

# Cartoons and Graffiti: Consolidated Forms of Peaceful Protest *in the Contemporary Arab World*

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## Abstract

The emergence of the Arab Spring and networked society has led to the consolidation of graffiti and cartooning as two forms of artistic expression in the contemporary Arab world. These forms were utilized as peaceful means of protest to demand the restoration of social and political rights that had been deprived. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze and explore how these two expressions evolved and diversified in the Arab world, ultimately becoming a form of peaceful protest. The methodology employed will be qualitative, given the theoretical nature of the topic. Specifically, a visual ethnographic approach will be used to examine the images presented in this work as a sample. The expected outcome of this research is to emphasize how these two relatively unknown forms of artistic expression have become an alternative means of communication, capable of engaging society and stimulating their involvement in political and creative processes.

**Keywords:** *Cartoons, Graffiti, Arab, Art, Revolution, Social Change, Protest, Propaganda, Demonstrations*

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## Introduction

This research is an attempt to demonstrate the strength of protest art in the Arab world. Graffiti and cartoons are two artistic expressions that have proven to be a means of communication and a way to encourage the population to participate in the political and creative process. For all these reasons, they are often associated with uprisings, with the aim of claiming a series of rights. Thus, the following hypotheses have been established, which will be analyzed throughout this work: (1) cartoons and graffiti are a way of claiming rights and policies; (2) their emergence is associated with revolutionary demonstrations; and (3) they can be considered a peaceful protest weapon.

To verify these hypotheses, the following general objectives have been established: (1) to study resistance arts; (2) to analyze these artistic expressions; and (3) to verify their impact on society. Regarding the specific objectives, the following specific objectives have been developed: (1) to compare the development of cartoons and graffiti in order to see the function they represent in society; (2) to verify the claim they make through drawing to understand the objective of these artists; and (3) to examine the consequences that these arts can have for their authors.

Nevertheless, cartoons and graffiti have generally been associated with revolutionary and street art. However, it is important to note that their use is much more extensive, as they generate a collective opinion. In particular, graffiti is often perceived as a collective and socially rooted art form that reflects broader social concerns, even when it is produced by individual creators. Therefore, it cannot be understood in isolation, but rather as part of a broader social and cultural whole.

In this context, urban artistic practices such as graffiti and cartoons can be understood within broader debates on public space, collective expression, and social participation. Previous research in urban cultural studies has emphasized how artistic interventions in public spaces contribute to civic engagement and the construction of shared meanings within communities. In particular, public art and creative placemaking have been identified as mechanisms that enable citizens to actively participate in shaping urban narratives and expressing socio-political concerns (Solanki, Kane Speer, and Huang 2014; Dona 2017).

Similarly, graffiti has been examined as both a subcultural practice and a form of aesthetic expression linked to processes of urbanization and identity formation. These perspectives highlight how artistic practices in urban environments function not only as visual artifacts but also as tools for resistance, communication, and social transformation. In this sense, the emergence of graffiti and cartoons in the Arab world can be framed within a wider global phenomenon in which art operates as a medium of collective memory, protest, and cultural negotiation (Poon 2023; Borrup 2019).

## Methods

A qualitative methodology has been used because this research consists of a social and cultural study of the phenomenon of graffiti and cartoons, as a form of protest expression and communication. Therefore, the aim is to understand the complex situation that has developed through lived experience (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). In this sense, both cartoons and graffiti are two forms of resistance art that explore diverse worlds. They also represent a sustained opinion of society, so their use serves to understand a particular moment, highlighting the experiences of those who are immersed in this situation.

Taking all of this into account, a descriptive and interpretive study has been carried out. An exhaustive sample was selected for this purpose. Three graffiti works were used to illustrate their development at specific moments. It should be noted that graffiti is generally conceived as a social and collective form of art, closely linked to broader social contexts rather than to a single identifiable author, whereas cartoons are usually associated with specific named artists whose work reflects an individual perspective. Three representative examples have been chosen. Two of them are by Ali Ferzat, one of the most representative cartoonists in the Arab world, due to his professional and artistic trajectory. The third example corresponds to the Algerian Ali Dilem, who has been quite critical of the situation in his country and has sensationalized the cyberspace in a remarkable way.

In this way, a visual ethnographic method has been used to study, analyze, and contextualize the selected sample for this work. Through this method, the aim is to reconstruct what happens in the drawing. For this reason, a reflection on this fact is intended, establishing a relationship between Arab culture and the context in which this art arises, taking into account at the same time the use of social media and Web 2.0 by society (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009).

On the other hand, the grounded theory has been chosen, as it is an inductive method that allows for the explanation of this artistic phenomenon in its natural context. Thus, two fundamental strategies have been employed: the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling. These strategies have enabled the coding and analysis of all the necessary data to develop different concepts. Therefore, a series of theoretical abstractions of what is happening has been established. For this purpose, an open coding has been carried out that has allowed for the identification of the analysis theme and observation of its dimensions, in order to develop basic concepts. Then, an axial coding has been conducted that has allowed for the establishment of categories and subcategories, taking into account the development of graffiti and cartoons in the Arab world and its consolidation. Finally, a selective coding has been established, in which the theory on which this research is based is refined, namely that graffiti and cartoons have been a communicative and social phenomenon that has been consolidated, generating a participatory process in society (Trinidad Requena, Carrero Planes, and Soriano Miras, 2006).

### Analysis

The development of the Arab revolutions has led to a great proliferation of artworks in response to the wave of protests and uprisings. This explosion of free artistic expression encompasses various genres of visual and multimedia arts, including photography, painting, video, and sculpture, as well as the development of mixed techniques, such as illustration and graffiti. They use an iconic language to draw attention to the corruption of governments, their excesses, their monopoly on wealth, or their rigid censorship regime. In addition to this, other works focus on the uprising itself, addressing topics related to the incitement and spread of the revolution through the internet.

Therefore, this new art explores political diversity in all its possible directions, as well as claims the right to freedom of expression. To do this, it relates to the revolution in a more nuanced way, taking into account the untranslatable voices or unrepresentable visions of democracy in the most universal sense. In this context, this art can contribute to the

debates surrounding the broader issue of post-colonialism, of how to represent the unrepresentable, that is, how to represent a society that has been, basically, essentialist and lacks homogenizing visions.

Art evokes a revolutionary transition from singularity to multiplicity and diversity in order to achieve a balance between newly discovered freedom and extreme fragility. In this sense, it not only evokes political and social upheaval but also a transition towards an artistic revolution. Additionally, the evocation of contemporary art appears simultaneously to articulate the liberation from the old censorship of art and culture in Arab-Islamic countries, as a consequence of the political and social restrictions associated with the old regime. Therefore, it not only shows ambivalence and tension but also the instability and fragility of the democratic transition process. Thus, the goal of these artists is to become alternative voices of the revolution, through visual and multisensory forms. In other words, this visual and multisensory language of instability combines semiotics, politics, and poetics, with the participation of the viewer, incorporated into the formation of discourse (Shilton, 2013:129–145). The artists, on their part, have become a representation of a new formulation of the vanguard, so that artistic praxis gives rise to a change in aesthetics, reflecting different episodes, while also becoming a refuge for expressing solidarity. Therefore, these artists, through their works, have become agents of ethical responsibility and socio-political change (Demerdash, 2012).

#### **Development of Graffiti in the Arab World**

In this context, graffiti became the most visible artistic response of the revolution in the streets as an act of defiance against the government. Some of the early graffiti served to reflect and highlight people's calls for freedom, as well as to demand the most basic needs such as food or bread. As a result, its use has motivated this art to be considered one of the most important voices of the revolution (Brianbridge, 2013).

Graffiti negotiated its integration between the contestations to the systems of state disintegration and bureaucratic power. The meaning of the revolution was constituted from the experiences lived within the spaces of the revolution. Therefore, artists tried to capture the memories of the past on public walls, turning them into monuments to these struggles and lives lost in revolutions. However, for the public, the spaces occupied by these walls acquired collective and personal meanings. The graffiti that appeared on murals and panels embodied specific memories of ordinary people, to the extent that people ended up gathering around the walls in order to participate in discussions to invoke a certain collective memory. These forms of art transformed public spaces and streets through graffiti activism. In this sense, graffiti can be understood as a form of urban artistic intervention that reconfigures the meaning of public space and fosters collective engagement. As noted in urban cultural research, artistic practices situated in public environments often function as catalysts for civic participation and social interaction, contributing to the construction of shared urban narratives (Solanki, Kane Speer, and Huang 2014; Dona 2017). The posters and visual graffiti seen in different protests contributed to creating a community and solidarity, becoming an ideal means of public dissent (Demerdash 2012). Therefore, the art of graffiti became a form of expression of the society's dissatisfaction towards different dictatorial regimes (García Prieto, 2013).

The early graffiti encouraged others, summarizing the demands and frustrations of the people; pointing out the failures of the system; remembering the pending challenges and the faces of those who oppressed and those who gave their lives for a future of hope and not repression. In this way, they reflected political changes, but also showed a certain omen of what could happen, giving a premonitory feeling in these countries (García Prieto, 2013).

In Egypt, for example, after the fall of Mubarak, there was a period of disillusionment during the SCAF's takeover, which journalists did not speak of, but graffiti criticizing the Military Council could be seen. When there were no demonstrations, there were paintings, so a symbiotic relationship could be inferred between what was seen on the wall and reality. In fact, it could be seen that in the mornings, walls covered in graffiti would appear, which were erased by law enforcement agents hours later, only to resurface the next morning with more force, irony, and color. This was so much the case that Egyptians themselves said that the walls were alive, as they recounted different events. In this way, graphic artists involved in graffiti in Egypt have published *Wall Talk*, a book that collects photographs of hundreds of paintings made in Egyptian streets from January 25, 2011, until the present day, thus graphically documenting the revolution (Carrión, 2013).

El-Husseini (2013) argues that the youth played a crucial role in the revolution, as they were the ones who organized and led the protests against the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak. The use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enabled the youth to mobilize quickly and effectively. Social media allowed them to share information, coordinate protests, and disseminate their message to a wider audience. Moreover, the youth's engagement in the revolution was fueled by a sense of frustration and disillusionment with the political and economic situation in Egypt. High levels of unemployment, corruption, and political repression had created a climate of social and economic inequality that the youth felt needed to be addressed. For this reason, the youth's engagement in the revolution was also influenced by cultural and generational factors. The youth, who had grown up in a more open and connected world, were more likely to question authority and challenge traditional norms than their parents' generation.

As a consequence, the walls of cities in Arab countries began to speak, screaming the harshest episodes of the transition that had unfolded in these countries. It was a way to challenge the official narrative, while also remembering all those who had died or been tortured in the protests and denouncing the brutality of some countries. In this sense, graffiti provided security information or messages for protesters, even explaining constitutional declarations on walls. Some paintings suffered furious attacks from governments, while others were updated as events unfolded, and an urban art form that was controlled both by neighborhoods and by the younger sectors of society spread (Carrión, 2013).



Figure 1. New Mural Identity (Carrión, 2013).

In this mural (Figure 1), double meanings are used to bring visibility to the revolution. This is achieved through the representation of a girl dressed in Ancient Egyptian attire. The girl is also depicted with a flower in her hair as a symbol of spring and rebirth. Additionally, the flags and symbols of the revolution are displayed, thus inciting revolution in a diachronic manner, referencing Egypt's glorious past and emphasizing the need to regain it, as the present has distorted everything.

In contrast, Syrian reaction was completely different. The protests erupted against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad in 2011. However, the protests quickly turned into a full-scale civil war, with various factions fighting for control of the country. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of millions of people and has had a devastating impact on Syria's infrastructure and economy (Hinnebusch, 2018).

Nevertheless, during the Syrian civil war, graffiti became a form of expression for those involved in the conflict. Graffiti was used to convey messages of resistance, to memorialize those who had died, and to critique the government and its policies. Graffiti artists risked their lives to create these works of art, often working in secret and under cover of darkness. In view of this, the Syrian government cracked down on graffiti and other forms of public expression, viewing them as a threat to its authority. However, graffiti became an important means of resistance for many Syrians, particularly young people. Through their art, they were able to express their frustration with the government and their hopes for a better future (Abaza, 2014).

As a matter of fact, the Syrian Arab Spring began with a graffiti. They sought to incite revolution in a peaceful way, as the revolution eventually led to a brutal civil war. However, this graffiti had quite negative consequences, as the authorities kidnapped the children who had created it without their parents knowing anything about it, causing them to take to the streets in protest to demand the freedom that had been taken away from them (Oudat, 2011). As a result, the uprisings eventually spread throughout the country, causing society to take to the streets to demand reforms and the freedom that had been taken away from them by the wrath of the president (Alhames, 2013).

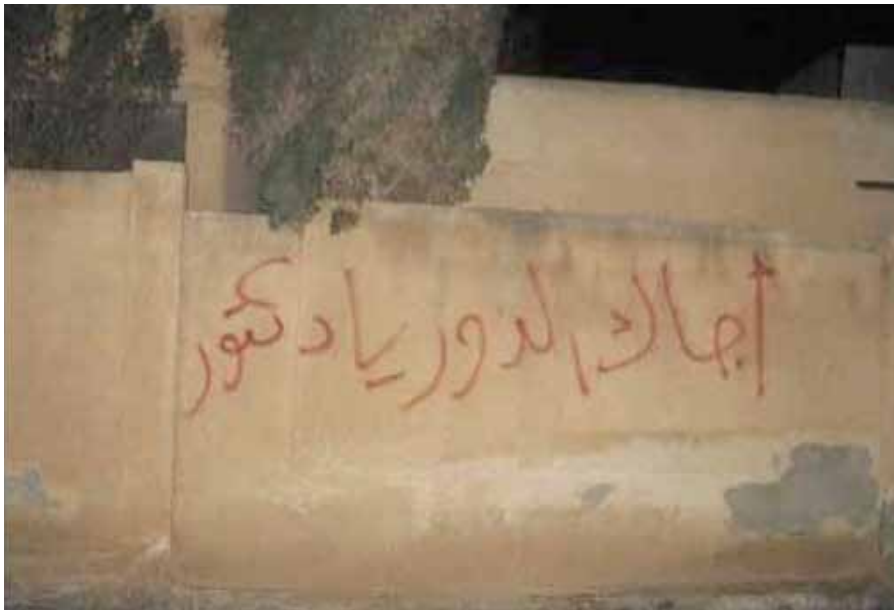


Figure 2. It is your turn, doctor (Alhames, 2013).

This graffiti (Figure 2) was the one that started the Syrian Arab Spring. Furthermore, it was created by young people in a school in the city of Deraa, motivated by the uprisings that had been taking place in the rest of the Arab world. As a matter of fact, the graffiti is composed of Arabic words, including a clear and direct message against the Syrian president: "It's your turn, doctor". These words refer to the profession of the Syrian president, who had studied ophthalmology in Europe. The aim of this graffiti was to make everyone around them react, but the consequences were terrible. As a result, the young people who made this graffiti were tortured, so protests soon became visible throughout the country. Thus, this graffiti became a symbol of the revolution, as it appeared on social media and other websites perpetuating its survival.

Nonetheless, graffiti consolidated itself as a means of artistic expression, becoming a contestatory current in Syria. In fact, it solidified as another part of the conflict, where rulers and peace activists found their freedom of expression. Despite this, artists who made slogans on walls against the regime were subject to certain persecution. Thus, the government covered up the graffiti and arrested the authors, even going so far as to control who bought the spray paints and what they intended to do with them (Alhames, 2013).



Figure 3. Freedom (Freedom Graffiti Week Syria, 2015).

This graffiti (Figure 3) is an example of what was previously mentioned. It shows hands holding the word "freedom" in Arabic as well as the dove of peace. The word "freedom" is painted in red to symbolize the bloodshed. This is so intense that it crumbles in the hands and drips abundantly. In addition to this, this graffiti aims to reflect how costly the Arab Spring was in Syria, as what began as a peaceful movement ended up turning into a vicious war.

### The Development of Cartoons

The development is associated with the emergence of the press during the Nahda (the Awakening). These first models aimed to entertain and make society laugh, while showing a progressive acquisition of public liberties (El-Jisr, 1988:1). The early models presented clear European influence (Wichhart, 2009:8.1-8.21). A negotiation scenario was generated, in which they took Western forms, transformed them, and mixed them (Abu-Lughod, 1989:7). These early models often circulated in a relatively anonymous manner, since the ideas they expressed were understood as shared social concerns with a common purpose. As a result, individual authorship was not always foregrounded until well into the 20th century. (Müge Göçek, 1988:15-16).

During the 20th century, its importance grew to the point of covering events of the First World War. Thus, around 1919, a nationalist movement was launched in which cartoons made by foreigners in Egypt appeared, but which retained their European essence (Krifa, 1988:29-30). They were characterized by intense cultural schizophrenia, that is, by a conflict of identity, in which two very different worlds were represented. The goal of these cartoons was to achieve realism, that is, to interpret the modern world not through personal experience, but rather through the reading of European magazines (Müge Göçek, 1988:91-92).

The 1950s marked a new era for cartoons and a new role for the cartoonist. During this decade, magazines multiplied and diversified to such an extent that a new movement of cartoonists known as modernists emerged, who were responsible for redefining the artistic conventions of cartoons as well as the topics of interest. Themes such as social injustice or class struggle began to be addressed, due to the fact that the main objective of these cartoons was the political regime, the economic order, ruling parties, and elites. A politicization developed, where cartoonists assumed the duty to enlighten and educate society through their drawings, as they became involved in a historical struggle against the established system of political and economic domination (Müge Göçek, 1988:104-110).

However, this did not fully solidify until the Gulf War in the 1990s. At that time, due to the lack of transparency in the media, cartoons were used to satirize the media and report the true news about the conflict (Slyomovics, 2001:97). In any case, the Gulf War caused cartoons to increase significantly, developing in two areas: traditional media and new technologies. Thus, cartoons began to be used as a propaganda tool that could awaken public opinion (Müge Göçek, 1988:139-144).

This fact finally became clear with the arrival of the Arab Spring in 2011, during which art contributed to creative activism, generating an immediate response, as it was able to simplify complex ideas into visual products that facilitated their memorization and understanding. For this reason, it acted as a tool capable of subverting the repression practiced by authoritarian regimes (Jamshidi, 2014:77-101). This fact was also favored by the development of cyberspace, as cartoons abandoned magazines and newspapers. The internet and new technologies represented an alternative virtual public sphere that allowed for the creation of an ideal space for cultural creation, while also inciting society to mobilize and confront regime injustices (Liu, 2013:252-271). It was a way to avoid censorship and reach a wider audience, and the emergence of social networks like Facebook or Twitter allowed for greater diffusion (Hicks, 2009:11.1-11.20).

Taking this view into account, during the Arab Spring, the use of the internet played a critical role in organizing and mobilizing protesters. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allowed for the rapid dissemination of information and facilitated coordination between activists. Online activism allowed for the circumvention of state censorship and the ability to reach a broader audience (Howard and Hussain, 2013). Additionally, the use of citizen journalism through online platforms, such as blogs and YouTube, allowed for the reporting of events as they unfolded, often providing an alternative perspective to state-controlled media outlets (Atton, 2015). However, it is worth noting that the internet was not the sole factor in the success of the Arab Spring uprisings, and its role has been debated among scholars (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

However, cartoons managed to gain ground after the Arab Spring. The development of the internet and different platforms allowed cartoons to become a revolution in themselves that were transmitted through an alternative means. Furthermore, cartoons used cyberspace to develop a bidirectional relationship with the public while generating a current of opinion. Therefore, it became a tool for peaceful struggle that allowed society to participate in the political process directly, using social networks as a bridge.

The figure 4 cartoon was made to criticize the Gulf War. It is an impersonal drawing in which an official is seen distributing medals, highlighting the consequences for society and the motives of the leaders. It can be observed that the officer is dressed in his best at-

tire, while the citizen receiving the medals has completely torn clothing. Additionally, the officer's arrogance is apparent in order to highlight the organ of power in front of society. Therefore, this cartoon is a critique of the Gulf War and its consequences for society. Additionally, this cartoon had negative consequences as the caricaturist Ali Ferzat was threatened with death.

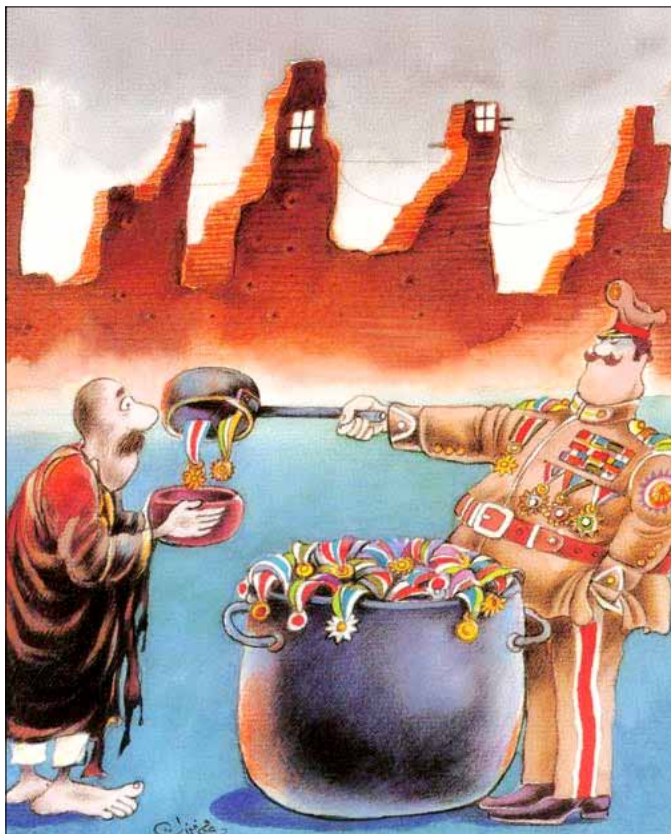


Figure 4. Official handing out medals (Creative Syria, n. d.).



Figure 5. President al-Assad and President Gaddafi leaving their countries together (Trotta, 2011).

This cartoon (Figure 5) shows Bashar al-Assad and Gaddafi trying to escape from their respective countries together. Gaddafi is portrayed as crazy and driving a car that is spitting out screws, while al-Assad is seen waiting with a hastily packed suitcase and a government member trying to help him escape with the Libyan president. This cartoon had negative consequences, as the cartoonist suffered a brutal beating by the government as a result of it. As a matter of fact, this cartoon was a revolutionary act. It was created in 2011 in Syria during the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Despite the consequences suffered by the cartoonist, this cartoon represented a breaking of the barriers of fear, as for the first time, the Syrian president was depicted in a direct way. Furthermore, this cartoon marked a turning point as it demonstrated the power and strength that these cartoons could achieve.



Figure 6. The fifth mandate (Dilem, 2019).

This cartoon (Figure 6) appears in the context of the 2019 revolution in Algeria, calling for a cessation of the government. Its author, Ali Dilem, depicted an image in which the Algerian president announces that he will not run for re-election, but will instead serve a fourth ten-year term. In this way, the author highlights the president's refusal to leave power and underscores his lack of coherence in the situation. The objective is to spur society, generating an opinion that seeks to influence the public regarding the president's hypocrisy, an underlying issue.

The next cartoon (Figure 7) depicts a criticism of freedom of expression. The Tunisian president and a citizen with a banner are shown in the cartoon. The citizen is demanding freedom of expression, while the Tunisian president points out that they are out of stock. The cartoonist is thus criticizing the situation that still affects the Arab world. In other words, the cartoonist Ali Dilem is criticizing the fact that, despite the Arab Spring and the reforms, there is still no freedom of expression, as governments themselves do not allow it. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the fact that Tunisia has been used as an example, as it

was one of the few countries in the Arab Spring to have a peaceful transition. However, as evidenced in this cartoon, the expected result for citizens was not achieved. Therefore, this drawing seeks to draw attention to Arab and Tunisian society in order to show the reality and incite society to continue fighting. For this reason, it can be considered a revolution in itself.



Figure 7. Tunisia: repeated shortages (Dilem, 2022).

### Results

After analyzing the phenomenon of cartoons and graffiti, it can be said that they are artistic expressions associated with revolution. Thus, during times of social and political conflict, their production increases considerably. Moreover, graffiti tends to emerge most visibly during moments of social conflict and upheaval. It is generally associated with collective, anonymous, and socially embedded forms of expression, often developed by younger generations in public spaces. By contrast, cartoons are a more individualized form of art that seeks to shape opinion in the viewer. They usually have a clearer intellectual and authorial component, as they are linked to identifiable artists who use satire and visual language to comment on political and social issues. This is because graffiti is a revolutionary art that develops according to certain circumstances. In contrast, the use of cartoons refers to a mature art that focuses on a current of opinion. Therefore, the art of cartoons has been associated with newspapers and its evolution has been progressive, as it has played with irony and double meanings to inform Arab societies about certain events.

This leads us to examine the issue of authorship in these artistic expressions. Graffiti is generally understood as an anonymous and collective form of art rooted in the contemporary social milieu. Although individual artists are often involved in its creation, graffiti is usually perceived as representing broader social voices, concerns, and forms of collective expression rather than the perspective of a single identifiable author. By contrast, cartoons constitute a more individualized form of art, as they are generally produced by a named person who uses wit, satire, and visual language to influence public opinion regarding a particular event or issue. This distinction is also related to the evolution of both forms of expression. Graffiti is often associated with youthful, immediate, and spontaneous interventions that make walls “speak,” whereas cartoons have experienced a more structured process of development. In the Arab world, cartoons have undergone a significant maturation process, with several intellectuals and artists contributing to their consolidation as an alternative form of communication.

In any case, graffiti and cartoons can be considered communal artistic expressions, as they are part of the Arab social collective. The goal of graffiti and caricature in the Arab world is to elicit a reaction from society and become a form of resistance art. Therefore, they are passive manifestations, as they are a peaceful form of protest. In other words, both spray paint and pencil are weapons thrown against authoritarian regimes.

In addition, both are a form of literature in images. They manifest themselves as an alternative non-verbal language that has generated a form of communication. In this context, it is a visual communication medium that draws attention to a specific fact and invites participation. Therefore, it must be understood as another means of communication that shows visual culture. As a matter of fact, if graffiti or cartoons are analyzed together, the succession of events can be appreciated. Therefore, it should be noted that this literature in images serves to narrate the most immediate reality, so they can also be interpreted as an important source of information that helps to understand the different events within the Arab world.

On the other hand, they have also adapted to new times. Although new technologies have arrived late in the Arab world, their most current transmission is through the internet. Cyberspace offers the opportunity to develop a virtual reality where the revolution develops simultaneously. This fact allows the revolution to remain alive, and this art to be preserved: no matter how much they try to erase graffiti, it is practically impossible to make it disappear thanks to the internet. Moreover, The development of social media has also allowed for an expansion of bidirectionality, as it has enabled society to comment on and analyze events through the network. For this reason, new technologies have brought a new era for these artistic expressions.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, it is necessary to say that both artistic expressions form a cultural block. However, they must be understood in their specific contexts. While cartoons are usually linked to identifiable artists whose work reflects an individual perspective, graffiti is more closely connected to collective social experiences and anonymous forms of expression. In both cases, artists are products of their time and cannot be separated from the context in which they create. It is a subjective art that makes society react to a specific event.

It should be noted that this art is also a historical source. Its development narrates what happens at a certain moment, so if it is joined and seen with a holistic perspective, a connecting thread can be found. In other words, these artistic expressions seek to tell a story, so they cannot be considered in isolation.

It is not a fixed art but evolves over time. It is true that a certain symbolism can be appreciated when narrating specific events. However, symbols can change, and their impact depends on the moment in which they are developed. Ultimately, it is important not to lose sight of it and to analyze it since it is a way of better understanding the contemporary Arab world.

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