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In the contemporary world we must recognize the ever more widespread destruction of those conditions under which intellectual creation is possible. From this follows of necessity an increasingly manifest degradation not only of the work of art but also of the specifically 'artistic' personality. The regime of Hitler, now that it has rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial, has reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime, whose task it is to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions. If reports may be believed, it is the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorian[1] reaction is now reaching its climax.

André Breton[2]

In 1991, Egyptian director and screenwriter Daoud Abdel Sayed released *Kit Kat*,[3] one of his best films. The death of Uncle Megahed, towards the end of the film, is one of the most poignant in Egyptian cinema: Sheikh Hosni, the blind protagonist, spills his heart out to Uncle Megahed, who stares into space unblinking, dead, unbeknownst to Hosni. After a lengthy monologue, in which Hosni attempts to understand and justify the mess he has made of his life, he finally realises that he is speaking to a lifeless corpse. The scene ends with Hosni carrying away the old man's body in a wooden cart.

I think the final chapter of a society's collapse begins the moment that members of that society realise that things are dire, but their realisation comes too late. They try to stop the inevitable, first through justification, then blame, and finally anger, but they do not realise that they are talking to a corpse because they are blind to the truth.

In the contemporary world, we see various regimes attempting to replicate the practices of Nazi Germany as described as Breton, as they purge all artists who show the slightest sympathy for freedom and turn those who remain into servants of the regime, who glorify it with the worst

aesthetic conventions. We can perhaps read the scene from *Kit Kat* as a metaphor for this cultural destruction: The blind Sheikh Hosni symbolises the collapse of humanity and his conversation with Uncle Megahed's corpse reflects the collapse of society and humanity's attempts to justify the situation, not realising that it is too late.

Societal collapse is typically attributed to multiple causes, such as environmental change, invasion, the fraying of social cohesion, growing inequality, and the decline of intellectual capacities and the suppression of creativity. Here I explore collapse and disintegration in the Egyptian context, one feature of which is the collapse of the creative industries, the largest and oldest in the Arab region. In this collapse, perhaps the most important question is: How does censorship supplant criticism, and how is criticism transformed into a tool to dominate creativity? This is a pressing question in Arab contexts that are struggling against the total authoritarian control of all symbolic production.

My work as a programme officer of the Education Unit of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies has given me the opportunity to work with an exceptional group of young artists and digital content creators from the Mediterranean region. These young men and women were trainees in the TAE'THIR programme, a three-year programme launched in September 2023 by our unit from Marseille, France, with the aim of promoting human rights in the Mediterranean region through the digital and artistic creations of young people. The programme encourages participants to analyse the impact of societal, political, economic, and cultural contexts on artistic creation, and to dissect the complex relationships between creativity and concepts like patriarchy or censorship.

The programme involves various activities to shepherd the development of participants' project ideas, the preparation of a research project, and meetings and interviews between participants and numerous cultural actors and institutions working in the field of arts, culture, and human rights in Marseille.[4]

In addition to giving participants the opportunity to listen, see, and learn from diverse and powerful experiences, the project has allowed us to raise these and other questions, all of them revolving around one main idea: Despite very divergent experiences, over the last decade events have revealed that the ruling regimes in the Arab region are all invested in authoritarianism, especially in their treatment of symbolic production, regardless of the differing objective contexts in these countries. In some of them, authoritarianism is the dominant form of power dynamics between government and citizens. Indeed, it has evolved into the chief driving force of social relations in those contexts.

In 1970, Louis Althusser wrote:

> The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs [Ideological State Apparatuses] as easily as it can in the (repressive) State apparatus, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle.[5]

What strikes me most about this passage is that one of the core tasks of the ruling classes in any society is to dominate the ideological state apparatus, which we can define, following Althusser, as the ideological-religious state apparatus (religious institutions), the educational apparatus (public and private school systems), the family, the legal system, the political apparatus (the political system, including various parties), trade unions, the media (press, radio, television, etc.), and the cultural apparatus (literature, arts, sports, etc.). For culture especially, the ruling class's domination of that apparatus is a strategic necessity, accomplished by exercising full control of public spaces and everything related to symbolic or creative production. I believe that this stems from a profound awareness among the ruling authorities that these forms of human production pose an existential threat to any authoritarian structure in society.

For decades, authoritarianism has profoundly impacted the arts in the Arab region, and this influence has evolved in tandem with the region's political and social systems. Authoritarianism, however, is not limited here to state control of the arts and formal institutions; it manifests as well in authoritarian practices that shape social and cultural perceptions, influencing the consciousness of a significant segment of the citizenry and at times moulding them into a disciplinary force for social control, which in turn often poses a fundamental threat to the continuity and existence of symbolic production.

It is through this lens that we can examine the arrest of a number of Egyptian women digital content creators for purportedly 'threatening the values of the Egyptian family and the values of Egyptian society and inciting immorality and debauchery and engaging in vice'.[6] These incidents demonstrate how society, in many cases, is a key driver and impetus of repression. In these cases, the repressive state apparatus—the police and the judiciary—arrested female content creators on TikTok pursuant to complaints filed by male content creators. As a result of their complaints, legal action was taken, but the complainants did not stop there. They also orchestrated a smear campaign against all the women charged in the case. For its part, the state expedited the case through the courts, which culminated in hastily issued prison sentences and fines.[7]

The threat to creative production is thus not under exclusive control of the ruling authority, which in turn imposes restrictions on topics and technologies. These may lead to restrictions on expression, forcing creative workers to produce works that conform to prevailing cultural, political, social, or religious values. These restrictions may be closely linked to politics, as they are often used as a means of promoting the vision of those with power over public spaces. Moreover, they may induce changes in the content of artworks, bending them towards specific goals. The most serious aspect of this situation, however, is the threat to cultural diversity posed by the focus on the dominant national culture, which typically expresses the vision of the ruling class.

But is patriarchy, as a theoretical concept that produces social practices, the basic starting point for the subversion of creative production? In this context, patriarchy refers to all the different forms in which it is manifested in various aspects of social, cultural, and political life. These forms

necessarily adversely impact any symbolic production of a society and interact with and affect the lives of individuals and societies in complex, overlapping ways.

Patriarchy includes religious leaders, who possess spiritual and religious authority that influences individual and collective beliefs and morals, and patriarchal laws that define the roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men, as well as patriarchal authority over cultural values and traditions, and socially acceptable arts and literature. A key pillar of patriarchy in Arab societies is the deep-rooted masculine cultural domination of these societies.

'Masculine domination' is a concept that describes an existing reality to which not only men but also women unconsciously contribute. That both parties—the oppressor and the oppressed—adopt the same categorical perceptions and assumptions allows for the reproduction and maintenance of hegemony, and even the attempt to impose it as a fait accompli. The centrality of masculinity imposes itself as neutral; it need not argue for its legitimacy. The entire social system functions as a formidable symbolic machine aimed at affirming the masculine domination on which it is based.[8] The incident with women content creators in Egypt is an important demonstration of these practices.

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony based on Marxist theory, which treats the dominant ideology in society as a reflection of the beliefs and interests of the ruling class. Rule by the dominant group is made acceptable by the spread of hegemonic ideologies—a set of views, beliefs, assumptions, and universal values—via social institutions such as education, the media, family, religion, politics, and law. Since institutions serve to socialise people into the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group, if that group controls the institutions that maintain the social order, it rules over everyone else.[9]

An important manifestation of authoritarianism is government censorship, codified in laws and regulations and carried out by regulatory institutions that continuously monitor artistic and media productions, determining which topics can be discussed, filmed, or included in artistic works. A report issued by the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, titled 'Under Siege: New Attempts to Control Drama Works',[10] examines multiple aspects of state censorship and control. It presents a legal analysis of a set of laws and administrative decrees related to the censorship of dramatic works, in addition to the decisions of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation and the proposals submitted by the proposals committee of the National Media Authority for new prohibitions on dramatic works. This censorship regime is thus a closed loop, allowing the authoritarian regime to shape society's creative vision.

This process, whose functioning requires more than one body, may allow an authoritarian regime to control trade unions, bringing them to heel so that they play the role of occupational policeman. Instead of a legal body consisting of a group of citizens practicing a single profession or similar professions, formed mainly to engage in collective bargaining on working conditions and pursue the economic, social, and even political interests of its members through lobbying governments and legislative bodies, a trade union comes to resemble a regime that monitors the activities, behaviours, and processes in a particular institution or society by regulating behaviour, scrutinising performance, and ensuring compliance with specific policies and laws.

I think that in order to understand totalising authoritarian cultural hegemony, we must start with criticism, which plays a vital role. Criticism can expose the philosophical and logical dimensions of power, like a mirror that reflects the true nature of hegemony and authoritarianism. In other words, it is the most important means of deconstructing power dynamics in social and cultural contexts. Criticism itself is a creative process and an essential part of the artistic process, but I believe that has changed now that censorship has supplanted criticism and censorship itself has become an integral part of the artistic process, as noted above.

In this context, criticism can be a creative and artistic process in itself. Combining a careful examination of works of art with intellectual inspiration, it can give us profound insight into the concepts and ideas that these works address and use to push us to confront authoritarianism.

Jean-François Lyotard, a French sociologist, philosopher, and literary critic who was a pioneer in introducing postmodernism to philosophy and the social sciences, discussed this idea in the late 1970s. Endeavouring to define the kind of art that can best be described as postmodern, Lyotard wrote:

> All that has been received, if only yesterday (modo, modo, Petronius used to say), must be suspected. What space does Cezanne challenge? The Impressionists'. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cezanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work.[11]

But can we transform that critical tool from a mere critique of presentations into a flexible medium for multiple creative tasks in order to lay bare the complex trajectories of authoritarianism in cultural hegemony? Indeed, can this tool play a transformative role, becoming a creative medium that resists all manifestations of authoritarianism, patriarchal cultural domination, and censorship?

Matthew Fuller[12] and Eyal Weizman[13] have gone even further in their treatment of criticism, seeing it as an artistic medium in and of itself rather than a tool for critiquing presentations. Their work turns criticism into an exploratory tool for investigative aesthetics,[14] a philosophical and political multidisciplinary approach to the concept of 'beauty' whose purpose is not only to produce truth, but also to make that truth understandable and scrutable in order to achieve justice.

This approach requires reconsidering concepts such as 'evidence' and 'document', and the role of the political authority, whose disinformation efforts are relentless, and countering those efforts through heightened sensitivity to the deluge of images and videos around us in order to achieve justice. They stress that artists concerned with investigative aesthetics must examine corruption, government violence, environmental destruction, and repressive technologies in cooperation with other fields not normally associated with aesthetics, such as professional journalists studying open-source videos and satellite imagery to carry out forensic visual investigations.

Drawing on diverse disciplines, this approach, known as investigative aesthetics, is based on theories of knowledge, environment, and technology. It examines facts and documents in depth,

and scrutinises radical practices like those of WikiLeaks, Bellingcat, and Forensic Architecture. Investigative aesthetics takes place in the studio, laboratory, courtroom, and gallery, online and on the streets, seeking to build new 'common senses.' This concept is an inspiring introduction to a new field that combines inquiry and beauty to change how we understand and confront power today.

It is, therefore, necessary to dismantle the old view of criticism by framing it as a means to prevent a particular current from nationalising and monopolising cultural diversity to its own benefit and as a first step towards a re-conceptualisation of thought and culture that accords with a diverse and democratic society.

The complex social reality under authoritarian domination affects the structure of cultural and artistic life through patriarchy, which is a key starting point for the subversion of creativity. Accordingly, we must realise the importance of understanding the tools of power and the impact of the ruling class's cultural and political hegemony, which is a fundamental obstacle to cultural diversity and creativity.

Turning criticism into a creative force could be a solution to our cultural and artistic challenges. While it gives us an opportunity to explore facts and conduct analysis in new and innovative ways, it also requires profound effort to carefully examine all the data.

We must dedicate our efforts to achieving a radical transformation in the way we deal with power and cultural hegemony. When we use criticism as a tool for analysis and change, and to expose and seek out the truth, we open the door to new opportunities to build a society based on equality, respect for diversity, and human rights. It is the responsibility of all of us as citizens, artists, and researchers- now - to struggle to build a world of justice, cooperation, and creativity, even if it is temporarily a prisoner of our artistic imagination.

About the Author

Hakim Abdelnaeem is the programme officer for the Human Rights Education Unit of CIHRS, a multidisciplinary artist, and a writer interested in issues related to the intersection of arts and culture with the social sciences and humanities.

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[1] In July 1794, the month of Thermidor in the French revolutionary calendar, a military coup brought down the radical Jacobin government, bringing the revolutionary tide in France to an end. In Marxist literature, the adjective

'Thermidorian' was subsequently commonly used to refer to the reaction that ended the revolution while preserving the social system that it produced.

2 'Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art', signed by André Breton and Diego Rivera, Mexico, 25 July 1938.

3 *Kit Kat* (1991) was written and directed by Daoud Abdel Sayed, produced by Hussain Alqolla, and starred Mahmoud Abdel Aziz, Amina Rizq, Sherif Mounir, Aida Riad, Nagah al-Mogi, and Ali Hassanein. The film is based on the novel *Malik al-Hazin* (*The Heron*) by Ibrahim Aslan.

4 The programme is led by the French EUROMED Network, CIHRS, Les Instants Video (Numeriques et Poetiques), and the French Education League in Bouche-du-Rhône, in cooperation with the French Human Rights League, the Institute for Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Research and Studies in the South. The project is funded by the French Development Agency.

5 Althusser, Louis (1970) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Ben Brewster (trans.). First published in *La Pensée*.

6 Egyptian Front for Human Rights (2020) 'Tahdid Qiyam al-Usra al-Misriya: Kayfa Tufrid al-Dawla Saytarataha 'ala al-Fada' al-'Amm bi-Habs Fatayat al-Tik Tuk' [Threatening Egyptian Family Values: How the State Imposes Its Control over the Public Sphere by Imprisoning the Young Women of TikTok], 27 July, accessed 1 June 2024, https://egyptianfront.org/ar/2020/07/tiktok/.

7 Ibid.

8 Bourdieu, Pierre (2001) *Masculine Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

9 Cikaj, Klejton (2023) 'Antonio Gramsci on Cultural Hegemony: What Is It and How Does It Work?', *The Collector*, 21 August, accessed 20 June 2024, https://www.thecollector.com/antonio-gramsci-cultural-hegemony/.

10 Othman, Mahmoud (2019) 'Under Siege: New Attempts to Control Drama Works', 15 April, accessed 27 November 2023, https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2019/04/15/17389-afteegypt.html.

11 Lyotard, Jean-François (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 79.

12 Fuller is a professor of cultural studies. He is the co-author of 'Urban Versioning System v1.0' and 'Evil of Media', as well as the editor of 'Software Studies, a Lexicon' and co-editor of the journal *Computational Culture*. He is the author of the forthcoming 'How to Sleep, in Art, Biology and Culture'.

13 Eyal Weizman is a British architect and the director of Forensic Architecture, at Goldsmiths, University of London, a research agency that uses technological, aesthetic, and legal means to expose the truth in a world teeming with misinformation, lies, disinformation. He is also a professor of spatial and visual cultures and a director of the Centre for Research Architecture.

14 Fuller, Matthew, and Eyal Weizman (2021) *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso Books).