

When Fox Becomes Polar Bear

Iman Issa



In the fall of 2010, a friend sent me an image of a page from a new Egyptian textbook for learning the Arabic alphabet. The page depicted the fourth letter of the alphabet alongside an illustration of a polar bear with a caption under it: “Fox.” The image was funny. Although this could have been viewed as a simple misprint, it felt more significant—as though it was somehow symptomatic of the carelessness and lack of precision with which forms have come to be handled in the country in recent years. One could imagine the editor of the book happening upon the image and either failing to notice the discrepancy or simply not caring to fix it, for there was a general feeling that, in present-day Egypt, a fox might just as well have looked like a polar bear.

One could view this as the epitome of carelessness and corruption, but for me this image became particularly memorable for being consistent with a feeling I’ve had in recent years, not only confirming it, but taking its premise to a new extreme. As an image, it offered a concrete manifestation of a cynicism that has come to permeate the way most forms in the country are understood and received. It was a material testament to a collective lack of belief in appearances. For perhaps the editor who failed to fix the image was not careless, but rather failed to recognize a difference. His mistake might not have consisted of a negligence that threatens to bring up a generation associating the word fox with an image of a polar bear, but indicated rather that he was the product of a tacit understanding that the children learning the alphabet simply will not believe the images they see to begin with. They will not mistake a fox for a polar bear, but will instead fail to make any association with an external reality when it comes to these images. Their faith in appearances has already been lost, and this might very well make an image of a fox or a polar bear truly indistinguishable—colors and shapes but not much else, and as such, easily and fully interchangeable.

But what could produce such extreme disbelief in appearances? What could so drastically divorce images from what they refer to?

One answer might be found in the extent to which forms have come to be instrumentalized in Egypt in recent years, with few remaining that can be viewed without a suspicion of hidden agendas. Even everyday conventions like one’s tone of speech, dress, and manner have become markers of one’s social positioning and affiliations. For when a door in a building can no longer reference a simple means of entry and exit but a device meant to alter behavior, and when floral patterns on a dress are seen as composite shapes and colors employed to conjure a certain socio-economic class or political affiliation, then a drawing of a leaf might also recall many things, but only the last of these would have any relation to an actual leaf on a plant. Here a drawing of a leaf might just as easily be substituted for

a drawing of a lion, dog, building, or anything capable of sending the same desired message of signaling a certain trait, belief, skill, possession, or membership to a certain group.

While this extreme reliance on display as a means of situating oneself could conceivably perform many functions, in the context of Egypt this tendency might be closely linked to the dysfunctional legal or juridical system under which the country has been managed for some time. When one can no longer depend on the law to safeguard one's rights, other means must be used to produce a favorable result in a given situation. Presentation here becomes tantamount: the ability to respond to situations by portraying oneself—as an honest citizen, a wealthy or powerful individual, or a pious subject of a certain faith or belief system—will largely determine the outcome of that situation. And it will be the measure of accomplishment for tasks ranging from simple paperwork or landing a job, to securing a business deal or escaping severe punishment for a crime.

Similar to an advertisement, dress, speech, and ornament here become a means of packaging and selling whatever is on view, which also means that they will come to be understood in this way, regardless of the intentions behind them. And just as an advertisement announcing a detergent to be the best in the world is not understood as being literally true, we cannot expect anything we see or hear in a similarly motivated context to correspond to a more substantial reality. This is a place where what was once known to be red could just as easily and incontestably be depicted as blue, so long as it said “color,” which it often did.

We may have already learned to decipher the language of politics and commerce in terms of hidden agendas, to look beneath the surface to uncover real motives. But what happens when this ability is extended to encompass the ways in which all forms are perceived? What happens when one can no longer take anything for granted, or believe that anything could not be staged for a specific reason by a specific group? The perceptiveness we find in reading a bright red color in an advertisement as not just red, but a sales pitch, or in hearing a political speech as a careful arrangement of words used in ways that have little to do with their meaning in a dictionary, might also have shifted into full-on paranoia—a paranoia that renders representation an extremely challenging if not outright impossible endeavor.

Can any forms survive this operation? Can any remain neutral in the face of this constant need to anticipate opportunistic agendas within every microscopic gesture? Can any forms still be accessible to a disinterested party, retain an ability to recall a truth, and escape being tainted by the suspicion of intentionally or accidentally serving predetermined personal or collective agendas?

It was in June 2009 that I visited the October War Panorama, a museum built in 1989 by the Egyptian government, with the help of the North Koreans, to commemorate Egypt's 1973 victory in a war with Israel. On the day I visited, a group of students on a school trip were there as well, clearly ignoring the colorfully painted revolving Panorama. Their teachers were equally dismissive, taking little interest in explaining the significance of the visit or in even referencing the Panorama in any way. Even the military guards entrusted with guarding and running the museum seemed to do it with the utmost carelessness, not bothering to turn off the lights to allow the Panorama's display to work properly, or to repair parts of the display that were falling apart. I had a feeling on that day that these visitors and museum employees treated the war machinery, paintings, and bronze statues on view as being unworthy of celebration, critique, analysis, and even irony.

This ostensible disregard could be the logical byproduct of a time in which large collective sentiments and ideological convictions have diminished to a point where traditional forms of propaganda—whether the political poster, monument, or historical tale—have little left to offer those with vested interests who might otherwise want to employ them. Perhaps it was clear to the visitors that day that the paintings and statues surrounding them had long ceased to serve the purposes for which they were intended.

Similarly, the museum's visitors and employees could have equally understood how little a panorama depicting a national victory could mean to a society that relies on appearances to survive, yet believes in none. For how could one expect a member of such a society to be affected by a monument or a war memorial that is so clearly staged, after having been so thoroughly trained to extract intentions from even the most accidental of forms?

The answer is probably more complicated, for forms function on many levels. One can still be involuntarily touched by the scale and material of a building or statue, can still feel one's own heart race to the sound of a drum, or experience awe at the sight of a flag blowing in the wind—even while on a conscious level understanding such gestures to be employed specifically to affect sentiment.

Although it remains difficult to fully comprehend or explain the disregard I witnessed at the museum, it remained clear to me that even though the Panorama was there—grand, colorful, and revolving to the powerful rhythm of drums—its symbolic power was not being invoked by anyone. And even if it was, it was clear that no one was watching or listening.

Nonetheless, the Panorama and its images, monuments, and statues were still present, with all of their particular colors and shapes. What to make of these, then?



A part of me was tempted to treat these colors and shapes as irrelevant, just as I perceived the others at the museum to have done. But another part of me began to wonder whether it was now, and only now, that it actually became possible for them to speak. For couldn't it be the case that, precisely because these traditionally instrumental forms have lost their utility, they have acquired a different kind of voice—a valuable voice that is becoming increasingly difficult to locate in other domains of representation? Could it be that, even when an image of a polar bear has replaced that of a fox, a renewed belief in forms can still be found in the unlikeliest of places? Is it not precisely here that a statue of a lion does indeed manage to recall a simple lion, and a flag no longer references ideas and symbols, but only its colors and fabric? Could it be that as the shapes, colors, and sounds of the statue, political poster, historical tale, and national anthem become the property of no one, they could similarly become the property of everyone?