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Scenes from the Crusades

Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo by Wael Shawky

Jacques Sapiega

[...]

With the ceramicists of Aubagne

First and foremost there is the affirmation of an ancestral tie with the earth. The symbolic significance of working with clay is clear and evidence of this is found from Pre-Roman times on in the ground beneath the town of Aubagne. With the discovery of glaze and enamel the production of pottery spread throughout Provence, and by the 17th century a quarter of the town's population was employed in ceramics.¹ Faience and ceramics began to be exported from the 18th century on. In the French West Indies these objects were actually called *Daubagnes*. Production became industrialized in the 19th century and in the 20th century it aroused the interest of a number of artists. In fact, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, Ernest Pignon-Ernest and Pierre Ambrogiani went to Aubagne to have their works decorated or to make pottery. The major exhibition of Picasso's ceramics staged here on the occasion of Marseille-Provence, European Capital of Culture 2013 is also a more recent episode in this story. A blend of industry and artistic creation, the theme of clay lies at the heart of an identity strategy, reinforced by the art of making *santons*, originally figures for a Christmas crib, though now they have taken on many different forms (countless personalities from the world of politics and the arts have been *santonifiées* – made into *santons*). These figure are deeply rooted in a history that melds religious and local traditions of the area. Indeed, before becoming the European Capital of Culture, Aubagne was already established as the capital of the *santon*. It has its networks of artisans, many of whom create original works, its museum, and its school with its

¹ Enamel was used in Marseille in the Sainte-Barbe workshops (doubtless first established by Islamic potters from the South of Spain) from the end of the 12th beginning of the 13th century and was widespread in Provence and Languedoc in the 13th and 14th centuries. Glaze first appeared and came into general use in Provence and Languedoc from the 13th century onwards. In Aubagne, pupils of Italian artisans who had settled in Manosque founded the first workshops around 1510. From Abel V., Amouric H., eds., *La céramique, l'archéologue et le potier. Études de céramiques à Aubagne et en Provence du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle*. Exhibition catalogue, Aubagne 1991.

apprentices. The *santon* makers and ceramicists were the first to meet Wael Shawky. Their moulds were to produce the 110 marionettes in the film.

[...]

From the birth of the marionettes to the distribution of roles

Wael Shawky's encounter with the Aubagne ceramicists came about through his discovery of the art of making *santons*. Though the *santon* can be very expressive, nonetheless it still remains a character fixed in a single pose. While the Aubagne craftsmen could model an endless number of different characters, they were not familiar with the technique of creating articulated marionettes; this was a technological and aesthetic challenge. Making the different body parts of the marionettes (heads, arms, hands, trunk, legs) in ceramic did not pose any problems a priori. The question was how to assemble and articulate them, with a view to manipulating them.

Fertility and marionettes

Ceramic puppets: it is a great temptation to link the myth of the marionette to the familiar symbolism of earth as the origin of life. The passage from matter to living being is far more evident here than in the case of other materials, such as wood or paper. Bearer of religious beliefs and philosophical theories, the marionette haunts the boundary between life and death. The fact that it is forged from clay adds to this dimension, it accentuates the musing and turmoil attached to it.

But while earth presides over fertility in the most ancient myths, it is at the same time associated with work and art.² Thus the creation of the Aubagne marionettes invented by Wael Shawky rested on a very strong division of labour, which was itself based on tried and tested techniques.

[...]

² See Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Le travail et la pensée technique' in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Maspero, 1969.

Searching for the right sets

December 2011. The project was going ahead and as the marionettes were taking shape thinking about the sets began to speed up. The size and number of marionettes were now known and it became possible to imagine the sets they would perform in. Nothing was really fixed. The only indication Wael Shawky gave was to seek a graphic and architectural equivalent for the title of Amin Maalouf's book, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*. How could that "point of view" be expressed with a camera?

Marionettes and cinema: an old story

Since the time when the first optical machines appeared, which preceded the "invention" of the animated image, marionettes had played a part in films.³ When the cinema was making its debut these two arts took the form of travelling fairground shows. Besides, the "cube" of the puppet booth, the little theatre used for marionettes – and especially the one for glove puppets – is rather similar, in a sense, to the frame of the first cameras. It has been noted that tragedies (religious subjects such as Passion Plays) performed by string puppets particularly inspired early cinema. In history films about famous events the actors' exaggerated mechanical gestures appear to be based on a marionette model.⁴ They imply that men who think that they are making history are merely puppets manipulated by forces greater than themselves, in this respect, they are the forebears of the marionettes in *Cabaret Crusades*.

However, the space of the marionettes and that of cinema were not to coincide for long. The cinematic cutting of the space into different planes was soon to take over.

³ See Cristina Craxioli, 'Acteurs de lumière: image, marionnette et projection cinématographique', *Puck* no. 15, p. 11–22.

⁴ François Amy de la Bretèque, 'Le théâtre de marionettes, forme modélisant méconnue du cinéma des premiers temps' in *La vie filmique des marionettes*, Laurence Schifano, ed., Presse Universitaires de Paris 10, 2008.

Indeed, marionettes in film were to have different sets from the painted canvas of the backdrop. There was a move from the traditional, conventional theatre filmed in a single static shot to the studio, where the scene was filmed in multiple shots, which were assembled during the editing phase to reconstruct a continuous and homogeneous space.

Mise-en-scène, enactments and ideologies

In the first episode of *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File*, the sets reconstruct the volumes in three dimensions, but on the same scale as the marionettes. However, the anti-naturalism of this particular performance space (starting with the artificial bodies of the actors) still remains. Even though the "natural" proportions between the marionettes and the sets seem to be respected, there is an enormous gap between this and cinematic realism. When the strings and rods are conspicuously filmed, as in *Cabaret Crusades*, and the mechanism of manipulation is implicit, the meaning becomes evident. The narrative and symbolic function of the marionette in cinema takes on its full significance, this is the opposite of those films that seek to reproduce the past with the aid of true-to-life sets.

In choosing to deal with the subject in film by using marionettes, Wael Shawky was seeking a way in which the mise-en-scène would avoid falling into the war of images trap. And, as we have seen, the "Arab point of view" that Maalouf proposes in his book is a bias that is delicate to handle.

The eyes of "the Other"

Wael Shawky found an answer to the problem partly in the sets of the film. Doubtless it is possible to put the camera close to the ground (at the level of the marionettes' eyes), and doubtless it is also possible to shoot them close up, multiply the shots and reverse shots, create movements and so on. But what is the marionettes' standpoint? What is their view of the world? Wael Shawky sought to imagine their universe, an approach that distances us from a realistic reconstruction. For him, the sets of the first part

were still too influenced by the idea of the "little theatre" very popular with television. But how could he get away from these conventions and the illusion of reality that makes the sets three-dimensional? Shawky found the answer by drawing inspiration from the miniatures by the Turk Matrakçi Nasuh (15th–16th century):

Studying those miniatures, I thought we could consider them as rendering concrete what I have been looking for since the beginning: the Arab point of view on the Crusades. In those miniatures geometric perspective has been completely ignored. They refer to a culture of the image typical of a certain civilization, to a perception of space we are no longer capable of understanding. These works of art are at the same time precise maps, although their point of view does not seem rational to us. And the idea came to me that those who will see the film will see it through other eyes.⁵

Miniaturist, mathematician and Ottoman historian, Matrakçi is known above all for having drawn a map of Istanbul that enabled travellers to find their way in the city. In 1533, he accompanied the armies of Suleiman the Magnificent through Asia in a campaign destined to vanquish the Shah of Persia, who was threatening the borders of the Ottoman Empire. He left a manuscript about this journey (*Beyan-I Menazil-I Sefer-I Irakeyn*) with illustrations of the towns and places where the armies halted en route.⁶ Matrakçi measured the distances between towns and his miniatures are veritable maps including descriptive details of the monuments. From Aleppo to Baghdad, these towns are for the most part the sites of the Crusades, where the action of *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* takes place. Although produced long after those events, these miniatures show the architectural heritage of the past, the ramparts and fortresses of

⁵ Interview with Wael Shawky.

⁶ *Nasuhu's Silâhi, 'Beyan-I Benazil-I Irakeyn -I Sultan Suleymàn Hân'*, Yuseyin G. Yurdaydin, Université Basimevi, Ankara, 1976.

Middle-Eastern towns erected at the time of the Crusades. These images and their great evocative power were to inspire the sets for the film.

Matrakçi's miniatures show the towns in a global perspective – a mixture of parallel and rotating perspective, and in some cases curvilinear perspective – without a main vanishing point.

Unlike the central perspective – called artificial – that gives a single, particular viewpoint, the towns are the object of an overall view, in which the image of the buildings seems calculated according to different perspectives. (These miniatures were doubtless used in connection with military tactics.) There is always the impression that multiple viewpoints dominate, we feel that we are seeing the towns from various angles at the same time. This allows us to see visible and invisible sides simultaneously and is far-removed from "natural" representation of the human viewpoint invented by the Italian Renaissance painters.⁷

A mosaic of towns

How could those miniatures become sets for the film?

How could that universe that does not conform to artificial perspective, with its abundance of details and colours, be brought to life? Rejecting their reproduction as backdrops (images-surfaces), Wael Shawky and Claudine Bertomeu, the set designer, experimented with a perspective inspired by the technique of movable or pop-up books. The principle consists in developing the sets in depth by opening up their pages. These works have been traced back to the Middle Ages.⁸ Today, certain creatives make giant pop-up books, capable of containing maps of cities. It is through this development from the page to in-depth representation that the idea of the movable book led to the creation of the sets of

⁷ Indeed, much more than a simple workshop model, the central perspective reflected a new conception of the world. And, even if this was not the declared aim of painters, it was an effective way of rethinking the space in coherent terms, domesticating it and redistributing human beings and objects on a single plane. Philippe Comas, *La perspective en jeu*, Gallimard, Découvertes, 1992, p. 37.

⁸ Jean-Charles Trebbi, *L'art du pop-up et du livre animé*, Alternatives, 2012.

Cabaret Crusades. To obtain that result the iconographic research consisted in selecting miniatures that would fit into the screenplay. They corresponded to 15 paintings (11 towns/landscapes and 4 dolls' houses) chosen by the author and added to the screenplay. Claudine Bertomeu and Wael Shawky made models based on these images, which were also numbered and provided corresponding elements and motifs. They were isolated, cropped, rectified, enlarged 200 times, printed on white sheets, cut out and finally glued to their polystyrene foam support.⁹

Computer graphics designer Jérémie Terris did this painstaking work and had to solve some completely new problems. Indeed, in the miniatures elements overlap. A house in the foreground hides part of what is behind it. Making the two houses exist in depth involved reconstructing the missing part. Then in order for the cameras to move alongside or behind the elements of the set a "back" had to be invented for the original images. It was also impossible to conceive the elements as being flat, since the support of the sets was at an angle of 45 degrees, so a curve had to be provided and perspective created by coming to a compromise between two- and three-dimensional representation.

The number and concentration of elements had also to be calculated. How many trees, houses and palaces were needed per set? The palaces (dolls' houses) in the foreground, whose proportions had no relationship with the towns in the background, had to allow the marionettes to perform in their interior or go out onto a balcony to speak to characters standing below. The illumination depicting *The Seduction of Yusuf* painted by Bihzad, in 1488, where two human figures float, weightless, on a flat surface whose labyrinthine perspectives create no depth,¹⁰ is projected within an in-depth construction reproducing this "carpet/page" with its panels and geometric motifs. A surface becomes a set whose elements host the animated characters. To cover the walls of these houses, the motifs (tiles, decorative friezes) had to undergo complicated treatment. They were isolated, straightened (they were often uneven) in order to be reproduced in large numbers to cover extensive surfaces. The colours were retouched and they had to be

⁹ In French *carton-plume*.

¹⁰ Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)*, Flammarion, 2004.

made uniform. All the constituent elements (houses, ramparts, palaces, mosques, bridges, trees etc.) were numbered and listed, then placed on the backdrops previously painted on a sloping wooden support. Here the Matrakçi miniatures acquire depth under our very eyes, as they seem to unfold and detach themselves from the surface. In concrete terms, the point of view offered to the camera reconstructs perception on various levels, a blend of two- and three-dimensional representation, in which the marionettes become animated beings. Let us imagine one of these miniatures where time and action are fixed ... The book opens, the proportions change, the houses, monuments and palaces are arranged in depth ... Suddenly the streets come to life, characters come and go, the noise of the town grows louder, a song is heard ... Gradually a dolly shot brings us into this world of strange shapes and colours: the magic of marionette animation begins here.

Mise-en-scène of the space and conception of the world

Can these sets with their strange perspective express a point of view that is "other"? Everything here rests on a paradox. First and foremost we must reject the idea according to which Islam condemns the reproduction of the real world in images. In his masterly work *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)* Michael Barry reminds us that Islam in principle forbids the image. In examining the complex relations between religion and the image starting from the œuvre of the illuminator Bihzad, the author shows how figurative art in Islam, though without the support of the mosque, depended on the patronage of princes who favoured an extraordinary pictorial output. Our misunderstandings about Islamic iconophobia are of longstanding, and unfortunately have recently been fuelled by the very real and recent destruction of masterpieces of figurative art by religious dictatorships. By placing in the foreground of his film figurative paintings of Arab origin and the image of another civilization called Muslim, Wael Shawky, true to his method of inverting points of view, breaks another stereotype. Nor does he shy away from a further constant in Arab painting: its delight in decorative and figurative elements that remain on the surface and do not attempt to create spatial depth. As Philippe Comar writes:

... beneath the apparent story of the image, there is first this way of setting the scene in the space. This involves the choice of a perspective whose object is to render intelligible the visible world and which is far from being a mere question of style. It is the means through which a painter, and more generally a period of history, sees a whole civilization and seeks to establish man's relationship with his surroundings. *Choosing a perspective implies a veritable philosophy of the space. An image does not only represent the world, it reveals the conception one has of it.*¹¹

Wael Shawky's attempt to reconstruct through the image the Arab conception of the world at the time of the Crusades is obviously a pure artistic projection. But in so doing, the theatrical illusion of *Cabaret Crusades* and the miniatures on which it is based – representations that see the world according to a non-realistic perspective – form the basis of a screenplay that eschews stereotyped interpretations and leaves more room for the viewer's imagination to take over.

[...]

¹¹ Philippe Comar, *La perspective en jeu*, Gallimard, Découvertes, 1992, p. 82–83