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Out of the Gutter, Into the Gram: A Comical Message and a Digital Medium

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Out of the Gutter, Into the Gram: A Comical Message and a Digital Medium

*If censorship exists, isn't it because aesthetics is perceived – at least by these in power –
as a very real threat to the social and political order?*

–Gabriel Rockill

Boo is the moniker you use when you're calling your lover, or someone you deeply care about. It's also the sound you make when you're trying to scare or frighten someone. It can also be the sound you make when you're watching a spectacle that you don't like — you start booing at it. Such is how the Lebanese political cartoonist, @theartofboo, translates his frustration — he boos at the spectacle that is Lebanese politics and reveals the layers upon layers of its social fabric through cartooning.¹ This means his cartoons spans across a lot of sectarianism, corruption, incompetence, ammonium nitrate, and very little electricity.

This form of political satire has endured a long history in the Arab world, and much of it has been through cartooning and doodling dissent. With the spread of the printing press in the 19th century, political cartoons began to play a significant role in mobilizing people and ridiculing the enemy. During World War I, Germany was the first nation to recognize the significance of political cartoons as a medium of warfare, as they were used to “mobilize the population both morally and intellectually for the war, explain setbacks, confirm belief in the superiority of the fatherland, and proclaim the hope of the final victory; against the enemy, political cartoons were utilized to put the population in dismay through ridiculing them, and constantly displaying their ineptitude, cowardice, and effeminacy” (Kishtainy, 6,7). Yet, political cartoons did not remain limited to Europe; their proliferation in the Middle East coincided with

¹ In a conversation with Lebanon's “Sarfe After Dinner Podcast,” Bernard Hage tells the hosts, Médéa Azouri and Mouin Jaber, that he learned about Lebanese humor from 2009 suicide bombings:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20g77cFH0Y8>

the growing Western influence in the Ottoman Empire. Göçek recalls this development in *Political Cartoons in the Middle East*: “[Political cartoons] accompanied Europe’s gradual technological, economic, and political domination over the rest of the world. The non-Western world including the Middle East promptly started to employ this medium to scorn their own Westernizing selves and to ridicule and delegitimize their Western rulers” (Göçek, 6).

Arab political cartoons before the Arab spring focused primarily on the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Naji al-Ali, a Palestinian cartoonist who was assassinated in 1987, is regarded as one of the most influential Arab cartoonists of the 20th century for illustrating over 40,000 cartoons characterized by their biting criticism Israel and Arab regimes.²³ During the first Gulf War in 1991, cartoons as a form of dissent gained even more traction in the region. Satellite dishes were relatively new at the time, and as audiences alternated between local and international news outlets, it became clear to them that the news coverage was by no means objective. When people lost trust in broadcast television, political cartoons satirized the biased media coverage, and became an alternative form of communication and propaganda (Slyomovics, 97).

Nevertheless, the Arab Spring marked a significant turning point for Arab political cartoonists. Caricatures became one of the main mediums through which the anti-government protests were articulated. Many argue that their intent was to “provoke, shock, and make people question their reality — to make them wake up.”⁴ Precisely because of the cartoons’ accessibility and simplicity, cartoons became a fun way to communicate relevant political issues to the public

² <http://www.handala.org/about/>

³ Naji Al-Ali’s most famous artistic creation was the refugee child *Handala*, who has become a symbol of the Palestinian cause.

⁴ A.A. Alwazir, Yemen: The Political Power of Laughter, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/6803>

sphere and to prompt political conversation among people. In other words, Salud Adelaida Flores-Borjabad argues in *Political Cartoons in the Middle East: A New Form of Communication and Resistance* that political cartoons were “consolidated form of communication” after the Arab Spring, because cartoonists began to explicitly criticize governments and politicians, thus rendering cartoons a “sign of revolution” (Flores-Borjabad, 327).

However, ever since 2011, governments have increasingly targeted those who dissent through their doodles. After criticizing President Bashar al-Assad in one of his drawings, Syrian pro-regime thugs crushed cartoonist Ali Ferzat’s fingers “so he doesn’t draw again.” Although Ferzat had been doodling for almost forty years, his bold satire was seen as an alarming threat when he depicted Arab regimes in 2011. Henri Lefebvre contends that a terrorist society, “cannot maintain itself for long (...) when it reaches its ends, it explodes” (Lefebvre, 148). Arguably, this explosion happened during the Arab Spring with the people’s staunch rejection of the status quo. With that, political cartoons became a weapon to resist the authoritarian regimes on the one hand, and an alternative form of communication and information on the other. They don’t just become a significant medium of protest, but a force of protest and indeed the message itself.⁵

The progression of authoritarian states coincided with the growing influence of social media in the region, ultimately making digital media the optimal space for Arabs to exercise freedom of speech and civic engagement. As El-Ariss argues in *Leaks Hacks and Scandals*, “the Internet, given its inception as a closed environment for communication experts and enthusiasts, became identified as a Habermassian public sphere, namely a forum for sharing and debating

⁵ In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan who argues that the form of a message (print, visual, musical, etc.) determines the ways in which that message will be perceived, to the point of actually altering the ways in which we experience the world.

ideas intrinsic to democratizing processes” (El-Ariss, 9). The increased reliance on digital media created a virtual “parallel republic” where people mobilized and participated digitally through citizen journalism, activism, and aesthetics (Halasa, Malu., Zāhir, 236).

In this light, different social media platforms took up different functions that enable us to draw intersections between the “digital and the subversive.” El-Ariss observes how Twitter becomes tied to the “classical genre of *akhbār* (news, anecdotes, lore), leaking and hacking to practices of exposure (*fadh*), and contemporary leakers and hackers to mystics and jinn.” (El-Ariss, 7) Similarly, Teresa Pepe writes about the Egyptian blogosphere which shaped the “auto-fictional blog” as a new literary genre for self-expression and literary creativity.

The rise of digital creative activism fueled new audiences for political cartoons and digital memes. Here, I employ Limor Schiffman’s definition in *Memes in Digital Culture* of memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, (b) which were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (41). From this premise, the political cartoon becomes a meme for being a cultural piece that can be copied or replicated and easily disseminated digitally. Just as An Xiao Mina illustrates in *Memes to Movements*, “Thinking of memes as enabled by technology helps us see the patterns and waves of meme culture as aspects of culture more broadly, indeed of humanity itself” (183). Akin to the political function of cartoons described earlier, *Memes to Movements* identifies an emergent global and intersectional trend occurring in today’s political meme culture: “memes [have become] the seeds from which social movements grow, but to flower, they must find their homes in the fertile grounds of minds and cultures” (177). Comparably, political cartoons traverse national borders on social media and adapt to different regional contexts and specifics. This form of satire infiltrates “prohibited

zones,” thus becoming a means of coping and cultural expression on the one hand, and a weapon to fight the state’s arbitrary oppression on the other.

Bearing in mind the growing internet meme culture, this essay reflects on the seemingly tight relationship between the aesthetic and the political: What makes the aesthetic political “influential” on visual digital platforms? How does the aesthetic consequently shape the political narrative — or does the political shape the aesthetic? Most importantly, how can something so apparently ephemeral and frivolous interface with different media and engage with complex political issues? The aestheticization of politics was first coined by Walter Benjamin as being a key ingredient to fascist regimes. He explained that “Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves” (49). However, this essay neither expands on Benjamin’s aestheticization of politics, nor the politicization of aesthetics.

Instead, I draw on Jacques Rancière’s interpretation of the term aesthetics as a “specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships” (10). According to Rancière, politics exists “when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society” (51). In simpler terms, Rancière explains that politics is the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the established order. Aesthetics is consequently bound up in this battle, Rancière argues, because the battle takes place over the image of society – what it is permissible to say or to show.

This paper hopes to unpack ways in which the political is mirrored, molded, expressed, and manifested in the aesthetic on visual medium of Instagram. Acknowledging today’s state of generalized economic, social, and even moral crisis makes it difficult to separate the artist’s

direct engagement from the public sphere, especially when their work carries potential to challenge systems of authority (Hessel). However, my work takes a step back to explore the audience's perception of this politically encoded aesthetic messages in a time when social movements are "becoming transmedia hubs, where new versions of society are encoded into digital texts by movement participants, then shared, aggregated, remixed and circulated ever more widely across platforms" (Costanza-Chock, 195).

Although a lot has been written about digital activism and political cartoons in the Arab world, little has been theorized about what makes this form of political artistic expression successful on these digital media platforms. Existing scholarship places great emphasizes on analyzing social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook for having played a significant role in mobilizing people on the streets during key revolutionary movements like the Arab Spring (Alhindi et al.). However, the October 17 uprising in Lebanon brands Instagram as a new, equally effective social networking cite with great potential to facilitate mobilization and political engagement among oppositional groups.⁶ The wave of protests resulted in a massive mobilization of opposition groups that began scheming for a secular, democratic revamp of the system, away from traditional political parties. Arguably, their competitive Instagram presence played a key role in increasing their popularity among Lebanese crowds, perhaps mostly like-minded bourgeois liberals. At a time when Twitter became a space for "intellectuals," Instagram became the accessible space for a different, equally invested audience to engage in political dialogue — albeit with a greater emphasis on visuals.

⁶ On 17 October 2019, unprecedented cross-sectarian protests dominated the streets of Beirut, demanding a radical overhaul of the political system. The protests, nicknamed the Tax Intifada and WhatsApp Revolution, erupted after the government introduced taxes on gas, tobacco, and WhatsApp calls. Although the protests were prompted by regressive tax announcements, the grievances go much deeper: governmental sectarianism, nepotism, mismanagement, corruption, and lack of accountability has left the country and its economy in shambles.

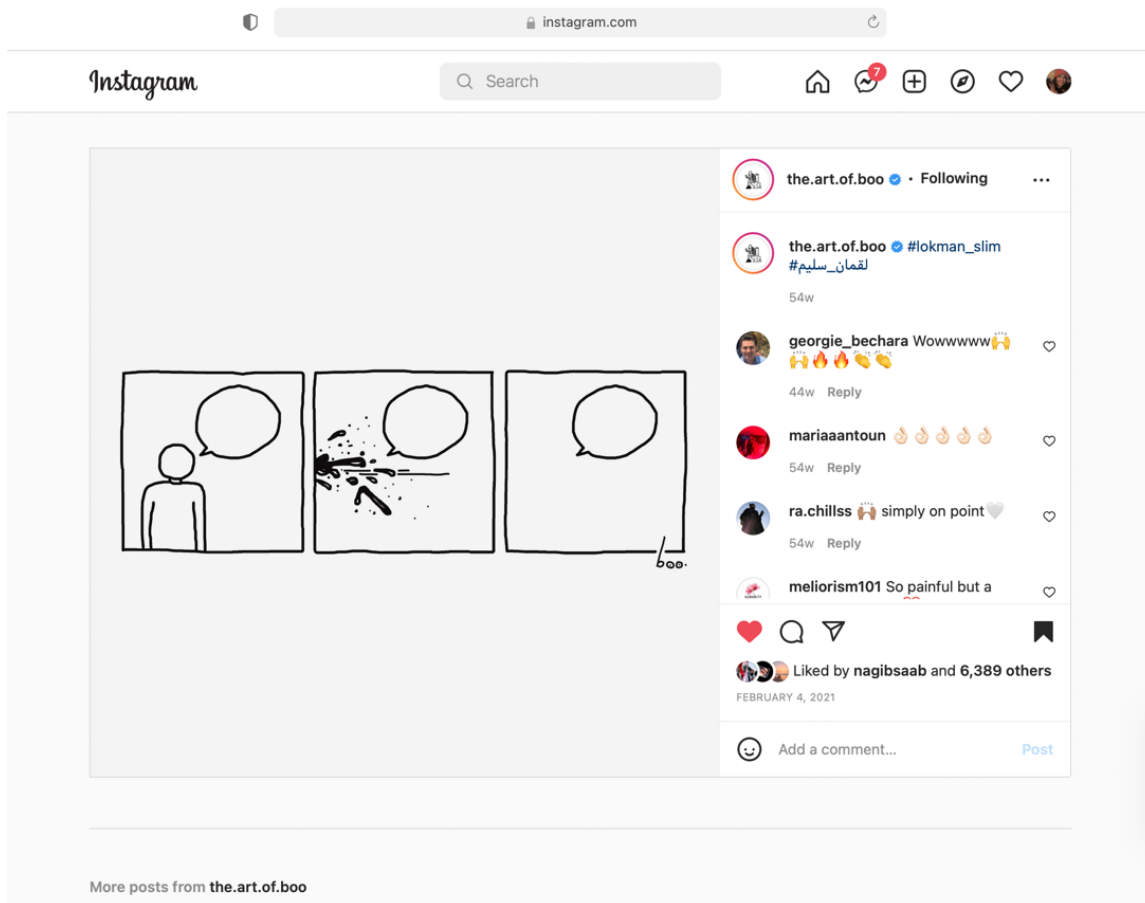
Bernard Hage, commonly known by the pseudonym “The Art of Boo”, is an illustrator, writer, musician and cartoonist who is known best for his political cartoons on Instagram.⁷ Since 2018, he is published weekly with *L’Orient Le Jour*, the French language Lebanese daily, and his work has been hailed by regional and international media, and popular blogs.⁸ This essay carefully observes three of the Art of Boo’s Instagram posts to demonstrate how comics generate political meaning through mirroring the medium of Instagram on the one hand, and by inviting the audience to become active participants on the other. I draw on *Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* to guide my understanding of the medium of comics and cartooning as a stylistic approach, and visually analyze three of the Art of Boo’s posts on Instagram. The three posts were determined based on engagement insights provided by Bernard Hage when I requested insight on his most successful posts. Although I received multiple engagement insights on different posts, I chose ones which cover different themes and varying layouts to allow for a richer, well-informed analysis of stylistic features and what makes them effective. In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how the medium of cartooning operates as a multifold mirror: it emulates the medium of Instagram while also enabling the audience to observe, detect, and perceive themselves vis-à-vis what they are not. The repetitive, simple attributes of the drawings prompt the viewer’s imagination and encourage political meaning production. Here, I aim to demonstrate that it is exactly in this vacuum that the comics ascend from solely being the medium of protest to the message itself. An Xia Mina says, “In today’s world, memes are the seeds from which social movements grow, but to flower, they must find their homes in the fertile ground of minds and cultures” (171). Following her metaphor, I hope to

⁷ <https://www.theartofboo.com/biography.html>

⁸ His work has been featured in CNN, The Economist, The Daily Star, The National, Annahar, Vice, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Al Jazeera, to name a few.

understand how we can cultivate these seeds further by analyzing the medium of comics
Instagram.

I



On 4th of February 2021, the Art of Boo posted a comic strip in one square Instagram frame. The comic was comprised of three different square panels, each contributing to the fast progression of the short story being conveyed. The Art of Boo's signature emerges on the bottom right corner of what appears to be the final panel from the strip, therefore insinuating the order in which the strip should be read. The first panel on the left shows a faceless figure with an empty speech balloon. While the second panel in the middle preserves the positionality of the speech balloon, the faceless speech figure is replaced by a splash of viscous or sticky liquid. The last

square panel retains no more than the same speech balloon from previous panels and is signed off with the artist's autograph: *boo*.

The images in this post follow a deliberate sequence, thus lending the Instagram post to the medium of comics. In *Understanding Comics, The Invisible Art* (1993), Scott McCloud specifies “the artform – the medium known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (6). Shortly after establishing comics as a medium, McCloud emphasizes the role of “deliberate pictorial sequence” in the form of the comic medium. He consequently defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Employing McCloud's definition of comics then renders the Art of Boo's post a comic artform, with comics being the messenger and the message being conveyed (6). However, McCloud also establishes the “long-standing relationship between comics and cartoons” very early on in his book. With that, he differentiates between cartoons as “an approach to picture-making – a style” and comics as the “medium which often employs that approach” (21). While AoB utilizes cartoons as stylistic features, the medium in which they are employed are comics that follow a deliberate pictorial sequence to relay a message.

The squares in which the visuals in this post are confined imitate the square dimensions of the post's exterior Instagram frame. In *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020), the authors argue that one of the app's early defining visual aspects was the square dimensions for posted images. They add that while the feature restricted its users to that shape on the one hand, it also prompted innovative responses on the other. Artist and feminist scholar Magdalena Olszanowski says that while hashtags facilitated the effective communication between women on the platform, the constant element was the square which she describes as

“the IXI common.” Reflecting on the analogue of the square, the authors of *Instagram* contend that the inspiration comes from an “older, somewhat fetishized photographic culture: Polaroids, instant-printed photographs with plenty of space to annotate if so desired” (50). Instagram’s layout, they argue, follows a similar aesthetic, with the space for likes, comments, and hashtags enabling a “digital realization of these annotations” (50).

Arguably, Art of Boo’s post also enables a visual realization of these annotations. The three squared panel frames reproduce both Instagram and the Polaroid’s square frame. Besides the square frame, the post also exhibits “plenty of space” above and under the comic strip itself. This empty space could potentially allow AoB’s audience to fill the space and annotate their interpretations mentally and digitally. Although Instagram shifted away from the initial aesthetic of square constraints by allowing non-square portrait or landscape content in 2015, there is something to be said about AoB’s adoption of square frames that reflect the exterior. The visual is of paramount importance for the aesthetics of Instagram, as it shapes interactive possibilities and determines how content is shared and interpreted (45). Social semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen claim that “visual structures ... point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction” (2). Therefore, AoB’s decision to work with the square aesthetic might reflect his inclusion within “platform vernacular” of Instagram (Gibbs et al. 2015). From this premise, we observe that the medium of comics begins to emulate the meta medium of Instagram.

AoB’s intention behind juxtaposing cartoons in a deliberate sequence may have been to convey a certain aesthetic-political message, but a closer inspection of the form of the comic relays that it is exactly the message which is at stake here. The speech bubbles, though empty, seem to persist from start to finish, thus reflecting the bubble’s sense of longevity and

permanency. Yet it is in this exact emptiness permeating the bubbles that the audience is able to ascribe meaning to the comic. The emptiness, or non-existence, allows space for the audience to ruminate and re-ruminate, to fill in the gaps with their imaginations and their own thoughts and beliefs. When art critic John Berger and his co-authors start their book in *Ways of Seeing*, “Seeing comes before words” (7), they reference Magritte’s *The Key to Dreams* to describe how the way we see things is always influenced by what we already know or believe.⁹ As the authors note, “we never look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.” In this light, the writers emphasize that “all images are man-made,” because they derive meaning from what we know or believe (9). This comic not only asks the audience to employ their imagination and subjectivity; rather, it encourages them to do so by accentuating the vacuum of the speech bubbles. As one of the commentors on the post interprets:

@tefanostephan:

قَدْ يُقْتَلُ الْإِنْسَانُ، وَقَدْ يُقْتَلُ الرَّأْيُ، وَقَدْ يُقْتَلُ الْكَلَامُ، وَقَدْ يُقْتَلُ الْقَلَمُ، لَكِنْ لَا يُمَكِّنُ قَتْلُ التَّفَكِيرِ. فَتَبْقَى حُرِّيَّةُ التَّفَكِيرِ مُطْلَقَةً

Author’s translation:

A person may be killed, and an opinion may be killed, and speech may be killed, and the pen may be killed, but the thought cannot be killed. So, freedom of thought remains absolute. The speech bubble’s void not only endures, but also begs the audience to engage and to inject their personal subjectivity in the equation to complete the meaning of the comic strip. Therein lies the power of the message: it requires the audience to fill in the space, and make their own “man-made” meaning, thus rendering the message more personal to them.

⁹ *The Key to Dreams* by surrealist French artist Rene Magritte was painted in 1930, and it depicts a painting of a horse, a clock, a vase, and a suitcase each respectively labeled in cursive with “the door, the wind, the bird, the valise.”

The speech bubbles are not the only emptiness the audience is required to assign meaning to, as the space between the panels also expects an arrangement of elements to grasp the full picture. That space between panels is “what comics aficionados have named *The Gutter*” (McCloud, 66). The Gutter is the limbo between panels where “the human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.” This process of observing parts but perceiving them as a whole is a phenomenon which McCloud refers to as *Closure*. At a time when the *Gutter* of comic panels present jagged, unconnected moments that fracture time and space, *Closure* equips us with the ability to mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. Yet in this comic strip, we perceive what appears to be a gruesome killing taking place between the first and the second panel. The audience observes blood stemming from the gutter’s vacuum, yet there are no indicators of what, how, or when the killing takes place. As McCloud writes, “to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (69). Time and motion are then stimulated vis-à-vis the audience’s deliberate, voluntary closure. Yet the act of constructing a coherent narrative between panels renders the reader an equal accomplice to the crime: we all participated in the murder. As a result, the powerful force of participation fosters an intimate relationship between the creator and the audience by granting the audience the agency to generate meaning and participate in the comic itself.

Although the visual content we choose to circulate on Instagram derives meaning from its form, it is also heavily shaped by adjacent captions, hashtags, comments, and any surrounding contextual information or annotations. Digital culture researchers Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gomez Cruz assert that “images play an important role in how we experience being in the world and increasingly due to the ubiquity of online interaction, how we ‘shape’ our world” (79). In other words, Instagram posts are never isolated structures, but appear and must be therefore read

in conjunction with surrounding visuals and text-based information. (16) Media scholar Ryan Milner notes that memes “carry complex layers of meaning, which embed multiple modes of communication... multiple communicative modes intertwine into a single message” (24, 25). While visuals are of paramount importance on Instagram, their message is highly mediated by a myriad of different contextual elements that shape our perception or understanding of the visual structure in question.

The Art of Boo’s post was accompanied by two hashtags, both spelling out the name “Lokman Slim” in English and in Arabic. Slim, activist and outspoken Hezbollah critic, was found dead in his rental car on the morning of February 4, with six bullets in his body. His execution, and the mystery that surrounds it, has led to allegations that Hezbollah, the Iranian militia dominating the Shiite cultural and public sphere in Lebanon, is responsible for silencing Slim’s uncompromising voice. As a Shiite activist himself, Slim worked tirelessly to challenge all forms of authority in Lebanon, especially contesting the ideological grip of Iranian Shiism imported by Hezbollah. A year after his assassination, the investigation is still ongoing, but no one has been held accountable yet (Chehayeb). Lebanon has the lion’s share of political assassinations, yet such political murders remain largely uninvestigated and unresolved. Slim was one of the most prominent Lebanese intellectuals to be gunned down since historian and opposition figure Samir Kassir in 2005. This legacy of impunity has led Lebanon to rank 107th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ 2021 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders). For decades, the perpetrators of such heinous speech crimes have gone unpunished, thereby aiding the suppression of dissent. Bearing the accompanying hashtag in mind, AoB’s post can therefore be read as a criticism of the government’s inaction, or even facilitation, of Lebanon’s growing list of political assassins (Al Arabiya English). Just as Tarek

El-Ariss writes in *Leaks, Hacks and Scandals*, “the digital needs to be explored in light of the current political state of the Arab world and the nature of the Internet” (29).

To facilitate the reading of the digital in the context of political developments, El-Ariss advances a close examining of hashtagging as a form of knowledge production: “Naming the object of knowledge and constituting it as target, or hashtagging [...], involves a mobilization through a process of circulation and proliferation. Hashtagging determines the conditions of knowledge and anchors its *maghzā* (meaning). The interaction that follows is tied to that which has been named and sought after. Hashtagging thus operates as tagging or branding a ganging up on the object of knowledge” (162). This form of hashtagging as branding thus enables the user to call people to a specific scene and to call into discourse particular online topics. When The Art of Boo brands his post by employing hashtags, the comic strip automatically joins the ongoing conversation on Lokman Slim in both, English and in Arabic — it becomes a part of the circulating discourse, and consequently, proliferates as such. In *Instagram*, the authors discuss the clash between visual aesthetics and platform vernacular when Instagram users decide to hide hashtags “by featuring them below the rest of the caption, several lines down” in order to maintain a “cleaner profile” (41). Despite the hashtag’s structural role in terms of being searchable and innovative, some users have shied away from overtly displaying hashtags to maintain the ideal appearance. Yet AoB’s decision to supplement the image with nothing but a hashtag is an insistence on contextualizing his post within the political discourse of Lokman Slim.

At a first glance, there might appear to be a tension between AoB’s empty speech bubbles and his clear contextualizing of the post vis-à-vis the hashtagging and the date of posting. However, I argue that it is exactly in this tension that the political message garners its power: the

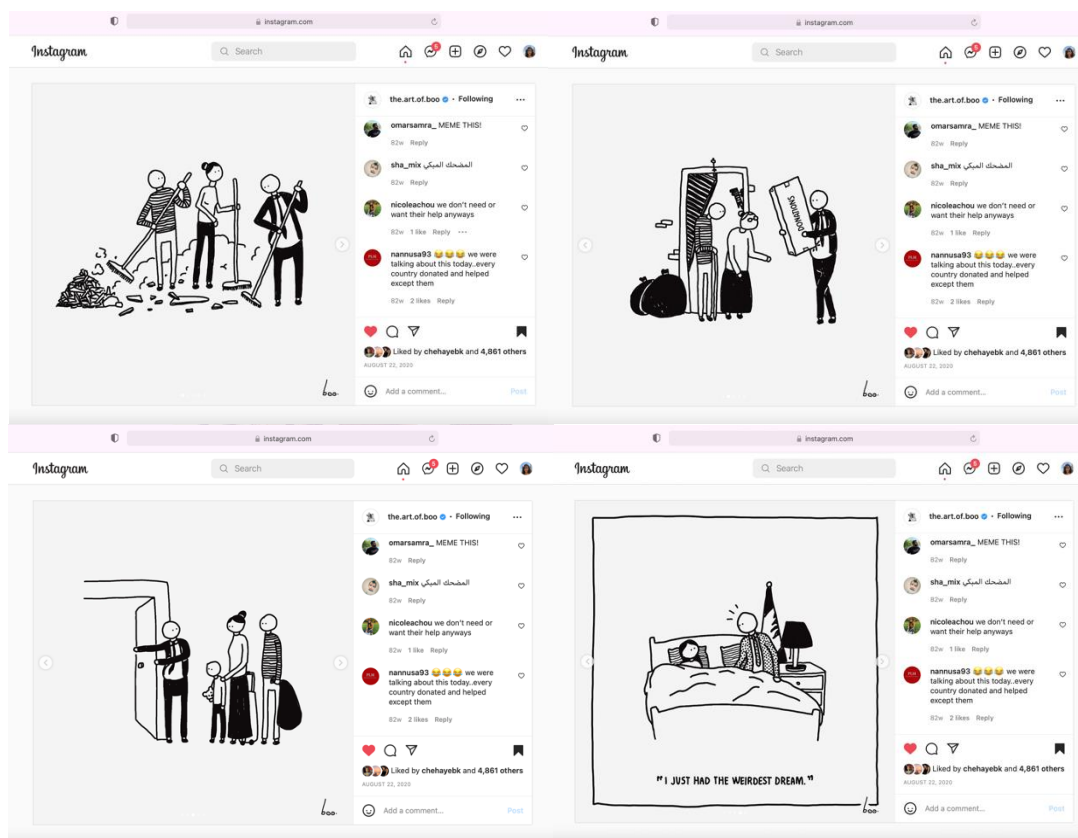
hashtag exists to propel a sense of direction in the audience and to anchor the post in its relevant timely context, but the message behind the post is not enforced on its reader; instead, it allows space for multiple interpretations, analysis, narratives, and insights. Although the hashtag might give away who the person in the comic is, the killer and the speech remain unknown. It is up to us to fill the gaps that the gutter's limbo enforces and reinforces. It is precisely in this work performed by the audience that the political and the aesthetic meet to generate powerful meanings. With that, AoB indirectly encourages the audience to do exactly what Slim was allegedly murdered for doing: thinking freely. The simplicity of the comic thus mirrors the brutality of the regime by literally depicting its bloody horrors and figuratively protesting its imposition on free expression.

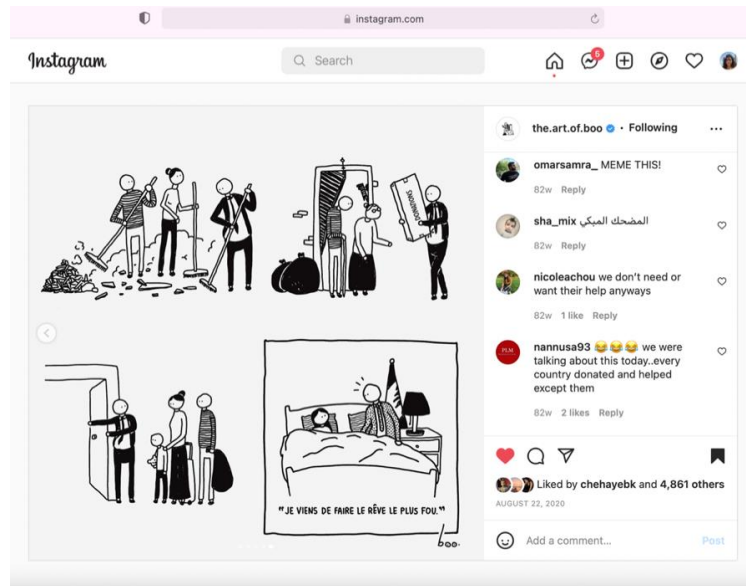
II

Following decades of government mismanagement and corruption at the Beirut Port, on August 4, 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history killed at least 218 people, wounded 7,000 others, and damaged 77,000 people, displacing over 300,000 people. The explosion resulted from the “detonation of tonnes of ammonium nitrate, a combustible chemical compound commonly used in agriculture as a high nitrate fertilizer, but which can also be used to manufacture explosives.” As of this paper's day of writing, a range of procedural and systemic flaws in Lebanon's domestic investigation have rendered it incapable of delivering justice to the victims of the Beirut blast. These flaws include a “lack of judicial independence, immunity for high-level political officials, lack of respect for fair trial standards, and due process violations” (Human Rights Watch).

Lebanon's government stepped down days after the explosion tore through the city, thus failing to deploy an adequate response to the crisis and leaving Beirut to rely strictly on foreign

aid and local volunteers. The devastation and wreckage wrought by the explosion triggered a civic call to action, with hundreds of residents picking up brooms to sweep debris in the absence of a state-sponsored clean-up operation. While in most countries, the governments would have led the emergency response, in Lebanon volunteers and non-governmental organizations armed with brooms and shovels flocked to residential areas to clean the debris and glass shards inside homes and on the streets. As a member of one of the local Lebanese opposition groups tells Business Insider in an interview: “Not a single public administration took to the streets to help these people. Not a single public establishment tried to clean the roads to clean up this tragedy, this catastrophe.” She asserts that ever since the explosion took civilian lives and devastated swathes of the city, the people have come together, hand in hand, to prove that in the absence of a state government, the people are indeed the real government.





On August 20, 2020, the Art of Boo posted a thread of five images on Instagram. The first image depicts three stick figures carrying brooms and sweeping sharp glass shards and debris. Two stick figures, one depicting a man wearing a striped shirt and another showing a woman wearing a white shirt and black pants with hair tied up in a bun, appear to be looking at the third figure in utter confusion. In contrast, the third character, lavishly dressed in a suit and tie that barely fit his plump figure, seems deeply engrossed in the task at hand. When you scroll to the right, you see the second image of the photo album portraying two old people with a hunched posture receiving a box of donations. The old couple — the man wearing a striped shirt and the woman wearing a white shirt with a black dress and with her hair tied in a bun — stand outside their house door, right next to two full bags of trash. The open door behind them reveals wreckage, with a ladder and other objects falling from the ceiling. The elderly couple welcome a man wearing a suit and a tie and holding a big box of ‘donations’ that is visibly poking his round belly.

A third swipe reveals an image of a nuclear family carrying luggage being escorted towards a door by a man wearing a suit and tie. Just like the first two images in the thread, the

female mother is wearing a white shirt, a black skirt, with her hair tied in a bun, and her male partner is wearing a striped shirt and white pants, while their son stands in front of the mother wearing a plain white shirt and black pants. Both parents are carrying luggage and bags, and their son appears to be clutching onto his stuffed animal. The family is positioned towards a door, where a man with a belly stands, his hand gestures guiding them towards the inside of the open door. Upon the fourth swipe, we see an image with a square frame depicting a couple in bed with the Lebanese flag standing behind their nightstand. The figure wearing the suit looks at the woman in his bed and enthusiastically exclaims: "I just had the weirdest dream." The last swipe combines all four narratives into a single image, with the last panel being the only one wrapped in a square frame and signed off with, "boo."

A closer inspection reveals the common denominator in all the images: the corrupt, Lebanese politician surprises the citizens when he cleans, donates, and shelters. The same chubby, well-dressed character appears in each of the panels to help the citizens, who are always dressed in variables of the same black and white attire. The audience can deduce the role each character plays through an emphasizes on the attire and a close inspection of the flag positioning in the last panel. Just as with other posts by the Art of Boo, politicians can always be differentiated from civilians by their fancy suits and the Lebanese flag that almost always accompanies their appearance, or disappearance in some cases. The audience thus automatically begins to associate the suit and tie and the flagpole with representations of Lebanese politicians.

Yet there is something to be said about the straightforwardness of these depictions and the roles they are assigned: the artist follows a consistent, simple, and repetitive style. McCloud explains that through cartooning, we are not so much "eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details." He clarifies that this very process of stripping down an image to its "essential

meaning” ultimately “amplifies that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). Although McCloud initially describes cartooning as a stylistic approach, he also describes this way of drawing as a way of seeing which serves a purpose through simplification. In AoB’s comics, all the politicians look the same, and you can almost never distinguish them. This radical conformity in representation can only reveal one thing: they are all the same in their levels of corruption and inadequacy, and hence there is no point assigning them different identities. Nonetheless, we notice that the politician in this post wears a different suit in his conscious reality than the one he wore in his dreams: a polka dotted suit, which is meant to depict his nightgown, while also reflecting his clown-like attributes and traits. The Art of Boo recognizes this amplification through simplification in his style, especially in this thread, which highlights the differences between politicians and by means of clothes and varying physiques.

One of the distinguishing traits of the Lebanese Uprising was the “new collective consciousness,” which unified different social classes, sects, and regions, against the backdrop of the current regime with all that which it entails (Muehlbacher, 6). This broad participation left behind what Bassel Salloukh calls a “symbolic challenge to the hegemony of the sectarian system” (Salloukh, 21). As a result, the two most prominent slogans at the time were, “The people want to bring down the regime” (*Ash-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām*), and “All of them means all of them” (*Killun ya ‘ni killun*), which insinuates the rejection of the entire ruling class (Waterschoot, 3). These two slogans reflect the consequential *othering* of the ruling class by participants in the uprising: the protestors did not trust the ability of the system in place to resolve their grievances and demanded a systematic rehaul of the current sectarian system.¹⁰

¹⁰ For more details on the context of the October 17, 2019, protests and a day-by-day action map: Chehayeb, K., Sewell A., “Why Protesters in Lebanon Are Taking to the Streets”, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/02/lebanon-protesters-movement-streets-explainer/>>, 2021-01-29. Hodges, E., “A Country on Fire: Lebanon’s October Revolution in Context”, <<https://www.lawfareblog.com/country-fire-lebanons-october-revolution-context>>, 2021-01-29.

While the movements opened up a dialogue across different sections of society and brought about a sense of hope for national unity, they also marked the entirety of the ruling political establishment as the common enemy (Rakickaja, 72). This sense of *othering* and distancing from the corrupt political elite could be observed very clearly in AoB's post, and when analyzed in the context of the aftermath of the August 4 explosion. As two commentors on the post respectively say:

@Nicoleachou:

“we don't need or want *their* help anyways”

@nannusa93:

“😂😂😂 we were talking about this today... every country donated and helped except *them*”

It is exactly in this distancing and othering that the post derives what one of the commentors describes as “المضحك المبكي”, or its tragicomic traits.¹¹ The tragic aspect can be attributed to the audience seeing themselves in the comic. As McCloud unapologetically points out, “humans are a self-centered race. We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist. And we make the world over in our image” (32, 33). The simplicity and universality of cartoons become a “vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't observe the cartoon, we become it” (36). Thus, the plain, simplistic style draws in the audience to associate more clearly with the message, because they see themselves in the messenger. Yet the audience also assumes a distance when they recognize features of politicians in the comics. In his

Civil Society Knowledge Center, “Collective Action digest – Special Issue (October 2019 – January 2020)”, <<https://civilsociety-centre.org/digest/collective-action-digest-22-october-2019>>, 2021-01-29.

¹¹ “المضحك المبكي” directly translates to “the funny, the tear-jerker,” and is generally used to describe that which is hilarious and tragic at the same time.

Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Henri Bergson explains that laughter presupposes an indifference, an emotional distance from the object of amusement, for “laughter has no greater foe than emotion.” In fact, it is the “*absence of feelings* which usually accompanies laughter” (4).

According to Bergson, stepping aside and looking upon life as a disinterested, unprovoked spectator will automatically transform drama into a comedy. The comedy thus assumes a dissociation, a detachment, and an alienation. The spectators see an opportunity to inject themselves in the simplistic, blank attributes of these cartoons, and reimagine the tragedy of the Beirut Explosion through the vacuum. However, they automatically reinforce the *othering* of the politicians through laughing at their ridiculousness and absurdity which the images so vividly capture. This othering generates indifference, which according to Bergson prompts laughter, or the comic. Yet, just as McCloud reminds us of our self-centeredness, Bergson says in the first sentence of his book, “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human[...] you may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression” (3). It is exactly in the audience’s interplay between associating and dissociating with the comic that AoB’s post becomes a *tragi-comic*: it invites relatability while emphasizing difference, and the result is a painful chuckle instead of a loud laughter.

The *othering* of the ruling class that the Lebanese movements stipulate is also perfectly embodied in the social function of this laughter, or chuckle in this case. Bergson specifies that “our laughter is always the laughter of a group.” He likens the laughter to “a kind of freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary” (6). If you don’t laugh, you do not belong to the social group that is laughing. If you don’t laugh, you are not one of *us*, you are one of *them*. If you do not laugh, you are not wearing a striped shirt or a plain white one,

you are then the silent accomplice to the ridiculous figure with the round belly and ludicrous dreams. The figure which *we*, the *revolutionaries*, mock and ridicule. Only when you acknowledge the comic in the tragicomic will you be able to associate with *us*, the people armed with brooms and shovels, against *them*, the corrupt political establishment that did not respond to the tragedy, and that in fact led us to it.

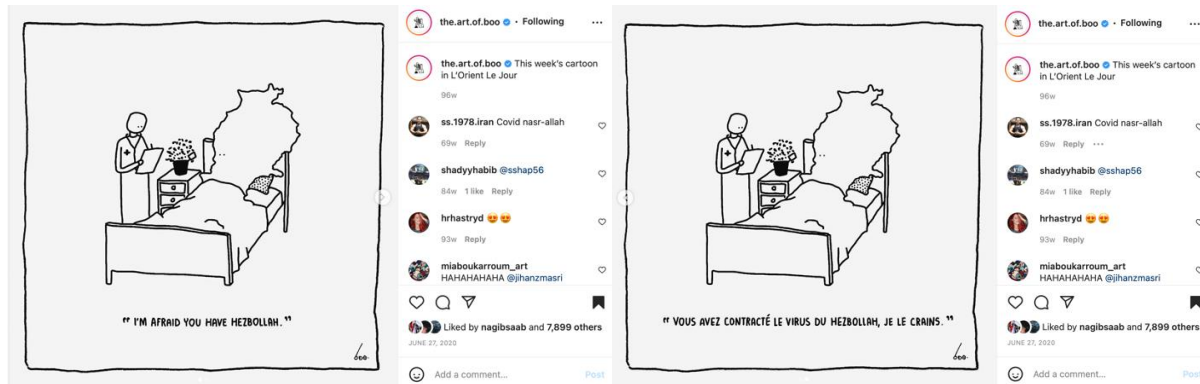
Selfhood may therefore only be understood with the assistance of an ‘*other*,’ or an outside object — like a mirror.¹² Internet culture researcher Latoya Peterson said in Personal Democracy Forum at New York University, “Memes are mirrors.” Mirrors work as an apt metaphor because they “reflect, amplify, and distort. But to work, they need something to stand in front of them” (Xiao Mina, 173). In the case of AoB’s August 20 post, the political cartoon reflects and amplifies the distinction between *us* and *them* by operating as a mirror that grants the audience the agency to detect and envision themselves instead of imposing a single image. In a way, the square-shaped Instagram post becomes the mirror Peterson draws on. The post alludes to the mirror in the way in which it invites the self to see itself within it. Through its simplistic, universal vacuum, the audience can detect themselves in contrast with what they are not: the image of the ridiculous politician. On the one hand, when the comic medium employs the cartoon as a stylistic approach, it allows the Lebanese spectator to define themselves in comparison with the ‘*other*’. Just as Berger emphasizes, images are informed by what we know or what we see. The audience see themselves in the hopeless citizens that are left unattended to by an inapt government that never achieves all the dreams it promises.

¹² Lacan theorizes that man, sensing himself from within his own body, is only able to conceive of his body as an accumulation of pieces or other bodies. Only when this whole is viewed in reflection, from a distance, is the accumulation truly composed. Thus, for Lacan bodily wholeness is only achieved with the assistance of an ‘*other*’, detached, object — a primitive media interaction

The medium of Instagram also allows for yet another layer of association with the comic. Here, I emphasize the role of the ‘right swipe’ in connecting the user’s body with the comic. Just as El-Ariss writes that the “infinite scroll” draws in and hooks the reader on Twitter with the “promise of revealing more,” the ‘right swipe’ on Instagram operates as an extension of the user’s bodily senses and a manifestation of the user’s curiosity and anxiety to see more, to know what happens next (126). Unlike the first comic, where the plot seemed to follow a coherent left-to-right progression, the Instagram thread fractures time and motion to produce entirely separate narratives, which only become connected with the user’s swipe and the last image in the thread, which joins them all together. The audience is no longer a spectator; they are an active participant both physically and mentally.

Interestingly, the final panel in the last image of the thread is the only segment with a square frame. All the other images did not retain square frames that imitate the square dimensions of the post’s exterior Instagram frame. This could be understood as a stylistic attempt at emphasizing the realness, or truth of the story: while the other stories were but a dream, the last one is the reality that must be distinguished from all the other fantasies. The fantasies seemingly float around the strictures of the exterior frame, while the real story is anchored in a square frame that imitates the exterior one. Once again, we observe the artist’s insistence on square frames that limit the characters, but also emphasize their reality. The square frame on the last panel, which operates as a microcosm of the Instagram’s square exterior frame, becomes a mirror of the viewer’s reality.

III



On Jun 27, 2020, the Art of Boo posted an album with the same image posted twice, the first image with an English caption and the second with the same caption in French. Accompanying the album with AoB's caption: "This week's cartoon in L'Orient Le Jour," the French language Lebanese daily where the artist publishes his weekly cartoons. The image depicts a stick figure physician wearing scrubs with a medical cross and writing on its notepad. The physician's patient is Lebanon's outline map vector, with a blank interior and two dots for eyes. The map lies on a polka-dotted pillow and a rectangular bedframe, with nothing else in the room besides a bedstand and a plant. As the Lebanese map waits in anticipation for the physician's triage and assessment, the physician apprehends: "I am afraid you have Hezbollah," "Vous avez contracté le virus du Hezbollah, je le crains." The English version says you *have* Hezbollah, while a direct translation of the French version declares that the outline map has *contracted the Hezbollah virus*. The French version directly labels Hezbollah as a virus, while the sentiment remains implicit in the English version.

Unlike previously discussed comic strips, this post is not sequential and does not follow a deliberate order intended to convey information. While single panels are "often lumped in with comics," McCloud contends that "such single panels might be classified as 'comic art' in a sense that they derive part of their visual vocabulary from comics." (20) Much as comics "juxtapose pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," the single panel also falls under the comic

label “for its juxtaposition of words and pictures” (20, 21). Hence, the above post can be labelled to fall under the comic medium, which also employs cartooning as an approach to picture creating. Just like previous posts, this comic is also wrapped with a square frame that emulates Instagram’s exterior square frame. Photographer and author Andrew Gibson writes that “the square format lends itself to a simple approach. It pushes you to pare down your compositions and make every element count” (Gibson). This layout, paired with AoB’s simple, colorless cartoons, amplifies the importance of the comic by placing it on the forefront of the viewer’s visual flow. However, the emphasis on the comic ultimately reproduces the gutter on a different level – it creates a gutter separating the comic from the Instagram frame. This essay previously interprets the gutter as the space where the comic comes alive, and the viewer’s imagination is stimulated. However, this section argues that the gutter can also be utilized as a stylistic method to emphasize the fictional aspect of the comic when it is controversial, while simultaneously operating as protective measure for the artist in question.

Although the comic strips previously analyzed in this essay obscure the identities of the politicians in question, this comic blatantly names and criticizes Hezbollah, consequently rendering this post a controversial one. The party’s extensive security apparatus, political organization, and social services network promote its reputation as a “state within a state” (Robinson). Published at a time when Covid-19 cases were still on the rise in Lebanon,¹³ the Art of Boo plays on the analogy of a state within a state: By *having* Hezbollah, AoB visually suggests that this state that permeates Lebanese premises is in fact a virus that quickly infects people and makes copies of itself. Besides wielding significant political and military power, Hezbollah continues to enjoy substantial support amongst its Shiite base in Lebanon and beyond.

¹³ According to [Relief Web](#), Covid-19 response — Lebanon bi-monthly situation report (26 June 2020)

Although polls from December 1, 2020, note a trend of dwindling support for the political party since the start of the October Revolution,¹⁴ Hezbollah still “coordinates a network of social media accounts that seek to orchestrate harassment and disinformation campaigns online” (Freedom House).

While this is not exactly AoB’s first post criticizing the powerful Shiite political party, *I’m afraid you have Hezbollah* explicitly calls it out and slants its decapitating effects on Lebanon, consequently generating a split in its audience reception. Much as any creative piece, this post generates different meaning-production among different interpretive communities. In order to further investigate the significance and impact of the audience’s varied cultural backgrounds, I employ Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretive communities, which “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading...but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (476). In other words, members of the same interpretive community will establish an agreement in interpreting a text, not from the text itself but from communal strategy – this strategy determines the text’s meaning and existence. As MacDowall and Budge explain in *Art After Instagram*, “the practice of social media, the curation, and its associated ties, is based less on individual judgements than the cumulative, collective and dispersed effects of these decisions” (65). Thus, the study of meaning-production generated by different interpretive communities in Lebanon when confronted by controversial comics becomes essential in understanding what makes this medium an effective political tool on Instagram.

¹⁴ According to a [study by Washington Institute](#) published on December 1, 2020, “the percentage of Shia voicing a “very positive” opinion of Hezbollah, while still a majority, has dropped slowly but steadily over the past three years. Today it is almost 20 points lower than in late 2017.”

There exists a handful of scholarly works that methodologically detect and quantify social phenomena such as peer influence, framing, bias, and controversy on social media. In this essay, however, I take a step back from purely quantitative analysis and resort to a more qualitative evaluation of elements that render this post controversial, the implications of this controversy on viewers, and what makes comics, especially controversial ones, worth studying on the medium of Instagram. As of this essay's date of writing, the previously discussed posts by the Art of Boo garner 82 and 27 comments respectively, while this comic on Hezbollah amounts to 624 comments in total. To better analyze the perspectives of the fractured interpretive communities, I zoom in on eight comments that represent the tensions raised by two main interpretive communities I was able to identify: (1) community that believes calling out specific political parties is biased and discriminating, (2) community that advocates for the explicit naming of politicians as a productive means of subverting the status quo. I have narrowed down the following comments because they represent tensions that were recurrent in my analysis of the comment section, as I demonstrate in what follows. By closely reading these comments, I hope to illuminate a better understanding of what stylistic, linguistic, and visual attributes fuel the fracturing of the interpretive community for this controversial comic.

Interpretive Community (1)	Interpretive Community (2)
<p>lebvant Imagine claiming to be a “humanist” and “artist” meanwhile you create pieces that dehumanize and discriminate. Disgusting and unprofessional!</p>	<p>jessicaabisaab Soo sad reading some illiterate comments especially from young people! W3ou ba2a. [Wake up.] It's not about religion nor sects. You need to start looking at the bigger picture here so we can at least save what's still left of this country! @the.art.of.boo this is amazing and well said 🙏</p>
<p>alirida.kheireddeen You have failed, this is a hateful and disgraceful speech.</p>	<p>ghantous.anthony Reading all the comments, I must admit, Hezbollah supporters are quite</p>

	the snowflakes! Geez you guys. It's a fucking post on Instagram.
<p>8bl00m00n This is literal Russian and US agenda 😊 what's the point of not siding with one external force but siding with the other? That's not siding with Lebanon if u only out Hezbollah without outing everyone else in the same breath like the north does with their news! You r claiming u r siding with Lebanon by removing the Iranian impact but what about the north American impact? The Russian and European impact? LOL this hilarious.</p>	<p>septimia Olala les pom-pom boys agressifs sont de sortie. "Ils sont tous critiquables". Bah ouais il a pas dit le contraire, suffit de regarder ses autres dessins hein. Mais bon ça implique d'avoir un minimum de recul et visiblement c'est pas à la portée de tout le monde...</p> <p><u>Author's translation:</u> Olala the aggressive cheerleaders are out. "They are all questionable". Well yeah, he didn't say the opposite, just look at his other drawings huh. But hey, it involves having a minimum of hindsight and obviously it's not within everyone's reach...</p>
<p>political_aya Right. Let's ignore 30+ years of a corrupt system that's been circulating the same people in different positions and blame the entire problem on one group who isn't even at fault for doing anything other than fighting imperialist policies which is the primary cause alongside a corrupt system behind what we are witnessing today.</p>	<p>farahdagher Every political group in the country is a virus. Hezbollah included. People can't expect that finding a cure for one part of the virus will cure the virus entirely, but it is a step in the right direction. The entire political system needs to go through a major restructuring with no one the least bit tied to any of these groups in power. The comments are just proof that many people are still so attached to those corrupt political parties and fail to see the bigger picture or else they wouldn't feel offended if you criticized one without the other. This shows that dismantling the political system will be extremely difficult because not only do we need to fight against our people in power, but we need to fight against our own systematic brainwashing done by these same people.</p>

A recurring theme among the comments that oppose the comic is the artist's "Western agenda," pandering to imperialist publications and policies. It is important to note here that the Iran-backed group is "driven by its opposition to Israel and its resistance to Western influence in

the Middle East” (Robinson). Thus, as soon as the Art of Boo explicitly criticizes the political group, he instantly becomes “unprofessional,” for “discriminating” in the name of art. In fact, his art becomes “disgraceful speech” that does not adhere to the “All of them means all of them” (*Killun ya’ni killun*) rhetoric that is integral and fundamental to the October Revolution. As this essay argues, previously discussed comic strips encourage the viewers to fill the gaps – the glaring vacuum created by the gutters and anonymous stick figures works their imagination and encourages critical political meaning production. However, the comments above propose a distinction between art and speech: as soon as the artist explicitly identifies political parties, his work ceases to exist only within the realm of art, and fleetingly enters the realm of speech. Unlike art, speech in this case is not vague and therefore rejects subjective interpretation. Speech is not a clean slate; it is direct and explicit. Instead of insinuating the rejection of the entirety of the ruling class like his other posts do, this comic clearly articulates a criticism of the proliferation of one specific party. According to this interpretive community, as soon as the Art of Boo names Hezbollah, not only does he shift from artist to writer, but he also becomes a traitor for breaching the rhetoric of the revolution and straying from the framework of *all of them means all of them* and emphasizing one group’s destructive hegemony. In fact, he is even blamed for reproducing the same sectarian discourse that led to the detriment of the country.

Although a group of people criticized AoB’s “dehumanize[ing] and discriminat[ing]” post, others applauded his ability to illustrate the “bigger picture” and target all parties unequivocally. A commenter even stresses AoB’s impartiality based on his other posts, where the artist seemingly targets all the politicians without discriminating. This interpretive community dissociates from the other by calling them “snowflakes” who are easily offended by a “post on Instagram.” They describe the first community “illiterate” for being “attached to those

corrupt political parties” and contend that defending any political party is unproductive and a result of “systematic brainwashing.” According to this interpretive community, AoB’s explicit mention of Hezbollah and satirical commentary not an attack on one political party per se, it is rather emblematic of the rejection of the entire political system. Notably, this comment is written in French, which is the language of the second post in the album.

Here, I argue that language plays an imperative role in fracturing the interpretive communities for this post. Considering AoB becomes an artist and a writer in this post, he chooses to deliver the message in English and French without following a literal translation. Although Arabic is the official language of Lebanon, English and French remain widely spoken with French being the second language of the country.¹⁵ In “To Write in a Foreign Language,” the Lebanese American writer and artist Etel Adnan explains how important language truly is in every art form, whether it be writing or art. She recalls how “Arabic became a second-class language within its own country” even before the withdrawal of the French from the Lebanese premises (3). In fact, the language bore a long history of being “equated with backwardness and shame” (2).¹⁶ Ngugi’s book *Decolonizing the Mind* stresses that “the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. [...] It makes them see their past as a wasteland of nonachievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples’ languages rather than their own” (3).

¹⁵ The French language’s popularity can be traced back to France’s colonial rule over Lebanon which lasted from 1920 until 1943.

¹⁶ Being multi-lingual presented a dilemma for Etel Adnan: she was unsure of what language to write in due to the political situation between France and Arab countries. “Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn’t need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn’t need to belong to a language-oriented culture but to an open form of expression” (Etel Adnan, 6).

Of course, translation remains, without a doubt, an essential communicative practice in our increasingly globalized and digitalized lives (as is beautifully illustrated in Rebecca L. Walkowitz's *Born Translated*). However, The Art of Boo's decision to translate solely in English and in French, does exclude and marginalize a big faction of Arabic-speaking viewers on social media and beyond. It hampers the accessibility of the comics and impedes the circulation of his political messages. In the case of this controversial comic, I argue that language accentuates the gap between both interpretive communities discussed in this section. By making the decision to write her solidarity comment in French, the commentor distances herself from those with "minimum hindsight" – the backwards supporters of Hezbollah. Seeing as Hezbollah brands itself as deeply invested in the fight against western imperialism (Haber), translating the comics solely to French and English should be called into question and further investigated.

When the Art of Boo no longer grants the viewers the opportunity to fill the gaps, his work becomes controversial and consequently reveals a discrepancy in the audience's revolutionary political discourse. While previously discussed works utilize the emptiness of the gutter to create their own meaning, this comic seemingly imposes a meaning – the gutter operating as the frame that stresses the fictionality of the comic on the one hand, while also distancing the comic from the medium in which it is presented. Yet, the fictionality matters a lot less when language comes into the picture, reaffirming that which the vagueness of art obscures. As a result, the audience no longer see themselves in the art – instead, they either see or distance themselves from respective interpretive communities generated by the comic.

The medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as

they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. – Marshall McLuhan (10)

This essay undergirds the argument that political cartoons are not only significant vehicle of protest, but also the message itself. However, instead of allowing the medium to “blind us to the character of the medium,” this essay takes McLuhan’s theory a step further by examining stylistic, visual, and linguistic elements that allow this form of political artistic expression successful on the digital media platform of Instagram. Not only do I examine what makes the medium of comics effective, but I ground my analysis examining an artistic medium within a digital medium — the comic on the gram. Although AoB utilizes cartoons as stylistic features, the medium in which they are employed are comics that follow a deliberate pictorial sequence to relay a message. On a medium where the visual is of paramount importance for the aesthetics of Instagram, AoB’s comics emulate the medium of Instagram by following a deliberate square frame that reflects the exterior of the comics. He employs hashtagging as branding that enables the user to call people to a specific scene and to call into discourse particular online topics. However, while the hashtagging invites the audience into the post’s relevant timely context, it does not reveal the whole narrative to the audience — instead, the vacuum incited by the gutters and the repetitive, simple attributes of the drawings prompt the viewer’s imagination and encourage political meaning production and participation. Yet, at times when the vacuum is less apparent, and when the comics’ ambiguity is challenged by explicit speech that calls out controversial politicians, the comic begins to fall under the realm of controversial topics that generate heated discussions in the comment section and reveal a greater discrepancy within the national political scene. This split in interpretive communities only becomes apparent when commentators are peeved because the artist is not on their side, and yet their willingness to argue

on the comment section proves the effectiveness of the comic on the medium — it encourages people to associate with or dissociate from respective interpretive communities in their analysis of the comic. Every decision embraced by the artist — albeit linguistic or stylistic, influences the audience's participation and meaning production to ascend from being the medium of protest, to the force of protest and indeed the message itself.

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