgency, can also ‘act to contain disruption and to thereby recuperate challenges to both the nonsensical and sensible orders and reinforce dominant notions of the nonsensical’.\(^{14}\) Slapstick film (al-Limby) and political television satire (al-Bernameg), while subversive in certain registers in that they ‘[revealed] the absurdity in what was previously thought to make sense’,\(^{15}\) also bolstered hegemonic notions of what is (or would be) nonsensical. This was especially the case in the realms of gender, class, sexuality, religion, but also geography, race, and disability. My criticisms of the hegemonic aspects of Egyptian satire is perhaps less unusual than my calling attention to the subversive aspects of slapstick. Although Sisi supporters and Islamists also criticized al-Bernameg for taking down their heroes and being immoral, my analysis is more aligned with that of some Egyptian leftist feminists in my circles, who sometimes talked with me about the show having classist and sexist elements. With both examples, I aim to train our attention to how seemingly vulgar slapstick humour and satire both redistribute the nonsensical, but also to how they reproduce the commonsense arrangement of dominant powers and social hierarchical practices.\(^{16}\)


\(^{13}\)Paulus, Tom and Rob King, Slapstick Comedy (New York: Routledge, 2010).

\(^{14}\)Holm, ‘The Distribution of the Nonsensical’, 2011.

\(^{15}\)Ibid.

\(^{16}\)This article is rooted in my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cairo for periods ranging from one month to two years, for a total of 49 months between 1996 and 2018. It also draws on methodologies in visual and popular culture studies.
**Slapstick politics on film**

In the summer of 2002, a new blockbuster film hit the theatres, which became one of the highest grossing Egyptian films of all time. The typically dilapidated movie houses, once grand symbols of modernity until Mubarak’s economic policies sucked capital from the middle class, were soon packed with Egyptians—many of them unemployed or underemployed young men—eager to see the new movie that it seemed everyone was talking about. Billboards sprang up around the cities, featuring the large personage of the film’s eponymous lead character—al-Limby—bearing what became his distinctive bug-eyed and slack-jawed expression that ambiguously coded as stupid, drunk, or stoned. The name al-Limby was a play on the name of the former High Commissioner for Egypt and the Sudan (1919–1925) Edmund Allenby, who exiled Egypt’s nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul after nationalist protests against the British. Subsequent years brought other films starring the Limby character that were also extremely popular.

A cab driver first alerted me to an entirely different view of the films than the disparaging comments I heard about them among Cairo’s literati, and suggested that they were doing important cultural work among their fans. Sitting in a typically interminable traffic jam in downtown Cairo outside of the faded glory of the Rivoli Cinema, I glanced up at the billboard for the latest al-Limby film and asked the cab driver what he thought of it. Al-Limby speaks to all of us downtrodden (al-nās al-ghalābat), he said. In each of his films, he explained, al-Limby works at different lowly jobs … when he can find them … and each time the powerful in society ruin his ambitions. The driver went through the plots of all of the films—when al-Limby’s liver sandwich cart gets sacked by the police going after unlicensed vendors, when the father of the girl he wants to marry rejects him because he cannot pay a good dowry, when he tries to make money as a swindling lawyer at a courthouse but gets caught. At no time did the driver mention al-Limby’s illiteracy or his drug and alcohol use—as do the films’ critics among my self-identified intellectual interlocutors (mithaqqa’fin); rather, he spoke of the humorous character as a relatable everyman for his struggle to get by in a society with widening income gaps and a rigid class hierarchy reinforced by state institutions. Like other observers, he talked about how, in the end, al-Limby always succeeds because of his salt-of-the-earth efforts.

The Limby films resonated with many Egyptians because they made nonsensical the actions and pretences of the state, as it is expressed in the everyday. The films signify the government through police or military characters, who obstruct regular people’s pursuit of a dignified life. They are also portrayed as corrupt, violent, and full of meaningless posturing. The first film in the series, al-Limby (2002), begins with a scene of the main character returning home from a wedding on a dark street at night, drunkenly singing a famous nationalist song that ‘should’ be revered. A policeman stops him and asks for his national identification card—an extremely common, harassing means of asserting authority and control over non-elite Egyptian men. Al-Limby replies that he does not carry it with him because he only has one so he leaves it at home, which connects with common fears that one will lose their documents and have to go through major bureaucratic hurdles to replace

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17 https://www.dailynewssegypt.com/2011/09/06/you-call-that-a-revolution/.  
18 The films starring Muhammad Saad as the Limby character include: al-Limby (2002), Elly Baly Balak (2003), and al-Limby 8 Gega (2010). Two films starring the same actor playing similar characters to al-Limby are: Oukal (2004) and Bouha (2005).
them. Instead, al-Limby offers the policeman his identification card for a government-run youth centre (markaz shabab) of the kind that the Mubarak regime had built in large numbers partly to contain youth discontent as well as to give the impression of care for youth, despite their chronic underfunding. The policeman takes the youth centre card from al-Limby and rips it up, proving its utter lack of value, already alluded to by the fact that al-Limby carried it without fear of loss. The policeman then tells him that he does not want to see him on the street ever again, which references what was a commonplace denial of public space to everyday citizens. Al-Limby dumbfoundedly replies, ‘Why, is it closed or what?’, thereby calling attention to this preposterous posturing of the police. In the rest of the film, the police are always chasing him down when he tries to turn a buck, for example by selling liver sandwiches or bicycle rides to tourists, along with a ‘silly’ musical soundtrack. These scenes again render police action nonsensical.

The second film in the series, Elly Baly Balak (2003) also challenges state actors’ nonsensical demand they and the state be respected, as well as the way state media tries to create ‘nonsense’ out of subaltern voices. In this film, al-Limby tries to get back from his conniving uncle a contract for a family apartment. The uncle has him arrested and he ends up in jail, where he is promptly interviewed by a heavily made up and coiffured female television reporter for a programme called ‘Good Morning Crime’—a play on the existing Good Morning Egypt. She takes for granted the state’s description of him as a criminal, calling him a thug (baltagi)—the popular term used by state security forces to delegitimize poor people or, later, protestors in Tahrir Square19—and asking him why he committed crimes and why he does not work. His funny responses challenge the faulty logic of her questions, all while he exaggerates and profusely repeats the honorific titles given to media personalities and other important officials in a way that highlights her pretentious judgement of his circumstances. For example, when she asks him what he can tell young viewers so that they can avoid becoming thugs like him, he replies in a serious tone, imitating both her pretence and showing the ridiculousness of her logic, ‘In the name of God, don’t stray from the right path, and if your uncle steals your apartment contract, kiss him.’ Through this seemingly nonsensical response, al-Limby highlights the absurdity of adopting the solution of the state, and its lapdog media, to social problems: to thank one’s oppressors.

The rest of the film, and actually its central story, rests upon the idea of becoming one’s oppressors to show how nonsensical they are, thereby reversing who and what should be considered nonsense. The jail is run by a sadistic police officer, Riyaq al-Manfaluti (played by the same actor who plays al-Limby). Al-Limby inadvertently escapes prison and in al-Manfaluti’s chase after him, they get in a car crash. Al-Limby dies, and al-Manfaluti suffers a brain injury. The doctor puts al-Limby’s brain into al-Manfaluti. The corrupt second in command at the prison, who understands what has happened, instructs the new al-Limby to play the role of the warden so that he can get money from the father of a rich prisoner for letting him out (the original al-Manfaluti refused to grant the favour). On al-Limby/al-Manfaluti’s return to the prison from the hospital, there is a formal welcoming ceremony performed for the prisoners. He mixes together all sorts of honorifics and other official words to create a nonsense mishmash that provokes laughter at the pretentious power of

19The term was also used by Tahrir protestors to describe the groups of men believed to be hired by regime forces to attack them.
police and military officers as displayed in their grandiloquent modes of speaking and interacting.

Not only do the films often offer a critique of the arbitrary arrests and detentions that marked Mubarak’s Egypt; this film also pokes fun at the government’s claims to be respecting human rights and government bombast in general. A human rights committee composed of foreign and Egyptian officials visits the prison, ostensibly to investigate it, but, as is typical of bogus government actions, only holds a pompous welcoming ceremony complete with dais and podium in the heart of the prison. The Egyptian member of the delegation gives a speech full of the kinds of empty platitudes about respecting human rights that state actors give while engaging in gross human rights abuses. When Limby is called to the podium, he both mimics the lofty speech of the official and criticizes its presumptions. For example, he asks the official how he thinks the problem of homeless children could possibly be solved with clean air, when homeless kids sniff glue under the al-Mālik al-Salih bridge (in a working-class Cairene neighbourhood) and then go home and sniff their brother’s feet (implying the typical cramped living quarters). He misnames the official as in charge of ‘burning humans’ (ḥurāq al-insān)—a play on ‘human rights’ (huquq al-insān). He tells them that they either need to make more houses or make more glue. Iman Hamam agrees that ‘Through fraudulence, [al-Limby’s] characters perform the role of the institutionalized authority: frequently a non-sensical, ruthless, and highly-strung figure (emphasis added).’ But, she argues that this ‘mock[ing]’ can only be achieved by ‘feigning empowerment,’ thereby making it ‘ineffective’.\(^{20}\) Certainly, the al-Limby films by themselves could be viewed as ineffective in creating broader social change. But if we take their popularity seriously, as well as how satirizing the powerful has effected social change in other contexts, then we can understand the films as providing space for people to cultivate an understanding of, and laugh at, how the supposedly commonsense demand to respect state authority is completely nonsensical.

Yet they also upheld the commonsense of colourist and sexist hierarchies. The films drew on the long-established trend in Egyptian popular culture that denigrates darker-skinned people, as part of the larger phenomenon of Egypt’s history as a colonizing power over the Sudan.\(^ {21}\) In the second film, for example, they appear in the role of servants—a doorman and a cleaner—and are mocked for their darkness in contrast to the lighter skinned main characters. After arriving to al-Manfalutī’s home, Limby watches his (new) wife ascend the staircase and says, ‘What is this sun that is rising?’ Then he turns to see the servant arrive at the bottom of the stairs and says, ‘What is this night that is intruding?’ In a subsequent scene, he greets the wife’s mother’s maid’s daughter, thinking it is the daughter his wife told him they have together. He hugs her and calls her ‘a shaded one’ (mudhallīma) and then when his wife corrects him and tells him that is not their daughter, he says, ‘Oh, I was wondering how a white mother and white father created a stick of date paste! (suba ‘agwa).


As is common in Egyptian and Hollywood films, al-Limby treats women as sex objects, even to the point of occasionally assaulting them for comic effect. In the first film, when al-Limby encounters foreign female tourists in the Sinai while trying to sell bikes to them in the first film, he calls them ‘muzzas’—a slang term that basically means ‘hot chick.’ He smacks an unwitting kiss on the cheek of one of the women and then runs away. Also in the first film, when his friend Bach (also a play on the so-called civilized West) sets him up with a gig as a bodyguard for a bellydancer, she gets the muzza treatment, but when he has to guard her room when man after man go in (presumably she is also a prostitute), he gets frustrated at this lack of access and upon hearing her laugh inside says, ‘Laugh, laugh! Hopefully the room will blow up with you in it.’

While it is ultimately impossible to say that the hugely popular Limby films generated the revolutionary action that we saw erupt in Egypt in January of 2011, it would be hard to argue that comedic films like al-Limby were a panacea that lulled the population into quietude (as a Frankfurt School approach to popular culture might argue), nor were they merely a ‘safety valve’. Rather, they served as a constant and very public reminder of felt political-economic struggles that the majority of Egyptians were facing. They brought people together in cinemas and other public spaces, and later, when they were frequently televised in homes. One might say they were brought together in a mutual recognition of struggle. As films that engaged in ambivalence, symbolic inversion, and subverting the norms of power, they could be considered a form of the gradual creative insurgency that Kraidy finds in various popular culture forms preceding the uprising. It was during and in the wake of these struggles that a new form of televiral comedy appeared that did similar political work.

**Satirical politics on television**

In March 2011, just when counter-revolutionary forces were gaining momentum in a deeply flawed constitutional ‘reform’ process, a surgeon-turned-comedian named Bassem Youssef hit the Youtube airwaves with his news mash-up called *The B+ Show* (named after his blood type) that got millions of hits and Facebook shares. By the fall of that year, an Egyptian satellite network known for some critical programming offered him his own show. Youssef is often referred to as the ‘Egyptian Jon Stewart’ and he readily admits modelling himself after the American comedian. With his suit and set parading that of a real television news anchor, and with a similarly generic show title (*Al-Bernameg*, The Programme), Youssef juxtaposed different clips from Egyptian state television and print media and, in rapid fire sarcastic reporting commentary, picked apart the pretences and lies in many of the regime’s counter-revolutionary tactics, especially in the fall of 2011 when the Supreme Council of Armed Forces ruled the country when the show already had 200 million viewers. He then went on to include more elements, such as elaborate humorous skits and musical numbers, which became extremely popular during the

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Morsy era. When Morsy was deposed and Sisi came to power, Youssef used humour to criticize the blind love for the new president and the way that his followers were subjecting the Brotherhood to the same treatment the Brotherhood had given them. Across the three seasons of the show from 2011–2013, Youssef faced multiple threats, court cases, and fines for insulting Islam and the government, and for incitement. The show made shockwaves for its criticisms of those in power, whether that be the military regime or, later the Islamists, and for its general disregard for bourgeois religious and gender norms. It was the first television show to make satirical fun at a sitting president and thus broke completely new ground. But it was at its most radical when it made resistant nonsense out of the mass media, particularly news talk shows, which play a significant role in shaping public opinion in Egypt.24

Youssef’s treatment of a violent incident in the fall of 2011, mere months after the fall of Mubarak, was especially meaningful for those who supported the revolution and opposed the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. On 14 October 2011, he aired a blistering disruption of the established conventions of state media in light of its coverage of a recent protest of thousands of Coptic Christians demanding equal rights and the end to violence against them and their churches in front of the State Radio and Television Building (known as Maspero). The army attacked the protestors with live fire and by running over them with tanks and trucks. At least 24 people were killed and 200 injured, nearly all Christians. But you would not know that from watching the state media, which was covering events from the building overlooking the protests. State media framed the event as an attack on the sacred Egyptian army by treasonous Copts, drawing on long-term associations of Christians as a fifth column in Egyptian society.25

Youssef’s first show after that incident remains one of the only, if not the major, extended televisual criticism of the state’s treatment of Coptic Christians and its role in sowing sectarian divides. It was also one of the first microscopic dissections of the pretences and falsehoods of Egyptian state media to air on mass media. And it openly condemned military violence. In its content, its mode of delivery, and its aesthetic forms, this episode was especially ‘disruptive with regards to existing orders of (non)sense’.26 It completely separated the relations between ‘the existing arrangement of powers, persons, and practices’ that was widely perceived to ‘make sense’;27 much as did the Limby films. Youssef severed the one-to-one correspondence between the media, the state, the army, Egyptians, the nation, and Muslims, as well as the notion that Egypt is a place of religious fellowship. These were correspondences and notions which had been performed, felt, and reproduced in state discourse for decades. They had been repeated in the heart of Tahrir eight months earlier, for example with the shouts and symbols of ‘the army and the people are one hand’ and ‘Muslim and Christian are one hand.’ Thus, to separate these, and to show how some of these elements worked against others in this supposedly accepted and sensible relationship, was an aesthetically radical move that redistributed the nonsensical. Instead of accepting the idea that Coptic grievances are

24Episodes of the show are available on Youssef’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/albernameg.
27Ibid.
nonsense, or that it is crazy to criticize soldiers, for example, Youssef made nonsense out of state media’s nonsense.

The episode achieved this disruption in several ways. First, it used the Jon Stewart-inspired comedy news satire mode of juxtaposing a journalist’s contradictory statements. Mimicking a television announcer’s voice, he says, ‘let’s welcome the person who wins the prize for the best announcer at the level of Maspero.’ Suspenseful music plays and then he runs a clip of state media personality Rasha Magdi’s live broadcast of Maspero. Over images of protestors wandering the streets and sitting stunned on the pavement, she declares, ‘Until now there are maybe three martyrs, and 20 injured, all soldiers from the army. And at the hands of (pause for dramatic effect) … not at the hands of Israelis or any other enemies, but at the hands of a group (fi’ a) of the sons of the nation.’ Youssef cuts to her defending herself to a Christian caller to the show, over footage of state riot police attacking protestors, ‘I am the last person, Mr. George, to agitate/provoke incitement against the Christians.’ Then a cut back to Youssef, who says, ‘really?’ And then he cuts to her announcing, over footage of large tanks and people sitting around, ‘Three soldiers killed and 30 injured by Copts packed in front of Maspero who fired on them.’ Youssef comes back and quips, ‘thank you for the clarification.’

He also uses the comic technique of reversing the referent of particular words and categories used by the media. In response to the media claims that the soldiers were the martyrs and victims (al-ḍahaya), he shows a clip of the massive demonstrations at the funerals of the murdered Copts and says, ‘and unfortunately the next day we saw the funeral of the victims … um, no, those are the protestors who died … no, no, those are also the protestors who died.’ To further highlight the negation of Coptic life, and show how military hardware is given life over them, later in the broadcast he parodies official announcements and offers ‘condolences’ to the trucks for being burned—the same trucks that soldiers used to crush protestors.

Youssef parroted back the belittling of Coptic grievances to achieve the opposite effect: to highlight how the media’s rendering of such grievances nonsensical is actually nonsense. After suggesting that the media focused solely on Coptic violence despite the presence of mostly non-violent protestors, he intimated that this focus on violence was understandable because ‘as we know, Copts mostly protest about silly things like the burning of six churches in less than a year … without any charges brought against even one individual … because never have obstacles to equality been enough of a reason to protest.’

The episode also uses parody of official media terms to disrupt their officialness, their ‘seriousness,’ their sense of being ‘obvious and correct.’ This calls the viewers to recognize that the entire story of Maspero, and hence other stories of state violence, is completely fabricated. In a sequence of rapid fire and serious sounding back-and-forths with an imagined producer speaking into his earpiece interspersed state media footage of events with the announcer referring to an ‘eyewitness’ (shahid ‘ayyân), Youssef says, ‘There are people who want to bring down the army? What is your source?’ (State media: Eyewitness) and ‘There are Copts who are burning Qurans and are burning the country? What’s your source?’ (State media: Eyewitness). This bit calls forth and dismantles

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the ubiquitous but unnamed eyewitness that was constantly conjured in state media reports to bolster the regime’s story of events. This entire episode was radical in its clear, public, centring of Christian life, death, and demands. It made sense of them.

Unfortunately, I suggest, the show also laid the groundwork for the subsequent mass delegitimization and dehumanization of the Brotherhood, and Islamists in general. When the Brotherhood came to power in the January 2012 parliamentary elections and the June 2012 election of President Morsy, Youssef’s criticism of Islamist media, and of their actions more broadly, was no less pointed than that of state media. As people grew increasingly unhappy with Islamist rule, Youssef’s show provided comic relief and hilarious political commentary, but did not try to understand Islamists’ grievances with the state. Rather, al-Bernameg made fun of Islamists’ looks, their supposed lack of sophistication, stupidity, duplicity, vanity, repressed sexuality, and their incompetent governance. Youssef’s criticisms sometimes engaged in classism of the sort common to secular-oriented elite denigration of the Islamic Revival. In its takedown of Islamists, and even more broadly, the show often trafficked in sexism and heterosexism to get laughs. Instead of calling people into a shared critique of power, then, the show upheld the Mubarak regime-supported notion that Islamists were non-sensical, and it reproduced hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and class. As Joel Gordon writes of this moment in general, this liberal ‘hostility towards Islamism … undercuts the ability to work toward building a new political order—in effect to share the revolution …’

Morsy’s failures, combined with this liberal hostility towards Islamists, made him an easy target for the first president to be satirized on television, and thus the satire did not live up to its radical potential.

The last episode before the 30 June 2013 coup, when the military removed Morsy from power, brought together in a powerful crescendo all of the previous year’s comic techniques for delegitimizing the Morsy government and its supporters. This episode aired on 26 June 2013 during a time of tense division among Egyptians, with pro and anti-Morsy protests and street clashes erupting ahead of massive demonstration planned for Tahrir Square four days later. Morsy decided to give a lengthy speech at the same time as the show—many said to detract from Youssef. On the other side of the airwaves, Youssef was making fun of the Brotherhood. He began an important bit by saying, in a serious tone, that ‘many people have gotten the wrong idea from the protests of the Islamists, that they are scowling, angry, and will take you back to the time of ignorance, but in reality these particular protests would raise your awareness, and enlighten you, and sometimes educate you.’ The audience realizes that this is all sarcasm as soon as he shows a close-up clip of pro-Morsy protestors chanting in a mixture of English and Arabic to create a rhyming chant. I underline the words they spoke in English, with an extremely thick accent:

One means one.

The media has gone crazy. (Here, they mean the constant media attacks on Islamists.)

Two means two.

Secularism no.

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Three means three.

Egyptians are free.

With his sophisticated cosmopolitan audience, many of them raised in or educated in English and French, Youssef does not need to complete the joke. They squeal in laughter at the end of the clip and give huge applause. They ‘get’ that this is bad, basic English, and they make fun of them for it, conveniently ignoring that most Egyptians do not have the cultural and educational capital to learn English.

In another part of the episode, he did a mashup ‘honouring’ Morsy’s one year in office that was made of clips of all the supposedly embarrassing and stupid things Morsy had said. One of the most famous was, ‘Gas and alcohol don’t mix.’ This was from a January 2013 diplomatic trip to Germany, during which Morsy spoke positively about drunk driving laws. This was an intertextual reference to the episode Youssef did right after this trip, during which he showed clips of Morsy’s English mistakes, such as when he said during a speech that civilizations should be ‘versus, not against’ each other. He also showed clips of him integrating English and Arabic, as if this were bad, such as when in a discussion Morsy said in Arabic and English (English underlined), ‘Don’t you have that a drunk is arrested and goes to prison if he is driving?’ Youssef then shows an image of a famous film actor known for saying ‘Is that English Morsy?’ to a character of that name in a very famous play. The phrase is written over his face. The audience is in fits of laughter throughout this bit, and a pan to the front row shows viewers barely able to contain themselves. Then Youssef parrots Morsy’s English in an exaggeratedly thick accent.

Another intertextual reference in the June 26 ‘homage’ to Morsy’s first year in office was an image of Morsy wearing a large hat that had been part of official dress he was given to receive an honorary doctorate at a university in Pakistan. In a March 2013 episode that would eventually land Youssef in court for insulting the presidency, Youssef skewered what was to be a prestigious honour. He came out on set wearing an exaggerated, huge version of the hat (that he then later wore to the courthouse). He goes on to say that the president never misses a chance to say some of his ‘magnificent words’ and then played a clip of him saying in his acceptance speech in English, ‘I thought that politics and scientific applications, and science, do not mix.’ Again Youssef imitates his accent and quips, ‘does nothing mix with you at all?!’ After a bit making fun of the fact that Morsy’s doctorate was in ‘philosophy’ (sic: it was a PhD), he goes to a ‘live’ correspondent in Pakistan, a racist rendition of a Pakistani with an Egyptian Arabic name made to seem Pakistani, pretend exaggerated Pakistani accent and gestures, who then says that ‘Morsy and Pakistan. Very good mix. Very good mix.’ The implication here is that Pakistan is filled with religious zealots, and so Morsy fits right in.

This episode was a culmination of all of the various comic strategies used to delegitimize Morsy during his year of tenuous rule. It ended with a long song which, idiomatically translated, means ‘We Chose You and We Got Screwed By You.’ This was a comic version of the song ‘We Chose You’ that the Mubarak government had circulated in mass media at the time of his last presidential ‘election’ to give the impression that he was actually chosen by the people. Yet if Mubarak’s notion of ‘the people’ was a constructed façade, so was Youssef’s, which was also classist. Nearly all of the singers who came out to perform the dancing and singing number on his studio stage were dressed in exaggerated attire of the lower classes. Most of the men were wearing the long robes associated with the
popular urban classes and the peasantry, with colourful patches sewn all over them. Many of the women wore long dresses of peasant women, in an exaggerated style often found in television renderings of them. The bit implies that these were the type of people who voted for Morsy, not necessarily the viewers. This class distinction is furthered by the appearance towards the end of the song by one of Youssef’s most well-known collaborators on the show, who emerges wearing a black suit with a bowtie and holding a jerrycan of the type used to hold gasoline. Referencing the government subsidies for the poor and making clear that he doesn’t take them but is still suffering, he sings: ‘okay [government] you are not giving me lunch and dinner, but why are you looking at my gasoline.’ This could be interpreted as directed towards vehicle owners, which while it includes many Egyptians does not encompass everyone, and the dress and lyrics establish a clear distinction with those who receive government subsidies. Gordon and Arafa highlight also how this routine played on earlier electoral moments and, like other routines, made Nasser-era references that, while jocular, were also ‘salt rubbed in a very deep wound’ for the Muslim Brotherhood, given how oppressed they were in that era.30

Youssef’s playful version of ‘We Chose You’ added the ‘We got screwed by you’ chorus. If the loosely sodomizing meaning of the song was not clear, it was made so by a lyric (sung by the man in the suit) calling Morsy’s rule a khaziq—which basically means a pole shoved up an ass—complete with the hand gesture that goes with that meaning. Sexual references were par for the course on al-Bernameg, which trafficked in both sexism and heterosexism. Youssef would flirt with female guests and famous female audience members, and he would comment on women’s looks. It was also not beyond Youssef to minimize women’s struggles. In Season 2, Episode 17, he essentially made fun of the experiences of sexual harassment in Egypt at the exact time when the anti-sexual harassment activists were working hard to put women’s treatment in public on the revolutionary agenda. He cuts to a correspondent in Tahrir, a woman dressed in medieval armour. He asks who it is, and she removes her mask and reveals herself as Lebanese singer Nicole Saba. He says, ‘oh that’s sweet! (using the word for sweet that is often used in street harassment).’ She replies in an exaggerated stern voice that this is sexual harassment; he denies it. Then she says she has to go fight harassment in the streets and lets out a crazy shriek in a warrior stance meant to elicit laughter, which it does. To be sure, Youssef criticized Islamists’ sexism all the time. But his own show also reproduced the commonsense notion that women are sex objects, and that their claims for gender justice are nonsensical.

Overall, al-Bernameg did not challenge dominant classist, sexist, anti-Islamist, and racist discourses or hierarchies in Egypt. As millions of Egyptians became increasingly frustrated with the glacial pace of economic reform and the Morsy government’s attempts to ramrod their supporters and views through state institutions and, especially, the writing of a new constitution, they found on television every Friday a hilarious comedian who gave a public voice to those feelings and, one could argue, helped congeal them into opposition to Morsy and the Brotherhood rather than to the deep state. Ultimately we cannot know to what extent al-Bernameg led to the mass demonstrations on 30 June 2013 and the subsequent coup. But it is safe to surmise that a show with thirty million official viewers (and likely a lot more as video clips circulated) that poked holes in Morsy’s legitimacy nearly weekly did play a role in creating a collective sentiment

against his rule, or at least ‘spoke to and validated the growing frustrations that brought so many people back into Tahrir Square’. 

In a sign that Youssef’s disruption of the nonsensical was only acceptable when it came to Morsy, many Egyptians turned on him when he began making fun of President Sisi, who deposed Morsy and took power. Sisi had tremendous support because he was viewed as saving Egypt from the Islamists—Islamists who Youssef had made fun of for a year. Censorship pressures and fears for his safety led to him to terminate his show in June 2014 and flee the country.

**Conclusion: a shift in what makes sense?**

It is time for scholars to take humour more seriously as a consequential political form in the Middle East. The outpouring of humour in relationship to the ongoing uprisings in the region alerts us to its political power and centrality for everyday citizens, particularly in Egypt where humour is so socially valued. In this article, I have argued that humour has both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic potential, and thus it needs to be approached more critically than is often the case for Middle East scholars and journalists. I have done so by bringing insights from humour studies to our understandings of humour in the region, particularly the notion of the distribution of the nonsensical. I suggest that a productive way to take humour more seriously as politics is by thinking about what makes ‘serious sense’ to whom and why, and to be more critical about how humour may either reproduce that arrangement or disrupt it. In this way we may see how humour can be an example of gradual creative insurgency or can insidiously reproduce regime politics and social hierarchies.

Unfortunately, despite all the humour discussed in this article, the forms of oppression that brought so many people to support Mubarak’s overthrow in 2011 are even more tenacious. As of this writing, the Sisi government has arrested a number of humorists using a new anti-terrorism law as well as laws with vague wording that prohibit insulting Egypt and violating public modesty. Such arrests include a farmer who dressed a donkey up in Sisi’s attire and wrote ‘Sisi’ on its flank, a prominent satirist vlogger who in 2016 had circulated a film of himself and his friends giving condom balloons to security forces in Tahrir, another sarcastic vlogger, a novelist for writing a comic novel filled with sex scenes, and a young cartoonist. The targeting of humorists, along with political activists and journalists, shows just how threatening humour is. This situation is much more dire than during the Mubarak regime, when jokes against the government were tolerated on screens and in everyday life, particularly in café culture. Today, plainclothes policeman watch over café-goers to the point that people are extremely wary and reticent to joke about Sisi or the security forces.

Yet these attacks on well-known humorists have not completely suppressed people’s penchant for the light-hearted (khifat al-damm). In private settings between family and friends, barbs and jokes persist that highlight the regime’s nonsense, as well as the nonsense of the mass media. Even if many avoid direct criticism of Sisi, some still joke about other political and media figures, lofty but meaningless regime initiatives, or government failures. One can see such humour not only in private settings, but also

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31 Gordon and Arafà, p. 37. For discussion of Youssef’s shows in the Sisi era, see Gordon 2017.
and especially in meme and YouTube mash-up culture. A whole subgenre of humour poking fun at Sisi supporters has appeared in the last few years. This includes a private Facebook group whose owner parodies elite women who swoon over him and show disgust at the lower classes. *Al-Limby* movies still air on television, and scenes are even repurposed for political jokes. For example, in 2016, a humorous YouTube post featured a clip of Sisi telling a reporter that Egypt can be strong, can go without eating, can go hungry. The creator then sutured that ‘serious’ politician speak with a clip from *al-Limby* where the main character tells a coffee server at a funeral he and Bach are attending to ‘go away’ (ittikil ‘ala Allah, literally, ‘entrust in God’), and Bach proceeds to cry that his coffee is bitter. Egyptians in exile, including Bassem Youssef, still engage in humour about Sisi, the regime, and its supporters—humour that disrupts the distribution of the sensible.

This everyday, often underground, humour is perhaps the best example of gradual creative insurgency. It is not spectacular. It does not capture the attention of the authorities. But it keeps alive, and continuously creates, the sense that the regime is pure nonsense. It need not be ‘willful, planned, and deliberate’, as Kraidy characterized the creative insurgency of the uprisings. The power of some of these expressions is in their spontaneity, in everyday conversations or tweets or Facebook posts written on the fly. They suggest that what makes sense as a reasonable life, and/or a reasonable regime, as shifted for many in Egypt. They are a ‘harbinger of a new sense of self’. It remains to be seen whether this gradual creative humour will contribute to a broader upheaval, even if not as dramatic as 2011, or whether it will reproduce some of the social hierarchies that have thus far marred the quest for social justice.

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33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Is2HTcLqOg.
35. Ibid., 20.