MEMES, MONSTERS, AND THE DIGITAL GROTESQUE

CRISTINA MORENO-ALMEIDA

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Cristina Moreno-Almeida

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To my beloved son Gabriel, Jibril, 'Gaby'

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Note on Translations, Transcriptions, and Transliterations

Readers familiar with Arabic are aware that transliterations and transcriptions are complex due to the multiple systems employed to render written and spoken Arabic in the Latin script and the different varieties of Arabic. For this research, some texts, such as memes, comments, posts, and captions, are presented in the original Arabic script; these have been transliterated, in some cases, to facilitate understanding for non-Arabic readers. In these instances, a translation is provided along with a transliteration where needed to support an argument. Two transliteration systems for the Arabic script are used: a simplified transliteration from the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) system that omits special symbols from the original Classic Arabic; and the Latinised alphanumeric transliteration system – also known as Arabizi – for words and texts in Darija. For readers unfamiliar with the linguistic landscape in North Africa, Darija is an unofficially recognised number of languages, employing both Arabic and the Latinised alphanumeric scripts, spoken and written by the majority of the population across the Maghreb. The latter system of transliteration maintains consistency with text that employs this format, for example, lyrics provided by artists as part of YouTube descriptions. Both systems are supplied in the table Transliteration of Arabic Letters. Due to the nature of Darija, throughout the text some words in Darija include letters such as 'p' and 'ch' which do not have an equivalent letter or sound in Arabic and therefore do not appear in Transliteration of Arabic Letters. In some instances, words in the common vernacular are written as they habitually appear, or the most common writing format is chosen. For example, the name Aisha Kandisha is also often written as Aicha Qandisha; *hogra* (contempt) and *hiba* (fear) are often written in this simplified manner instead of a faithful transliteration, which would be *Hogra* and *7iba* respectively. For other texts, all original spelling and punctuation from the texts – even if these contradict the transliteration table – are provided.

For other languages, texts cited in this book appear in the original language as long as there is not a common translation in English available; citations of the Quran or official websites fall into this category. The rest of the texts have been translated by the author.

Finally, due to the nature of the book's subject matter, the reader might find what are considered vulgar words and expressions. This is particularly relevant in Chapter 8 due to its focus on language.

Transliteration of Arabic Letters

Arabic letter	Classic Arabic	Darija (alphanumeric)
ب	b	b
ت	t	t
ث	th	t
ج	j	j
ح	H	7
خ	kh	kh
د	d	d
ذ	dh	d
ر	r	r
ز	z	z
س	s	s
ش	sh	ch
ص	S	s
ض	D	d
ط	T	t
ظ	Z	d
ع	‘	3
غ	gh	gh
ف	f	f
ق	q	q/9
ك	k	k
ل	l	l
م	m	m
ن	n	n
ه	h	h
و	w	w/u/ou/o
ي	y	y/i
ء	’	2[1]
پ	p	p
ڭ/گ	-	g
ڤ	-	v

[1] Although this letter is usually transcribed as a 2, texts in Darija rarely include this letter.

1

Introduction: Uprisings, Memes, and Horror

In 2020, the Mosaic Rooms, a London-based centre for contemporary culture from the Arab World and beyond, curated a digital programme called 'Future Threads'. The concept of 'Future Threads' included artists, curators, and thinkers who engaged with social transformation and forward-looking projections. The online programme for the event stated: 'In times of pandemic [Covid-19] this programme unpacks the disruptive potential of art and culture' (The Mosaic Rooms 2020). As part of this exhibition, the Iranian collective New Media Society and the Egyptian artist Heba Y. Amin presented films and creative pieces centred around concerns of surveillance, dictatorships, and the emergence of digital authoritarianism. For these artists, the concept of the future was articulated as 'dusty' and contained feelings of despair as related with fears that tomorrow – the future – will not be dissimilar to the present.[1] The exhibition sought to inspire an exploration of ways in which to ward off the disillusionment that change was near, the unfulfilled critical potential of digital media, and the sense of uncertain futures triggered by the evaporation of the momentum attained during the social uprisings seen in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010–11.

This book is interested in narratives produced within digital artefacts in the period between those so-called moments of crisis: what has been called the 'Arab Spring', the 2010–11 uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East,[2] and the

[1] Citing the theologian Rob Bell, Brené Brown expressed in an interview with activist DeRay McKesson that 'despair is the belief that tomorrow will be just like today' (McKesson, 2018).

[2] While the Middle East and North Africa hold a prominent place in the scholarship of the region, some prefer to name it North Africa and West Asia (NAWA) or South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) in an effort to decolonise the name. This terminology is, however, being debated among academics at the time of writing because the changing name does not necessarily denote a change in the region which it refers. Although the region is not a monolithic, homogeneous, or centrally governed entity, a shared language, colonial history, and religion in many of these countries provides a sense of connection. Other events mark clear differences as some of these countries are characterised by dramatic agitations and transitions, coups, civil wars, military rule, and deepening economic crisis. While the 2003 war and subsequent occupation of Iraq, and the consequences of military aggression by the US–UK-led coalition have had a devastating effect on the stability and security of the region, other

Covid-19 pandemic. Critical events are claimed to bring new modes of action and redefine traditional categories (Das 1995, p. 6). The evolving potential of critical events to effect change has been palpable after natural disasters (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019; Cohan and Cole 2002) or social unrest (Das 1995; Malmström 2019). However, this book is interested in the phenomena hidden beyond dominant narratives such as the 'Arab Spring' and the 'Arab Winter', discussed further in the following section. This research focuses on the underlying messages within the cultural terrain that are connected not only to the affective politics of the aftermath of the uprisings, but also to creative and aesthetic interests that link this decade with broader uneventful, ordinary, and 'unimportant' daily events developing within the digital sphere. In this book, I am keen to ponder digital culture as part of – but also beyond – the aftermath of the uprisings. In doing so, this book presents the ways in which memes, horror, and the grotesque capture a politico-affective moment experienced as a cycle of despair, alienation, and anomie as much as a chance for aesthetic experimentation profiting from the media's own narratives and affordances.

Zombie Labels

The Arab Spring has emerged as an important landmark in debates around digital media and democratisation. In 2009, almost two years prior to the events known as the Arab Spring, the Green Movement in Iran had already prompted initial attempts to report on these protests as part of the liberatory affordances of the rapidly developing Internet 2.0. Announced as the 'Twitter Revolutions', Western media in Europe and North America praised social media's affordances in encouraging oppositional groups to revolt against oppressive regimes. The contagion of demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt impacted similar movements in other countries such as the Spanish Indignados or the US Occupy Movement; however, these other demonstrations lacked the same techno-enthusiasm. Techno-optimistic discourses focused on how the internet was going to save North Africa and the Middle East from its oppressive leaders. Yet, soon after, media and regional

countries have proved to be stable and have experienced higher economic growth. Some of these are also highly autocratic with tight control of media and civil society.

This book will employ the term North Africa and the Middle East, but it will also favour terms such as Maghreb, which mainly refers to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania; or Arabic and Darija, two umbrella terms to speak about the language spoken in Arabic-speaking countries and in the Maghreb, respectively (more in Chapter 8). The term 'Arab' is only used critically, and when employed by media scholars, as is the case with the Arab Spring, to highlight that Arab is not the only ethnicity in North Africa. Across the book, I will use Amazigh to refer to what has been commonly known as the Berber identity, and to Tamazight as the languages spoken among the diverse Amazigh communities that live across North Africa.

experts challenged the presupposed power of mobilisation of social media in the region. George Joffé (2011), Albrecht Hofheinz (2011, p. 1420), and Mohamed Zayani (2015, p. 11) expressed scepticism about the benefits of technology for social movements. Most significantly, Annabelle Sreberny referred to the terms 'Facebook Revolution' and 'Twitter Revolution' as zombie categories that offer little explanation 'about either new media or political process' (Sreberny 2015, p. 357).

The choice of the term zombie speaks to the perpetuation of already challenged narratives to discuss the 'Arab' Other and the important role of technology in its liberation. Tourya Guaaybess posits this unfounded, yet assumed, link between media penetration and development:

> This faith in media [as a tool for development] is not reconsidered or questioned even by UNESCO, for instance, which is continuing its crusade for modernization via media and, today, via the Internet. UNESCO defends the idea that it is necessary to reduce 'the digital divide between rich and developing countries,' even though the role of media in development has never been clearly established. (2013a, pp. 2–3)

At the time, Walter Armbrust argued that 'for many, the relatively low rate of new media usage in the Arab world was taken as a sign of cultural backwardness' (2012, p. 157), a disease that a 'Social Media Revolution' would cure. Portrayals of protesters tended to be skewed towards bloggers who were described as 'mostly young, educated secular, middle class, Western looking and ultimately "liberal" [to] reinforce Western bias at a deeper level about who are the exclusive actors of a potentially radical change in the supposedly "closed societies" of the Middle East' (Salvatore 2011, p. 2). The reality on the ground was that protesters were much more diverse in age, gender, and class, as evidenced in pictures, videos, and testimonies available in archives such as the tahrirachives.com. The media-constructed categories of who was engaged in the protests, which is different from the reality of who was actually protesting, soon affirmed the Western media's pre-occupation with linking democracy with the use of digital media. In fact, excessive focus on this seemed to be more important than attempting to understand the role social media plays during times of upheaval or crisis. This criticism, which exposed the biased connection between the so-called social media revolution and democratic change, represented a significant shift in attitude away from orientalist perspectives that had stressed the role of social media and technological development.

The story of activist Wael Ghonim offers a glimpse of the initial techno-enthusiasm followed by the subsequent disillusionment with social media in the wake and aftermath of the uprisings. In March 2011,[3] a month after Ghonim

[3] Hosni Mubarak, president of Egypt since 1981, announced his resignation on 11 February 2011 after 18 days of protests.

appeared in several newspaper stories in the United States, he gave a TEDx talk praising what he coined as 'the revolution 2.0' (Ghonim 2011). Delivered in English from Cairo, Ghonim's talk was broadcast to a TED Conference in Long Beach, California. Ghonim satisfied the English-speaking audience's eagerness to confirm the wonders of technology in spreading democracy in the Middle East from what Hamid Dabashi (2011) calls a native informant perspective. In this speech, Ghonim famously claimed that 'if you want to liberate a society, just give them internet'.

This bold claim did not stand the test of time. In December 2015, Ghonim delivered another TEDx talk in Geneva, stating: 'I once said "if you want to liberate a society, all you need is the internet," I was wrong' (Ghonim 2015). By then, Ghonim's initial euphoria had faded; he now claimed that 'starting January 28, the revolution was on the streets. It was not on Facebook, it was not on Twitter. Those [social media sites] were tools to relay information, to tell people the truth about what's happening on the ground' (NPR 2012). More importantly, Ghonim asserted that if social media had once united Egyptians, it had since torn them apart (Ghonim 2015).

Ghonim's sense of defeat has been further corroborated by the findings of a report on social media in Egypt. The report suggests that social media has been as central to the failure of a democratic transition in Egypt as it was to the triumph of the protests (Lynch *et al*. 2016). These findings also recognise that social media serves as a tool for pro-democratic movements while also legitimising authoritarian regimes – a notion that had already been articulated by Evgeny Morozov (2011) and Mohamed Zayani (2015, p. 11) by the time this report was released. In spite of the shift in perspective regarding the role of social media in instigating political change, this report still asserts the importance of technology rather than challenging techno-deterministic theories.

By 2016, the once hyped role of social media in liberating the oppressed turned into a narrative of loss and apathy under the rubric of the Arab Winter. Enthusiasm, according to Gilbert Achcar, gave 'way to melancholy in the "Arab Winter"' (2019). The Arab Winter was fostered, among others, by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's *coup d'ětat* in Egypt in 2013, Syria's civil war, lack of substantial changes in spite of a new Moroccan constitution in 2011, and the return to power in Tunisia of the old guard in 2014. Instead of Arab Winter, Taieb Belghazi and Abdelhay Moudden (2016) have referred to this period as *ihbat* (إحباط), an Arabic word that connotes frustration, deception, and disillusionment. Rather than alluring but ineffective narratives that present the 2010s as an Arab renaissance or awakening (Arab Spring) versus an Arab death (Arab Winter), *ihbat* highlights the important role of affect and underlying emotions in the aftermath of social movements.

Even if Morocco did not experience dramatic social and political changes, '[t]he feeling of disappointment has generated a self-deprecating attitude of

self-blame and collective guilt' (Mifdal 2016, p. 54). In the same vein, Maria Frederika Malmström (2019) made analogous claims about the events that followed the uprisings in Egypt in 2011 and the *coup d'ětat* in 2013:

> Among my Cairene contacts, the clear majority who were politically active before and lived through both joy and despair today talk explicitly about palpable responses (theirs and others') of affective politics such as suspicion, depression, denial, anger, fatigue, and a sense of hopelessness that developed after the summer 2013. (2019, p. 122)

Witness to the existing affects within North Africa and the Middle East were the immediate acts of solidarity, initially with Tunisian protesters and then with those in Egypt, that took place across the region, from Morocco to Bahrain, in 2010–11. A shared language and satellite technology allowed many Arab speakers in these countries to find their news in one shared television news channel, Al Jazeera, and encouraged a collective momentum. The emotional resonance of enthusiasm experienced through demonstrations in support of Tunisians and Egyptians also carried into the aftermath of the uprisings through common interconnected feelings of shame, loss of hope, disillusionment, disappointment, anxiety, and depression but also numbness, apathy, despair, and anomie.

Hope for change and the strength of social movements were followed by the belief that the deadly wars in Syria and Iraq might spread throughout the region in the same way as the uprisings. On Al Jazeera, the events in Egypt during summer 2013 after the *coup d'ětat*, and news of the war in Syria, were presented daily, raising fears of the potential contagion of instability that might jeopardise the political and social stability of everyday lives in other countries of the region. This fear is best understood through Paolo Virno's 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment' (1996), in which the author details the aftermath of labour activism. Virno argues that the fear of losing what has been gained through protest may translate into flexibility and adaptability in work: 'In contrast to the Hegelian relation between master and slave, fear is no longer what drives us into submission before work, but the active component of that stable instability that marks the internal articulations of the productive process itself' (1996, p. 16). In the aftermath of the uprisings, feelings of disaffection (feeling dissatisfied) or disillusionment (feeling disappointed) worked to maintain the status quo. Fear of losing stability, however, carried the burden of learning to live with feelings of continuous *ihbat*. In Morocco, fear of Syria's chaos, together with cosmetic changes and Morocco's discourse of stability in comparison with other countries in the region, justified the continuance of business as usual for ordinary people. While protests and demonstrations continued to occur throughout the rest of the 2010s, unlike the events of 2010–11, some subsequent demonstrations were heavily repressed and their leaders imprisoned. The state had learned to recognise that ashes had the potential to reignite the flames of unrest at

any moment. Repression and *ihbat* as a result of the experience of the Arab Spring had clear social, political, and affective consequences for the rest of the decade.

When it comes to media studies in the region, some have campaigned to free new media and technology studies in the Middle East 'from the straightjacket of the Western experience' (Alterman 2005, p. 204). However, Guaaybess (2008, p. 199) counters that claiming a difference between North Africa and the Middle East and the 'West' is to fall into the geopolitical, religious, and culturalist trap that is central to the role of economic profit in its media landscapes: 'Cultural specificities' – she argues – 'cannot be at the core of a medium's business' (Guaaybess 2008, p. 204). A focus on the economic dynamic of the North Africa and the Middle East media field, according to Guaaybess, illustrates the 'fact that the development of transnational Arab channels is not an exotic phenomenon' (2008, p. 209) but the fruit of a financial interest.

The recent history of media and information and communication technologies in the region is marked by the processes of the liberalisation of the broadcasting landscape. While newspapers are traditionally privately owned, radio and television broadcast networks were kept in the hands of the state until the 2000s. Since then, national broadcasting authorities have experienced deep reforms, in part affected by the expansion of Arabic-language satellite television allowing, at least on paper, for a diversification of national broadcasting networks. The liberalisation of the media sector continues to be haunted by the dominant powers' anxiety about maintaining control. For this reason, the impact of the sector's reform is limited. The rules and regulations governing entry into the broadcasting field remain confusing and unclear, hampered by sluggish bureaucracy and a preference for those with close ties to power. Moreover, despite a population of 420 million Arabic speakers globally according to worldatlas.com (Sawe 2018), the economic benefits of the sector remain undisclosed; however, sources suggest that few satellite channels are financially sustainable (Kraidy 2008, p. 98).

In the age of global cultural flows (Appadurai 1990), reactionary ideologies, and the penetration of entertainment streaming services such as Netflix, it is important to look in depth into particular national and regional dataspheres; although there are regional affects, there are also well-circumscribed national media spheres that differ from country to country. Until recently, Egypt has been the main exporter of broadcasting productions, spreading its language, norms, and values across the region (Guaaybess 2013b, p. 4). The media landscape in the Arabic-speaking region, however, is no longer Egypt-centric. This is evident considering that well-known programmes watched across the region, such as *Arab Idol* (a version of *Pop Idol*, popular in the United Kingdom), are now hosted by pan-Arab networks with headquarters in Dubai and may be recorded elsewhere, as has been the case of Beirut for *Arab Idol*. Instead of importing Egyptian productions, many countries are investing in local products, commissioning their own soap operas in their own local language, or adapting foreign formats, as is the case of *MasterChef* in Morocco (see Agence Med Production, 2014). Reports on

the media landscape particularly in television, radio, and the press have shown a preference for ultra-local content. The Arab Media Outlook report (Dubai Press Club 2012) highlights that while content producers in television, music, and cinema are aiming to reach a pan-Arab audience to maximise economic benefits, consumers are turning to ultra-local content. While speaking in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) may be useful for news broadcasters as Al Jazeera, the use of local languages is preferred for other content such as talk shows, soap operas, and even films to make them relatable to local and national audiences. MSA simply sounds too formal and foreign, so it does not resonate with the ways in which people talk in their everyday lives, as argued in Chapter 8 of this book.

Local languages particular to countries or areas within the region are not necessarily always understood across the region, with a few exceptions (namely Egyptian, as the country has been a media and cultural exporter for decades). For example, Khaleeji, the variety of Arabic spoken in the Gulf, or Darija, the unofficial yet spoken and written language in the Maghreb. Particularly relevant to this book is to understand that the main Maghrebi languages (including Tamazight) are only partially understood in neighbouring countries in North Africa, differing in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (and, thus, differing in their transliterations, Darija, Darja, and Derja, respectively). These different variants or languages across the region are identity signifiers of national belonging with further regional, generational, and gendered particularities. It is important to note that while there are shared regional affective bonds, there are also powerful national spheres of political, social, and cultural resonance favoured and encouraged by the use of local languages. These differences need to be considered when imagining the cartography of post-uprising dataspheres.

When it comes to the digital sphere, in 2014 Saudi Arabia reportedly had the world's highest number of YouTube views per internet user with 90 million video views per day (Khan 2014), and in 2016 it had the largest number of Twitter users in the region (Statista 2017). In Morocco in 2020, YouTube.com was the most visited website in the country with monthly traffic of 79,170,000 visits, followed by google.com and facebook.com in second and third place, respectively (Kemp 2020). An already existing lack of faith in political systems and parties, the mistrust of media, growing online systems of oppression, and the demand for ultra-local content had an inevitable effect on digital cultural artefacts produced in the second half of the 2010s.

The Power of Memes

As techno-optimistic narratives praised the Arab Spring, research on memes was theorising these digital items against the backdrop of research in virality (see, for example, Shifman 2012). Such an approach of linking social media use to

biological terminology (viral, spread, and mutate) stems from common references to the work of Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In this book, Dawkins defines memes as the cultural equivalent of the biological gene which can self-replicate and mutate like a virus. Framing memes in this way provides communication and media scholars with legitimacy in studying memes due to the foundation of natural science as a 'serious' subject (Galip 2020). Memes have been disentangled from this origin myth to be discussed from multiple other perspectives including the digital art world, fandom culture, and digital participation. In this sense, memes may be considered as part of online forms of activism (Lievrouw 2011) as well as the long tradition of employing images for public commentary and public conversation that can be traced back at least to the 1300s BCE and continuing through the Roman Empire, across the European Middle Ages, and into political cartoons in the 20th century (Milner 2016, p. 82).

Instead of a biological connection, a different reading of the inception of internet meme culture lies within internet subcultures sometimes referred to as 'alt-right' (from alternative right). Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis (2017, p. 3) consider that these internet subcultures gather together a heterogeneous group of conspiracy theorists, techno-libertarians, white nationalists, men's rights advocates, trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and 'bored young people'. A popular meeting place for such groups has been the English-speaking imageboards 4chan and Reddit, launched in 2003 and 2004 respectively. These online forums, with a focus on image sharing, have been a critical component in their users adopting mono-culturalist (namely the belief that only one culture should dominate the public sphere) and anti-pluralist discourses tied to ideas of racial or civilisational superiority. Due to their ties to far-right ideologies, these internet subcultures have also been named as 'digital fascism' (Fielitz and Marcks 2019), 'post-digital far-right' (Fielitz and Thurston 2019), and alt-right. These terms are still being questioned and debated, particularly the latter because it washes out the ultra-nationalist, racist, and misogynist beliefs shared by those who profess allegiance to an 'alternative right'. They may present a populist anti-establishment stance, whereas the elites and intellectuals do not champion the interests of ordinary people. They are conservative advocates for conservative views dominated by patriarchal norms. Through the 2010s, armies of trolls, bots, or electronic flies – as they are referred to in Arabic – have exploited internet infrastructures to establish connections among these groups and spread 'fake news' and hatred (Banaji and Bhat 2021). We cannot forget, however, that the same 'deep vernacular web' (de Zeeuw and Tuters 2020) has also served other activist movements such as Anonymous who have profited from its anonymity, impersonality, and ephemerality.

While memes may have been born within the underground space of the internet, they have quickly become part of the mainstream datasphere through

sharing, spreading, and mutating (Hardesty *et al*. 2019, pp. 7–8; Hristova 2014, p. 266; Shifman 2014). From a depoliticised perspective encouraged particularly by some media scholars, internet memes are loosely defined as digital items including still images, videos, GIFs, and hashtags that share common characteristics and are co-created and shared online by multiple participants (Shifman 2014). The popular conception of memes defines them as a combination of words and images, sometimes videos, with a pastiche DIY look shared on social media and other messaging apps. Although different scholars have suggested hashtags, bot posts, emoticons, and GIFs as memes, these have grown to inhabit their own category. As this book argues, the definition of memes requires a closer look at their association with specific politics, contexts, and online aesthetics.

Participation is a key feature in studying memetic culture due to the so-called techno-optimism among media and communication scholars. Henry Jenkins's (2006) idea of the internet's bottom-up opportunities for mass participation, however, fails to address digital inequalities and the limited power of participants to be heard in a space controlled by big corporations (van Dijck 2013, pp. 128–9; Fuchs 2011, p. 266). As Matthew Hindman (2009, p. 18) opines, while it is true that anyone with internet access can post, being read requires passing through a set of informal barriers, which especially affects ordinary citizens' ability to reach an audience. Social media is largely dominated by a small number of media companies such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (now X) – three companies owned by just two white men – and governments with tight control of the internet, such as China and its 'digital wall', inhibit equal access for all people. For this reason, while memes may be praised for the opportunities they provide to ordinary people to tell their stories, their potential for sparking bottom-up resistance and social change may have been overstated (Zebracki and Luger 2019, p. 8).

Instead of discussing whether memes can spark social and political change, this book considers the ability of memes to depict complex social and political conversations. Even with limited reach and spread, memes are worth studying precisely because, in their abundance, they unearth subtle ways in which to be political online. For this reason, internet memes should be considered as digital hidden transcripts (DHT). Memes act in the same ways as others have argued that gossip, rumours, songs, and jokes play a role in cementing people's opinions and in criticising power (Scott 1990; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994, p. 131).

Considering memes as DHT is particularly relevant in situations where the state holds tight control of media. Reconceptualising James C. Scott's seminal work, Guobin Yang (2009) identifies four forms of DHT employed by online activists: 1) using code to break code; 2) as a type of online guerrilla tactic to fight censorship; 3) linguistic, such as creatively altering words to avoid detection;

and 4) organisational creativity. While these tactics conform to the behaviour of self-declared activists, uncovering DHT among ordinary participants who might not consider themselves as activists requires a more versatile and flexible understanding of DHT. This holds true especially when trying to understand the less obvious but latent criticisms – and also endorsements – of power present in creative artistic expressions online. Therefore, this book looks at cultural production exclusively disseminated online that is not necessarily organised by activist groups.

Looking at memes as DHT is necessary when and where states retain absolute control over the media and mainstream channels and only partially report on or avoid speaking about matters that are important to ordinary people. But it must also be noted that social media is controlled by a few individuals. Due to the affordances of digital culture – abundance, relative anonymity, and fewer gatekeepers – memes and other forms of digital cultural production have become a social thermostat of the internet. As with popular culture in general (Frith 1996, p. 250), memes not only reflect social values, but they can also create them. From a cultural studies perspective, as popular culture artefacts internet memes are necessarily ambivalent. They act not on their own but collectively as social processes that acquire meaning through negotiation between participants, reflecting their beliefs, values, and attitudes (Harrison 2003, p. 47). For this reason, memes share a common language (McCulloch 2019; Milner 2016) and a subculture born in an eminently collective rather than individual 'deep vernacular web' (de Zeeuw and Tuters 2020).

Memes can act as forms of political and social critique (Denisova 2019; Mina 2014; Phillips and Milner 2017, p. 207; Seiffert-Brockmann *et al*. 2018, p. 2866) because they speak to the ways people see themselves in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and so forth. For the same reason, they can reproduce and perpetuate stereotypes and normative narratives (Hristova 2014; Milner 2016) such as reinforcing depictions of poverty (Dobson and Knezevic 2017) or racism (Yoon 2016), or they can aid in the dissemination of alt-right propaganda (Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021). Not all memes are meant to cross the red lines of what is politically and socially appropriate, as An Xiao Mina (2014) claims in an example of social change memes in China that relate to environmental issues or other causes. Consequently, in order to understand the different collective experiences and communities, we are compelled to gather in-depth knowledge of the contexts in which memes are created, circulated, and engaged with (Zebracki and Luger 2019, p. 11).

Not everyone agrees about memes' political role. In her study on the Occupy Movement, Stefka Hristova (2014, p. 274) reads online participation as mainly 'entertainment', concluding that while the internet is a tool for amplifying a message, it is only a space for the civic and cultural and not the political. For

Hristova, 'the political' is related to modes of governance, or what Chantal Mouffe (2005) calls politics. However, in analyses on cultural production, the political is closer to Mouffe's definition as 'a space of power, conflict and antagonism' (2005, p. 9). In a more pragmatic way, John Street understands the political in music in terms of agency as any given situation that 'present[s] people with a choice, and one which they can act upon; they must have agency' (2012, p. 7). As such, the mere act of releasing an album into the market (Moreno-Almeida 2017) or of singing (Street 2012, p. 44) may be read as political. Pushing the boundaries of the political, Robby Hardesty *et al*. (2019, p. 503) claim that memes undermine the capable political subject when the master subject loses control over the memesphere and reluctantly becomes a meme. In this manner, to understand the political potential of memes, Hardesty *et al*. suggest that memes must not be limited to ideology but should also be seen as an affective event (2019, p. 4).

Studies conducted outside the United States and Western Europe have seldom delved into meme content beyond examining the role of memes in shaping and disseminating political narratives that counter dominant state discourses (see Denisova 2019; Li 2011; Mina 2014, 2019; Pearce and Hajizada 2014). Studies on digital media in North Africa and the Middle East are notable for their interest in examining whether technology is able to deliver democracy and incite revolutions (see Breuer and Groshek 2014; Howard and Hussain 2013; Khamis 2013; Lynch *et al*. 2016; Martin *et al*. 2016). These studies underpin the understanding that countries in the region are in constant evolution towards liberal democracy or authoritarianism (Bogaert 2018, pp. 29–30; Cavatorta and Durac 2011, p. 1). Although insightful, there have been few opportunities to study digital culture and memes within *and* beyond direct and obvious references to governance. Studying digital creative artefacts free from the limitations of this transitology paradigm, the digital sphere with its main actors – elites and power, activists and ordinary people – is best understood as a space where 'the marginal and the mainstream constantly intersect, decentralizing power as one coherent regime of oppression and the activist as its site of resistance' (El-Ariss 2019, p. 11).

The role of meme culture in challenging authority is a topic of discussion in this book, but only as one way in which online participants engage with meme culture. This book examines memes' criticisms of governance through ordinary people's affective and aesthetic relationships with power. Memes therefore are not only an opportunity for sharing and disseminating anti-governance stances, but also worthwhile for understanding the intersection between creativity and an affective moment: 'if one were to examine what has gone viral at any given time, one would have a snapshot of what is considered of consequence to a specific society at a specific time' (Dobson and Knezevic 2017, p. 779). In content and form, the affects, politics, and aesthetics of memes discussed throughout this book reveal numerous untold stories about ordinary people's relationship with power as

much as an entire digital ecosystem telling stories about agency, identity, humour, nostalgia, or new artistic trends. For this reason, the book frames meme culture not only within the power dynamics of governance but also as part of an aesthetic interest in horror and the grotesque, including visual semiotics or vulgar language going beyond the political. While the grotesque is not unique to digital media, it certainly excels online (Douglas 2014), as we will see in multiple examples throughout this book. An analysis of memes in context with other digital cultural artefacts – uncommon to most studies on meme culture – compels a radical contextualisation of the aesthetics of the digital ecosystems in which memes roam. The analysis of memes along with other digital cultural artefacts such as comics, animated cartoons, music videos, and other multimodal creative artefacts unveils stories about political ecosystems, ordinary people, spheres of resonance, and belief systems. These artefacts also shed light on the aesthetic preferences of a particular moment and place enclosed within global flows and mediated through the digital realm.

So, Why Horror?

Horror fiction, or what Noël Carroll (1990, p. 12) calls 'art-horror', is predominantly present within written text or audiovisual artforms, mainly written literature or cinema and fine arts. Canonical Eurocentric horror history sets its beginning with what is considered the first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, written by Horace Walpole and first published in 1764. The genre is said to take inspiration from European 18th-century English Gothic novels, German *Schauerroman* (shudder-novels), and French *roman noir* (black novels). The genre may be traced even earlier with the development of the 'apparition narrative'. These non-fiction texts written in the 17th century emerged as a Christian reaction to 'the loss of religious faith occasioned by the rise of sceptical philosophy, empirical science, and materialism' (Moreland 2017, p. 99). By the end of that century, books and pamphlets had been published to persuade their readers of the reality of supernatural beings, including ghosts, revenant beings, and demons (Moreland 2017, p. 99). The most common tropes present in horror have evolved with time to include odd and hybrid creatures that provoke fear, as well as revenant monsters, curses, dreams and nightmares, acts of possession and dispossession, excessive instances of sex and violence, as well as dealing with the *unheimlich* (uncanny).

By incorporating supernatural elements, English-language gothic novels led the genre into the world of fantasy by blurring the lines between gothic, horror, fantasy, and science fiction. In spite of common themes, horror is a difficult to define genre because of its lack of a consistent style. Horror differs from fantasy and science fiction in that, in horror, the main characters of the story must believe

that supernatural elements are odd, menacing, and against the laws of nature. On the contrary, in fairy tales and fantasy, non-human characters, for example in *The Lord of the Rings*, do not necessarily instil a sense of horror or fright. In contrast, while science fiction also involves the supernatural and non-human, its main focus is the presence of technology and interest in futurism. Thus, fantasy and science fiction are not horror, but horror and gothic are often used as interchangeable terms. While scholars have yet to agree on a working definition that convincingly differentiates between these two interconnected genres, gothic and horror appear as different forms of embracing similar motifs and aesthetics, as is the case with East Asian Gothic cinema (Balmain 2017), Bollywood Horror (Banaji 2014), or Pop Goth culture (Edwards and Monnet 2012).

The lack of consensus on what we mean by horror and gothic from literature, to cinema, to pop culture has led to the conception of horror not as a genre per se but as a mode that can manifest in any form or medium capable of adapting to change – in other words, as 'a progressive form of fiction, one that evolves to meet the fears and anxieties of its times' (Douglas E. Winter cited in Cardin 2017, p. 44). Accordingly, Carroll (1990, p. 15) argues that horror is not necessarily characterised by a particular mode of writing or the monsters it usually breeds, but rather by the affective reaction the genre is designed to provoke. Following Carroll, Xavier Aldana Reyes (2017) claims that while gothic has a clear aesthetic and thematic marker, horror is a mode marked by the overall affect and emotion it attempts to convey – mainly fear, shock, dread, disgust, and so forth. Similarly, when discussing the poetics of horror in films directed by women, Patricia Pisters (2020) claims that we may not be able to read all images as explicitly horror. Thinking about horror in this way, Pisters (2020, p. 13) argues, helps us to rethink its affective meaning also beyond gender conventions, which will be essential when we get to Chapter 6, which discusses the everyday monstrous feminine. Horror in this sense is present in form, aesthetics, and meaning, which includes affect and emotion and not forcefully a form of writing or filming. Following these perspectives, in this book horror is identified as a changing mode that adapts to different times, locations, cultures, languages, and media, which intends to horrify as a way of revealing complex fears and anxieties, as well as desires, through its most common tropes including monsters, abnormality, and hybridity.

The genre is certainly still defined according to Eurocentric modes of literary and cinematic production in contemporary compilations on the study of horror such as *The Palgrave Handbook of Horror Literature* (Corstorphine and Kremmel 2018) or *Horror International* (Schneider and Williams 2005). Monster theory has experienced a similar tendency, dominated by monstrous creatures in cinema and literature in edited volumes such as *The Monster Theory Reader* (Weinstock 2020a) and *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Lauro 2017a), *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imagining Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Botting and

Spooner 2015a), and *All Around Monstrous: Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts* (Bernardi and Jacob 2019). Due to the Eurocentric narratives that dominate the origins of horror and monsters, Patrick Brantlinger (1990) suggests calling European horror 'imperial Gothic'. It is plausible to consider that beyond Europe and its preferred mediums for creating horror fiction, the themes of horror can be traced back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written circa 1700 BCE, as well as oral stories including myths, legends, and folktales from diverse cultural contexts around the world.

Recent studies have paid more attention to the role of local myths and beliefs in creating horror fiction. These have played a significant role in challenging the original myth that frequently sets the origin of many genres within the Global North and spreading from there to the rest of the globe. Colette Balmain has conceptualised East Asian Gothic cinema as 'a shared cultural mythology, based upon cultural proximity and intra-regional homologies [that] provides a cinematic template of ghosts and ghouls together with a grotesque menagerie of shape-shifting animals, imagined as either deities or demons' (2017, p. 1). Balmain considers East Asian Gothic to be an indigenous genre with similar concerns to other forms of gothic and not a version of Western Gothic, a copy of an original, or another effect of the colonial period. Characters such as the fox spirit, which Balmain (2017) names as the gothic creature par excellence in the East Asian cultural imaginary, help to challenge limited understandings of the gothic where Europe is said to be the gold standard. Beyond geographical perspectives, to dislocate gothic and horror as genres exclusively endemic to certain creative forms, we also need to consider looking beyond written texts and cinema.

The aforementioned studies have only recently included digital media as a new medium in which to encounter horror. Yet, in the digital era, horror has necessarily engaged with the changing, or rather mutating, fears that the digital had entailed. Technology and media have been said to be haunted and haunting (Blackman 2019, p. x; Sconce 2000), whether by demonic creatures hidden inside hardware (McKelvey 2018) or as invisible entities we only perceive while navigating social media alone in our dark rooms (Tanner 2016). In an attempt to understand the ways in which horror fiction reflects on fears of digital technologies, Aldana Reyes and Blake (2015) have coined the term 'digital horror'. They define digital horror as 'any type of horror that actively purports to explore the dark side of contemporary life in a digital age governed by informational flows, rhizomatic public networks, virtual simulation and visual hyper-stimulation' (2015, p. 3). Their definition is, however, limited to horror films' exploration of the digital age.

In this book, digital horror extends beyond the cinematographic to encompass manifestations of horror that inhabit and take shape within the digital sphere. Therefore, the aim is to expand the notion of digital horror beyond creative expressions that speak to fears of technology. Digital horror, in this book, also

intervenes in art-horror or horror fiction by identifying the ways in which horror has adapted to a digital medium and bred new digital monsters. To challenge the dominant contemporary and biased taxonomies of horror from fields of study and languages that have and continue to greatly influence horror studies (for example, English departments researching English Gothic novels or Hollywood zombie films), this book turns its attention to digital horror in an area and a language (or languages) claimed to have shown little interest towards horror literature and cinema. Therefore, in answering 'why horror?', it is necessary to engage with Andrew Tudor's concluding statement reiterated in Shakuntala Banaji's (2014) study of Hindi horror: 'the question should not be "why horror?" at all. It should be, rather, why do *these* people like *this* horror in *this* place at *this* particular time?' (Tudor 1997, p. 461). This book envisions a radical disruption in medium providing a unique opportunity to understand why digital horror is key to unravelling the triumph of memes in the second half of the 2010s in parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

Studying digital media and grotesque aesthetics in North Africa is not a random choice. The growing penetration of the internet, its relatively low participatory barriers, and its considerable anonymity have opened a space in which to be creative, even if, or even because, no one is watching. However, creators in the region are aware of the hurdles and challenges the digital entails. The digital, with its potential for both oppositional politics and state surveillance, provides a space for experimenting with various artistic aesthetics and genres that may not align with or cater to the preferences of traditional media and its gatekeepers. In its study of digital horror, this research seeks to unveil hidden transcripts concealed within the imagination of monsters emerging within a particular online datasphere. In arguing the digital sphere as a space in which to explore horror, it is clear that the migration of horror and monsters from traditional religious beliefs, folktales, novels, and films into digital platforms and online genres such as YouTube videos, animated cartoons, and memes has proliferated. A focus on a geopolitical place with a tightly controlled media industry allows for a better understanding of the worlds of horror, monsters, and the grotesque in the digital sphere because it is the medium in which these can most carelessly wander.

In order to make these connections clear, this book examines digital horror in a region believed to be devoid of horror fiction in written literature and cinema. As we shall see throughout this book, but particularly in Chapter 3, the digital has emerged as a space in which to experiment with horror as an expressive mode for things that cannot or will not be expressed otherwise. It is evident, in analysing the research, how participants have created monsters out of powerful figures or themselves as much as they have contributed towards the perpetuation of digital monstrous forms such as memes and other rapidly made grotesque cultural productions. In this sense, not only do horror and monsters reside within digital

items, but they are also monsters in themselves due to their hybridity, oddity, and grotesque appearance. The imagined monsters (dehumanised characters) in their monstrous forms (memes and other odd and amateurish-looking cultural artefacts) will test the limitations of oddity, abnormality, and hybridity in enticing fears and desires. In populating almost exclusively online ecosystems and encouraging unsophisticated aesthetics, these digital monsters are able to reveal important stories of abuse, isolation, and humiliation, as well as creativity, trendiness, and artistic innovation.

A Note on the Structure

The chapters in this book are intended to offer a complex and multi-layered understanding of the work of memes, the imagination of monsters, and the significance of grotesque digital culture. For this reason, the chapters are interconnected and are best comprehended when read together rather than as stand-alone texts. As the book advances, cases that appear in different chapters are occasionally presented under different theoretical and conceptual approaches. The purpose of building on chapters as the book progresses is to provide a holistic perspective on the subject matter. The book is divided into four sections, each dealing with broad thematic areas.

Part I, *The Poetics of Digital Horror,* begins with Chapter 2, which engages with different interpretations of the grotesque, paying particular attention to its role in postcoloniality and digital aesthetics. Monster theory is a key focus to illuminate that memes are monsters of the digital age. Chapter 3 makes the case for horror in a region where horror has yet to be theorised.

Part II, *Stories of the Undead,* dives into the ways in which power struggles between ruling elites and ordinary people are staged online through fear and contempt. Chapter 4 examines illustrations of those who suffer humiliation by the elites, and Chapter 5 focuses on the way creators express and mock the culture of humiliation.

Part III, *Home Wreckers,* turns to the idea of haunted homes through an analysis of gender and the nation. Chapter 6 looks at ordinary women online as creators as well as hosts of the amateurish content they create, and Chapter 7 explores memes that seek to challenge dominant narratives of the homeland.

Finally, Part IV, *Desiring the Grotesque,* examines the ways in which monsters and the grotesque may be glamorised and become desirable. Chapter 8 takes an in-depth look into the political use of local language and vulgarity, while Chapter 9 sees the grotesque as an essential part of new forms of nostalgia among a new wave of content creators and musicians as opposed to nostalgia expressed by ultra- nationalist memes.

Chapter 10 delivers the conclusions of this book, making the case for an academic disobedience that threatens established disciplines and markets.

Part I

The Poetics of Digital Horror

2

The Digital Grotesque

The rapid proliferation of digital media in the 1990s opened a space to rethink aesthetics and creativity in exciting and perhaps novel ways. Some content is more utopian than others (for example, Steven Holtzman's *Digital Mosaics* (1997)); however, the vibrant emerging work displays a wide range of interpretations of digital aesthetics from technology, computing, and code, to algorithms, online infrastructures, and digital art. Efforts to understand the aesthetics of technology or the technology of aesthetics, however, are not new but date back to European scholarship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. R. L. Rutsky asserts that the consideration of aesthetics in technology begins with modernist tendencies to 'technologize aesthetics', 'aestheticize technology', or 'aestheticize modern technological society' (or politics) (1999, p. 9). Rutsky (1999, p. 9) highlights that the modernist interest in technologising aesthetics is not exclusive to a single political belief but corresponds as much to left avant-gardes as to Nazi visions of an aestheticised technological state. To some extent, modernist attempts to reconcile aesthetics with technology strive to demythologise the magical values of the aesthetic spheres with their technicist tendency (Rutsky 1999, p. 10). Artistic attention, including television and cinema, has followed technology and media development throughout time; of course, this has been revisited in the wake of the so-called digital revolution.

As with other technological changes, digital media suggests a new aesthetic sensibility marked by its own unsettling logic (Rutsky 1999, p. 20). Studies on art and digital media provide insight on the roles of internet infrastructures, algorithms, and platforms, considering the possibilities of infinite reproduction; the uniqueness and authenticity of art; problematising authorship and anonymity; or the changes to artistic interactions and exhibitions (see, for example, Goriunova 2012, 2014; Hoelzl and Marie 2015). When referring to digital art, Claire Bishop claims that 'at its most utopian, the digital revolution opens up a new dematerialized, deauthored, and unmarketable reality of collective culture; at

its worst, it signals the impending obsolescence of visual art itself' (2012). Bishop questions how the internet affects the idea of aesthetics all together:

> The internet asks us to reconsider the very paradigm of an aesthetic object: Can communication between users become the subject of an aesthetic? The centrality of this question to social practice is obvious: Does work premised on a dialogic, prosumer model, seeking real-world impact, need to assume representation or an object form in order to be recognized as art? (2012)

In line with this perspective, Pau Waelder, a researcher, art critic, and curator (Chierico 2017), along with scholars Martin Zebracki and Jason Luger (2019, p. 8), make a similar argument. They assert that GIFs, tweets, hashtags, and creative symbols including emojis and memes are examples of digital art forms. The distinction lies in the fact that Waelder's viewpoint focuses on artists incorporating memes and technology into their creative processes, whereas Zebracki and Luger categorise all memes as forms of digital public art.

Gilles Deleuze's aesthetic philosophy informs much of this work in its capacity to argue for ontological creations serving to rethink aesthetics in digital computation (Fazi 2019), machine aesthetics (Rutsky 1999), or digital images (Hansen 2004; Ibrahim 2021), or in rereading classic literary works through the lens of digital media theories (Colebrook 2012). At the centre of these studies is Deleuze's interest in returning to the Greek etymology of aesthetics, *aesthesis*, to focus on an aesthetic theory of the senses. Over time, this aesthetic perspective has gradually shifted, giving way to discussions focused on specific European experiences of art and the study of beauty. The discipline of aesthetics emerged at the end of the 18th century following Kantian and Hegelian understandings of aesthetics centred on theories of art as beauty rather than studies or theories of senses. The latter encompasses both the visual and the auditory aspects, or as Walter Mignolo (2011, p. 13) accurately highlights, the interplay of senses and sensations, akin to the phenomenon of synaesthesia. The emergence of the affective turn in digital aesthetics has, in some views, led to a conceptual impasse, characterised as being caught 'between the continuity of sensation and the discreteness of digital technology' (Fazi 2019, p 3). Despite criticisms of this shift towards affect, digital aesthetics scholarship has yet to fully integrate research that examines creativity in digital objects from a perspective that incorporates affect and offers critical engagement with Eurocentric interpretations of aesthetics solely as 'beauty'.

Throughout this chapter, I suggest integrating the perspective of digital cultural studies into the varied studies on digital aesthetics. I elaborate on the seemingly contradictory creative tendency that leans towards negative aesthetic qualities in technology, such as notions of failure and ugliness. This is particularly significant since technology is developed, in principle, as an effort to improve sound, visuals, and written content. The aim to challenge the purpose of new technological tools may be aligned with a tradition rooted in artistic curiosity towards creative

disruption. Art and media aesthetics belong as much to artistic curiosity driven by experimentation in repurposing new technology for unconventional uses, as they serve as a means for political activism and protest.

Embedded in discussions on failure and ugliness is where we find the digital grotesque. The digital grotesque serves as a framework to explore the politics and aesthetics of rapidly made, amateurish-looking, and visually unappealing digital items as well as other digital artefacts that engage with digital horror. The digital grotesque profits from the abilities of both the grotesque and the digital to threaten established normative boundaries, both existing within and transcending them. By establishing a framework that incorporates critiques of the implications of the 'post-' in postdigital and postcolonial contexts, the digital grotesque reveals important, often overlooked hidden stories of alienation, dehumanisation, and anomie as well as vibrant new artistic trends, forms of activism, and avenues of empowerment. This chapter argues for interpreting memes as digital monsters bred within the cultural logic of the digital grotesque.

Digital Cultural Studies

In examining the complexities of aesthetics in the digital domain, this book aligns with the cultural studies tradition of examining the interconnectedness of politics and aesthetics. While certain branches of cultural studies have evolved to consider the discipline as a mere political reading of culture, cultural studies has always been 'as much about pleasure as about ideology' (Felski 2005, p. 32). As exemplified by Dick Hebdige's (1979) seminal examination on punk style, cultural studies has had a long-standing interest in investigating the political dimensions of appearance, aesthetics, and styles among subcultures. In this book, the study of digital aesthetics primarily focuses on creative cultural artefacts that are native to the digital sphere. The items produced and shared online are, however, not necessarily meant to be considered as 'works of art' (what is purposefully made to be seen as art) or, as defined by Olga Goriunova, as 'a historically acknowledged and institutionalized form of creativity becoming tangible, socially acceptable, limited to cultured and human society' (2012, p. 18).

A digital cultural studies insight does not intend to 'elevate' digital creative artefacts such as memes, online cartoons, and other modes of creative digital cultures to an exclusive and elitist group of 'works of art' or art objects. Instead, this emphasis on digital aesthetics goes beyond the debate over whether certain objects qualify as 'works of art'. Cultural studies provides a framework for interpreting digital aesthetics that extend beyond meticulously planned and deliberate processes of individual artists or artistic trends while retaining their political dimension. The focus is not on investigating the ways in which digital artists explore the potential of memes to make art or how they engage with memes in

the context of evolving aesthetics, mediums, politics, cultures, societies, or the art world. Rather, the aim is to move towards a cultural study of the digital, or rather a digital cultural studies, which acknowledges creativity beyond what is traditionally considered 'artistically respected', to echo Hoggart as quoted in Hebdige (1979, p. 8). After all, while cultural studies has faced criticism for having 'ignored' aesthetics in favour of a political reading, it always meant to broaden the scope of what is recognised as art (Felski 2005). In his study on digital aesthetics, Rutsky (1999) underscores the potential for new media and information technology to erode the delineations between high and popular culture.

From the perspective of digital literature, Claire Taylor (2019) advocates for 'critical digital culture studies' as a subfield within cultural studies. According to Taylor, this subfield should encompass aesthetics, technology, and ethics in order to understand digital literature

> as simultaneously, making use of technological affordances without being determined by them; as building on prior literary traditions without being bound by them, and as providing a critical stance on contemporary socio-economic conditions all the while being aware of its own imbrication in them. (2019, p. 3)

Taylor claims that new work on cultural studies has unquestioningly embraced and integrated the digital component. There is a pressing need for in-depth research that explores and develops theories on the connection between digital culture and cultural studies (2019, pp. 15–16). As part of her advocacy for a field she defines as 'digital culture studies', Taylor suggests recuperating a leftist critical analysis that includes close textual analysis (what she refers to as aesthetics) applied to the lived experiences of culture within the context of digital media platforms.

Media studies scholarship has veered away from cultural studies analysis to concentrate on the examination of political, social, and economic dynamics surrounding digital technology (Hoy 2017, p. 9). Writing in 2020 with a particular focus on memes, Jordan Schonig highlights that research on memes has invoked scant attention 'to consider what role aesthetic experience or feeling might play in the daily ubiquitous acts of judging such objects [of art] on social media platforms' (2020, p. 27). Media studies related to North Africa and the Middle East, in particular, has traditionally paid little attention to content analysis (Hafez 2008, p. 9; Lynch 2008, p. 21) in favour of the journalistic and reporting potential of media outlets with a global reach such as Al Jazeera (Armbrust 2012, p. 158). When examining memes from a media studies perspective, it becomes evident that there is a tendency to neglect the politics of aesthetics and creative genres, often prioritising a purely media-centric analysis and its resulting social and political impacts (see, for example, Denisova 2019; Milner 2016; Shifman 2014). Even in studies that contemplate art-historical associations with alternative forms of media, there is a noticeable absence of the role aesthetics play in constructing and reflecting political beliefs, social movements, and forms of political contention at large (see, for example, Lievrouw 2011). In this regard, although An Xiao Mina (2019)

describes memes as the internet's equivalent of street art, the discourse predominantly revolves around the connection between meme culture and social, political, and cultural movements, with less emphasis on delving into the political implications of their aesthetics. My own work on memes (Moreno-Almeida 2020; Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021) has only cautiously engaged with the political dimensions of aesthetics as part of a broader political analysis of memes.

Nevertheless, it is well established that genres and aesthetics can encapsulate specific emotions. In discussing the role that emotions play in shaping particular literary genres, Sianne Ngai (2005) quotes Thomas Hobbes, who argues that humanity's fear of invisible spirits is what gave rise to the oath as a distinct form or genre. Similarly, Helmut Rosa suggests that the unique characteristics of distorted sounds and metallic guitar chords in heavy metal serve as metaphors of a genre which expresses both alienation from the world and 'a promise of reconciliation' (2019, pp. 326–7). Much like the oath or heavy metal, this book suggests that the aesthetics of memes embody the emotions, politics, and aesthetics that have emerged in the digital era.

The objective here is to investigate digital aesthetics, incorporating both aesthetics and aesthesis, through the framework of digital cultural studies. Instead of forcing memes and digital culture into the confines of the art world or undertaking a purely political reading of these digital items according to their medium (in media studies) or message (in political science), digital cultural studies offers insight into the aesthetic (art and sensory), social, and political dimensions of digital 'styles', bridging the realms of digital art, media, and politics. This book extends the important groundwork laid by Taylor by presenting a cultural studies perspective that takes a serious look at digital aesthetics as they relate to art and affect, media, and politics. However, this research advocates for the examination of cultural artefacts beyond literary texts. The goal is to provide a radical contextualisation of digital artefacts autochthonous to online ecosystems, emphasising everyday life experiences and the interaction of everyday life with governance, and considering the affordances *and* limitations of digital media while also thinking beyond these. This viewpoint encourages us to reflect on digital creative culture beyond discussions of what qualifies as art and what does not. The aim is to contribute to the existing rich literature on art, images, and digital aesthetics by paying attention to often overlooked narratives concealed within everyday digital items and the dialogues they generate. It is in the attempt to recognise the choice of a particular aesthetic as intrinsic to digital media and cultures that this book builds one of its main concepts: the digital grotesque.

The Postdigital

In the aftermath of the digital revolution, the postdigital era signifies a period in which complex computing processes and digital forms and functions have become

so integrated into our daily lives that the presence of fans or flickering lights no longer appears as something exceptional (Albrecht *et al*. 2019, p. 11). This normalisation of the digital, at least in certain regions of the world and for certain individuals, coincided with the development of programs and applications (apps) designed to improve our daily routines. These range from apps that motivate us to exercise and remind us to drink water or even to take a moment to breathe, to sophisticated word processors and image-editing software.

Florian Cramer (2015, p. 15) argues that the 'post' in postdigital should not be perceived as a signal of the end of the digital era, but rather likened to how we employ this prefix in terminology such as postcolonial or postfeminism. In essence, the term postdigital signifies a non-linear but critical continuation of the digital in the same way as postcolonial alludes to the ongoing mutations, rather than the end of, colonialism (post-colonial). As defined here, the postdigital (without hyphen) represents a habitat, and not necessarily the subject, and therefore should not be equated with the notion of digital natives. Interestingly, Cramer (2015) also considers the postdigital as an era of disillusionment with the digital. In this regard, it is an era that looks with nostalgia at pre-digital technologies such as analogue cameras and typewriters, often incorporating vintage aesthetics into the digital world as filters that replicate the look of Polaroid photos or antique radios with Bluetooth capabilities. Such disillusionment with technology is partly reflected in artistic explorations and appreciation of glitches in new technological devices.

Kim Cascone (2000) contends that the artistic interest in failure serves as an indication of the postdigital era. Furthermore, Cascone identifies postdigital aesthetics as the result of artists' inspiration in failure, glitches, and errors in the system. It is within these instances of technological failures that artists uncover new techniques and sounds. In this postdigital context, failure is interesting and exciting because these errors remind us 'that our control of technology is an illusion … revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build it' (Cascone 2000, p. 13). Similarly, within the realm of visual arts, digital artists have explored the aesthetics of failure for decades, from television in the 1960s to the consequences of default compression and decompression algorithms in digital images. Through this creative investigation, the digital dimension in visual culture not only encompasses aspects related to production, storage, and distribution but also includes a change within three other parameters: access, place, and mode of appearance:

> The current state of digital visual culture as a whole, is characterised by the dislocation of the image from print to screen, from the archive to the Web and by the need for fast data transfer and access via enhanced network infrastructures (fibre optics, mobile broadband) and image infrastructures (compression). (Hoelzl and Marie 2015, p. 68)

Accordingly, 'failure' also indicates the changes in medium, connection quality, and other forms of internet infrastructures.

Rather than serving as a reminder of humanity's efficiency and perfection, digital failure serves as a canvas upon which art and artists explore technological advancements as tools of disruption. As articulated by Cramer, the postdigital mindset embodies an attitude 'of taking systems apart and using them in ways which subvert the original intention of the design' (2015, p. 20). Rather than characterising this approach as failure, Nick Douglas (2014) prefers to view this rebellious attitude through the prism of the resulting aesthetics. Although ugliness is not the sole aesthetic of the internet, according to Douglas, it is the one that best defines the internet against all other media. Termed 'internet ugly' by Douglas (2014, p. 314), this aesthetic involves the use of tools such as Photoshop and AutoCorrect – originally intended for smoothing and beautifying images – as a way to create messy, distorted, and visually unappealing memes and cartoon strips. Its dialectical purposes, Douglas claims, include 'glorifying the amateur, validating the unglamorous, and mocking the self-serious, formulaic, and mainstream' (2014, p. 334). The interest in technology's capacity to generate ugliness and failure underscores the potential of digital technology to subvert the purposes for which these programs and apps were originally conceived and constructed.

In the postdigital landscape, the concepts of failure and ugliness not only reflect humanity's imperfections but also have evolved into deliberate sources of aesthetic and political disruption. In a medium created to produce perfect-looking images and flawless texts, the amateurish, the careless, and the rapidly made are not merely categorised as failed or successful attempts at using technological advances. Purposefully disrupting technology becomes an act of defiance against dominant aesthetic norms and perceptions that prioritise enhancement as the driving technological innovation – that is, the pursuit of 'better' images, cleaner texts, and sharper sounds.

Examples of digital disruptions that have created digital forms of communication include SMS (Short Message Service) language or memes, ranging from image-macros (a combination of image and text) to remixed videos and GIFs. The former challenge the rules of grammar, eliciting both disapproval and a sense of comfort for many who have contributed to the evolution of SMS language as a novel form of expression. Shorter text exchanges, or dialogues led by image-macros, possess the capacity to not only artistically explore failures in the system but also disrupt and reshape prevailing norms. In this context, memes emerge as aesthetic anomalies, displaying their insubordination towards the potential of editing tools by ignoring their original purpose, corrupting their presence, and disrupting digital language and its aesthetics altogether.

Platform infrastructures and their user communities have played a significant role in repurposing digital tools to enhance and beautify the digital realm.

Olga Goriunova (2014) presents a compelling case concerning the role of 'techno-aesthetics' emerging as a result of a platform's internal infrastructures. According to Goriunova, memes are a cultural by-product influenced by the specific workings of imageboards such as 4chan and Reddit. In the context of 4chan, for instance, the platform's infrastructure necessitates that new threads be continuously reposted to maintain visibility within the board's limited space. According to this infrastructure, memes that are funny, sharp, or original stand a better chance of being reposted and, consequently, preserved within the site as opposed to mundane, unoriginal, or 'normal' content. Such repeated reposting, known as 'meme-forcing' on 4chan, often results in popular memes appearing on mainstream platforms such as Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram. This infrastructure not only informs human behaviour but also influences technical manners (Goriunova 2014, p. 70). Both of these factors have contributed to the distinctive aesthetic of memes we recognise today, characterised by their unconventional, rapidly produced, and amateur appearance.

The link Goriunova identifies is that meme aesthetics are connected to the way platforms are designed and the manner in which they require user interaction for posts to gain notoriety. She observes: 'And what following memes demonstrates is the circular movement of mutual formation of technical infrastructures imbued with aesthetic theatres of individuation and the mediated forms of culture, politics and new human–technical platforms, ultimately, pointing at the new kinds and manners of aesthetics' (2014, p. 72). As a result, memes' aesthetics have evolved to embody an ugly, rapidly made, hybrid, and amateurish appearance, reflecting the memers' (those who create memes) desire for attention, connection, and survival within imageboards.

In tandem with the phenomenon of meme-forcing, imageboards drew inspiration from the anonymity characteristic of early online chatrooms, resulting in the emergence of radical new forms of anonymity (Lolli 2017, p. 86). This design choice provided a fertile breeding ground for the development of trolling culture, particularly on platforms such as 4chan's /b/ board and its later iteration, 8chan, which have gained notoriety as hotspots for anonymous trolling.[1] These platforms and channels are often associated with spaces of depravation, where anonymous participants share the most despicable content including pornography, white supremacism, racism, and xenophobia. While 4chan has been popular in Anglocentric milieus, similar trolling forums have emerged online in other linguistic ecosystems such as ForoCoches in the Spanish-speaking world or Jeuxvideo.com, often referred to as the French equivalent of 4chan (*L'Obs* 2015; Reynaud 2016).

[1] For more on 4chan and trolls, see Whitney Phillips's book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (2015).

Depravity can also be associated with the spectacle of grotesque images now readily available to wide audiences. As Tarek El-Ariss claims, '[c]yberspace has resuscitated if not amplified the Place de Grève and its spectacle of cruelty, as seen in leaked videos of torture and humiliation, from Khal's depictions in Throwing Sparks and the Abu Ghraib pictures during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the gruesome performances of ISIS's head- and limb-severing in 2012' (2019, p. 8). Through the spectacle of depravity, one can trace meme culture back to artistic interests in shifting normative expectations of beauty.

Aesthetic Disruptions

In the 19th century, Francisco Goya (1742–1828) devoted his series of works known as *Pinturas Negras* (Black Paintings) to reflecting on the impact of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) and the internal political turmoil in Spain during that period. Goya conveyed the impact of war and governmental chaos through depictions of ugliness, monstrosity, and horror in his artwork. This interest in grotesque imagery during that era was not casual. A contemporary of Goya and one of the pioneers of Jena Romanticism and the first gothic novel, the German poet Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), proclaimed that ugliness signalled 'truly modern art and literature' (Bru 2015, p. 23).

During the 20th century, European artistic movements followed suit, exploring aesthetics as a means of challenging conventional expressions of beauty. Avant-garde artistic movements such as Italian futurism, cubism, Dadaism, surrealism, Situationist International (SI), pop art, and youth subcultures such as punk and hip hop exhibited keen interest in the grotesque, satire, culture jamming, cut-and-paste techniques, and remixing – elements that are also characteristic of memes. These movements produced art that ridiculed and questioned normative and institutional aesthetics as a form of protest.

Dadaism, born in a cabaret setting after the First World War, expressed scepticism towards maintaining independence and freedom, as stated by Tristian Tzara in the *Dadaist Manifesto* of 1918, reflecting the world's disillusionment following the war (Kristiansen 1968). Carelessness and the creation of amateur-looking cultural artefacts also emerged in 1970s subcultures such as punk and later hip hop. In these movements, there was no celebration of 'skilfulness' in mastering traditional instruments or adhering to European classic musical norms; rather, the focus was on making art without such constraints.

In citing Stephen Duncombe's work on the zines of the 1980s and 1990s, Mike Mowbray (2015, p. 28) highlights how the cut-up amateurism of 'cheap, multiple-copy objects' represents a politically important aesthetic form precisely because

it stands in contrast to the 'slick, polished, seamless' façade of professionalised media production.

Many of these artistic explorations of the grotesque, including memes, can be linked together by what Leah A. Lievrouw (2011) refers to as alternative/activist media. Lievrouw describes alternative/activist media as information and communication practices that seek to challenge dominant cultures and politics. This label includes artistic movements such as Dada and SI due to their 'explicitly political objectives, their critique of dominant economic and political regimes, and their ready appropriations and adaptation of popular media technologies and content to confront and intervene in mainstream culture and politics' (Lievrouw 2011, p. 30). The connection between meme culture and alternative/activist media is explained through its use of culture jamming techniques. However, this technical association overlooks memes' ties with online trolling and reactionary online subcultures, often referred to as the alt-right. The term alt-right capitalises on the use of similar language by suggesting an alternative form of right-wing politics that differs from mainstream right-wing groups. It is worth noting that techno-aesthetics, and aesthetics in general, have not only fascinated but also attracted and influenced the formulation of 20th-century fascism. This is particularly prominent in their penchant for medieval aesthetics (Spotts 2009) including grotesque illustrations of the Jewish community to articulate their reprehensible anti-Semitism (Cohen 1996, p. 8). Thus, a shared interest in 'alternative' aesthetics has not only driven leftists' criticisms of socio-political circumstances, but has also been a source of fascination for far-right ideologies and bigoted discourses throughout the 20th century.

Different forms of artistic expression may have originally challenged prevailing aesthetics in their own time and place. However, these same aesthetics can be reappropriated to exert influence and shape different ideologies and beliefs in other places and/or eras. This is made possible by understanding that the categories determining whether something is considered beautiful or ugly, dirty or clean, noise or music, are not absolute but are contingent upon individual perspectives (Douglas 1966; Sartwell 2004). What was once deemed disruptive and grotesque may no longer elicit the initial discomfort it was designed to provoke, or conversely, it might now evoke discomfort where it previously did not. Likewise, in discussions on the boundaries between music and noise (as explored by Attali 1985 and Rose 1994), what may be considered by some to be noise as matter-out-of-place could be viewed by others as matter-*in*-place because it resonates emotionally, aesthetically, performatively, or politically with certain groups of people. Although taste might not be as *absolutely* determined by social class as argued by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), systems of power exist that shape the establishment of positive and negative values within a particular time and place. These systems can influence both dominant and alternative perceptions on aesthetics.

By 2022, the ugly aesthetics of memes clearly demonstrated an ability to adapt to a wide array of beliefs, even those that are diametrically opposed. Within the realm of meme culture, a struggle unfolded to resist appropriation, particularly by the left, as evidenced in the alt-right motto the 'Left can't meme'. This assertion posits that the Left, as Alessandro Lolli articulates it, '*non sa, o ancora peggio, non può fare i meme, perché troppo moralista*' (doesn't know, or even worse, cannot make memes because it is too moralistic) (2017, p. 158). According to the alt-right perspective, the mainstream right is too conservative for such transgressive and 'triggering' jokes (Ebner 2019, p. 169). Because the original purpose of memes was to portray what cannot be said in a politically correct manner within the mainstream media (Lovink and Tuters 2018), the alt-right believes it is the only group that dares to forgo mores, ethics, and morality in order to articulate their opinions. In this way, the alt-right imagines itself as sole proprietor of anti-politically correct humour. But as humour, meme culture now serves a wide variety of purposes that include political activism and leftist agendas.

The use of political humour as a strategy of attacking authority is well documented in North Africa and the Middle East (see, for example, Bhungalia 2020; Jones 2017; el Khairat 2015; Kishtainy 1985, 2009; El Marzouki 2015; Mifdal 2016; Norris and Jones 2005; Pearce and Hajizada 2014; Wedeen 2013) as well as in anglophone culture (Day 2011). While academic literature considers humour coming from anti-authoritarian efforts as a positive tool of resistance, sarcasm from the alt-right is mostly portrayed as prejudiced. As alternative media, both anti-authoritarian groups and the alt-right use humour as a temporal liberation that suspends hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). In authoritarian contexts where media is tightly controlled by the state, mocking those in power sends strong messages under the disguise of entertainment and laughter, operating to deflect the seriousness of possible criticism. This same technique is effective for the alt-right because humour helps disguise what some find to be intolerable messages in formal political settings that may encourage hate speech, racism, and/or attacks on feminists, among others. In turn, offensive humour provides a shield for the alt-right against accusations of racism, for example, and its possible consequences (May and Feldman 2019).

In a postdigital landscape marked by the rapid spread of online campaigns, ongoing debates on cancel culture have ignited intense discussions that blur the boundaries that differentiate humour, political correctness, bigotry, and activism. While a comprehensive exploration of cancel culture is beyond the purposes of this book, it is worth mentioning that offensive memes, or any content designed to disrupt, are more likely to attract attention online. Consequently, this content has a better chance of surviving in a social media environment hungry for content and engagement. Anti-political content and cancel culture debates have also shed light

on the fact that memes, jokes, and other creative artefacts are not always perceived as funny. Ryan Milner (2016) argues against humour being one of the five defining logics of memes by pointing to the serious nature of some memes. Drawing on Kate Miltner's (2014) work, Milner prefers to highlight the ability of memes to create emotional resonance rather than humour. However, this book embraces both emotional resonance and humour, as much as aesthetics – and not only *aesthesis* – to examine the world of meme culture. These elements come together within memes and other digital cultural production, offering the potential for disruption. Expectations of disruption are at the core of the digital grotesque.

Digital Grotesque as Disobedience

In its contemporary conceptualisation, the grotesque emerges as a revolution against strict social norms opposing classical Aristotelian aesthetics: barbaric, chaotic, excessive, crude, and uncivilised. After all, the grotesque, in its Italian origin *grottesco* (derived from *grotta*), means 'of a cave', suggesting wild forms, irregular proportions, or oddities. During the Italian Renaissance, the term was initially employed to describe recently unearthed Roman paintings found on the walls of the caves (*pittura grottesca*) at Domus Aurea. The presence of these frescos within the caves added a sense of decadence and monstrosity to these newly discovered images.

The word grotesque resurfaces in Michel de Montaigne's *Les Essais*, published in 1580, in chapter XXVII, 'De l'Amitié'. At the beginning of this chapter, the author ponders the artist's placement of a fresco painting on the wall:

> *Il choisit le plus bel endroit et milieu de chaque paroy, pour y loger un tableau élabouré de tout sa suiffisance; et, le vuide tout au tour, il le remplit de crotesques, qui sont peintures fantasques, n'ayant grâce qu'en la varieté et estrangeté*. (Montaigne and Desan 1580)
>
> [He chooses the most beautiful place and middle of any wall, to draw a picture, which he elaborates with his utmost sufficiency, and he fills the empty space all around with grotesques, which are fantastic paintings, without any grace only in variety and strangeness.]

Montaigne continues:

> *Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crotesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite?* (Montaigne and Desan 1580)
>
> [And in truth, what are these things I scribble, other than grotesques and monstrous bodies, made of various parts, without any certain figure, or any other than accidental order, coherence, or proportion?]

In this well-known passage, Montaigne associates the grotesque to the monstrous, a bond that endures to this day. The meaning of the grotesque evolved with time, gaining further negative connotations during the 18th century as something absurd, comical, unrefined, and uncivilised. It is partly because of Victorian concerns with degenerations that the grotesque also becomes associated to experimentation, monstrosity, and horror. According to Naomi Simone Borwein, this inextricable connection between grotesque and horror is rooted in physicality and the visual, as it is 'a physical manifestation of horror and terror that is created by deviation, dichotomy, and excess' (2017, p. 999). While it is obvious that the grotesque and the horror genre have significant roots in Europe, it is also clear that, as with the postcolonial gothic (Chapter 3), the grotesque successfully serves to uncover the in-betweenness of post-colonialism and decolonial aesthetics because of its ability to address power relations.

In his *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, Michel Foucault (2003) speaks about the grotesque and monsters as mechanisms of power. The grotesque, or the Ubu-esque, aids in understanding forms of governance, order, and disorder (Das 2017). Inspired by Foucault, Achille Mbembe utilises the concepts of the grotesque and monsters to speak about postcolonial systems of power in his eminent book *On the Postcolony* (2001). The grotesque and the obscene, Mbembe argues, are 'two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination' (2001, p. 103). As Mbembe suggests, the grotesque leads us to stories where we, the colonisers, are absent. Instead, monstrous forms emerge from the local imagination that are even more terrifying than the coloniser itself. To Frantz Fanon's (2005) understanding of the colony as a space of terror, Mbembe adds that it is populated 'with maleficent spirits that intervene every time one steps out of line' (2001, p. 181). Serpent-men, jinns, and zombies are part of Mbembe's list of creatures involved in constructing for the colonised 'a world of prohibitions and inhibitions far more terrifying than any world of the colonizer' (2001, pp. 181–2).

Examining post-2011 Tunisia, Charis Boutieri (2021) argues that the grotesque is part of the democratic life in post-revolutionary nations because it denotes the instability between revolution and democracy. Boutieri suggests that what she calls 'the democratic grotesque' challenges the idea of a 'docile democratic consensus or violent anti-democratic extremism' (2021, p. 74). Contrary to the presumption that democracy is contained and sensible, Boutieri argues that it can be grotesque, a factor that destabilises clear-cut differences between a chaotic revolution and an ordered democracy. Particularly through postcolonial lenses, the grotesque offers insight into the blurred lines and liminal spaces that unravels complex power dynamics, transcending the dichotomy of resistance versus compliance, freedom versus oppression, or democracy versus authoritarianism.

On the contrary, the grotesque introduces stories of local creatures such as jinns and ghouls that transcend the colonial experience and offer their distinct

tales of horror, as we will explore throughout the different chapters of this book. Through the perspective of local monsters, the grotesque is reconfigured as a meeting space which blurs boundaries and situates stories about power and ordinary people within the complexities of the in-betweenness. Understanding the digital grotesque as a global phenomenon while considering how the grotesque manifests in the North African datasphere enables a deeper understanding of those spaces that exist, not in a space of neither/nor, but rather in-between.

This perspective examines the grotesque as an agent of disobedience towards normative forms of feelings and thinking. In the final stages of this book's completion, meme study scholar İdil Galip (2021) published an important book chapter centred on memes and the grotesque. Galip interprets the grotesque in two forms: Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque and Sigmund Freud's uncanny. The grotesque in Bakhtin is about transformation, metamorphosis, being born and dying, growing, and becoming: 'They [grotesque images] remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed' (1984, p. 25). Degradation in its different forms, including abusive language, is how the grotesque manifests within medieval popular festivities and the carnivalesque. It is through the grotesque, where degradation meets laughter, that the plebeian gains power by ridiculing the elites. Freud's uncanny shifts the perspective towards the *unheimlich*, understanding it as something that was once familiar but is now strange, causing feelings of fear and dread (Azzam 2007, p. 20). Both the *unheimlich* and Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque inform the digital grotesque. However, it is through a Foucauldian interpretation of mechanisms of power that this book aims at locating the digital grotesque within decolonial calls for aesthetic disobedience.

A postcolonial approach to the grotesque provides a framework for engaging with the concepts 'aesthetics' and 'grotesque'. Rather than a postcolonial perspective, a decolonial perspective on the grotesque suggests that it serves not merely as a tool for disruption but as a tool for disobedience. In 'Aiesthesis Decolonial' (2011), Walter Mignolo argues that aesthetics is a colonial process through *aesthesis*. While aesthetics is a 19th-century European construct related to beauty, the sense of pleasure towards creativity in images, decorations, or languages (aesthesis) unquestionably belongs to any civilisation. Mignolo states that modernity is told through the story of salvation where coloniality is a necessity. Salvation, and by extension coloniality, can only be achieved through exploitation, repression, dehumanisation, and control of the population. Because aesthetics is the colonisation of aesthesis, there are assimilated colonial expectations in place to dictate how people should feel and think: '*son estas expectativas naturalizadas las que operan en la colonialidad del ser, del sentir* (*aesthesis*) *y del saber (epistemología)*' (these naturalised expectations are the ones which operate in the being's coloniality,

feelings (*aesthesis*) and knowledge (epistemology) (Mignolo 2011, p. 18). Once the colonial logic is uncovered and understood, it opens up the possibility for decolonial artistic and aesthetics projects that contribute to decolonial processes. From this vantage point, artists can use aesthetics in a decolonial manner in order to practise aesthetic disobedience.

The concept of the digital grotesque is inspired by Mignolo's claim that aesthetics can be openly political and decolonising ('*abiertamente political y decolonizadora*' (2011, p. 18)). It engages in the ways in which digital cultural artefacts react against imposed aesthetics that continue to be informed by the colonial experience, contemporary elites, and media gatekeepers. However, in order to perform aesthetic disobedience, the digital grotesque needs to decolonise prevailing frameworks of the grotesque as the *unheimlich* and the carnivalesque. Failure to do so would render this book just another application of established theories to a new postcolonial case study (Tlostanova 2020, p. 168). The digital grotesque performs aesthetic disobedience because it not only sheds light on aesthetics disruptions within the digital realm, but it also does so by dismantling the very expectations that underpin its point of departure – a non-Eurocentric datasphere.

Yet how can we dismantle aesthetics in a context where aesthetics, or even the concept of the grotesque, lacks an exact equivalent? The Arabic translation (p. 341) of Montaigne's *Les Essais* by Farid Azzahi (2021), translated from the Modern French version, omits references to the grotesque. Instead, the translation interprets '*grotesques*' and '*corps monstrueux*' (monstrous bodies) as *garaaba* (غرابة), strangeness in Arabic, and as *ajsaad hajiina* (أجساد هجينة), hybrid bodies. In general, to speak about aesthetics, Arabic employs the neologism *jamaliyya* (الجمالية) – meaning the 'science of beauty' (علم الجمال, *'ilm al-jamaal*) inherited from European studies on the subject. However, in alignment with Mignolo's perspective on aesthesis, Samir Mahmoud (2018) contends that the absence of a specific term for aesthetics in Arabic prior to the contemporary era should not be misconstrued as lack of interest or theoretical exploration of the relationship between art and beauty. In fact, aesthetics and beauty have strong ties to Arabo-Islamic thought as evidenced in the well-known Hadith, which comprises the sayings and tradition about the Prophet: 'God is beautiful and loves beauty' (إِنَّ اللَّه جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ). This phrase is believed to establish a connection between beauty and faith (Ali 2007) centuries before Kantian aesthetics was formulated. The prevailing emphasis on beauty, coupled with the contemporary interpretation of aesthetics, has resulted in the neglect of studying oddity, deformity, unevenness, or even horror as a genre (more in Chapter 3). Arabic words such as *mutanaafir* (متنافر) and *ghariib* (غريب) denote dissonance and strangeness respectively, but 'the grotesque' is equally a Eurocentric term. Given that this book is written in English, it utilises English words that, in Arabic, are mere reconfigurations of the

Eurocentric narrative. Nevertheless, throughout the book, it will become clear that local terms are employed when they carry significant connotations relevant to experiences that would be lost in translation (such as *hogra* (humiliation) and *hiba* (fear)). We will revisit the grotesque in Chapter 9 to explore its local, colonial, and decolonial implications.

Memes as Digital Monsters

The English term 'monsters' originates from the Latin word *monstrum*, related to the verb *monstrare* ('to show' or 'to reveal'), as well as from *monere* ('to warn' or 'to portend'). The manifestation of a monster can assume a myriad of forms, including being formless or invisible, and often serves as a cautionary tale. In horror fiction, monsters' bodies, whether it is Dracula, Freddie Krueger, zombies, or jinns and ghouls as discussed in Chapter 3, are typically characterised by their distinctiveness from human beings. Contemporary monster theory also includes the concept of monsters as creatures with human bodies, as well as those metaphorically shaped as governments and big corporations, conspiracy theories, media industries, and those which manifest as a global pandemic, or even the internet. Particularly in an online world where images have proliferated profusely, monsters in general and ghosts in particular have acquired a 'new valency as an element of the cultural imaginary' (Gunning 2007, p. 98) because their appearance fluctuates between the visible and invisible. Because monsters can be anyone or anywhere, visible or invisible, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2020b) argues that we only recognise a monster once it kills. In this way, monstrosity does not entail the presence of a monster; it is, instead, an act of murder (Bernardi and Jacob 2019, p. vii).

In Foucault's analysis of abnormality at Collège de France, he defines monsters as creatures whose existence and physical attributes violate the laws of society and nature, combining the impossible and the forbidden (2003, pp. 55–6). Inspired by Foucault's interpretation of monsters, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has written what is considered the foundational text of monster theory. In 'Monster Theory (Seven Theses)' (1996), Cohen suggests seven propositions in the analysis of monsters:

Thesis I: monsters are born as part of a cultural moment, a time, a feeling, and a place

Thesis II: a monster always comes back despite the number of times it 'dies'

Thesis III: monsters are incoherent hybrid creatures difficult to categorize

Thesis IV: monsters embody difference and alterity (cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual)

Thesis V: monsters are guardians of borders, which prevent and delimit mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual)

Thesis VI: monsters engender not only fear, but also desire
Thesis VII: monsters bring back questions about our perceptions of the world

Indeed, monstrosity is intricately linked to specific times and places while simultaneously transcending boundaries of temporality. Monsters represent hybrid forms that encompass abnormality and otherness, serving as custodians of the borders of normality. Crossing these borders may result in one's demise at the hands of a monster 'or (worse) to become monstrous oneself' (Cohen 1996, p. 12). However, because of their forbidden practices, monsters evoke both fear and desire. Monsters always return, and when they do, they ask questions about us and why we have created them. Some of these principles are shared by cultural items, as cultural studies posits that culture is never generated *ex nihilo*. In exploring how these tenets relate to internet meme culture, the following argument posits that internet memes can be regarded as particularly monstrous creatures.

Memes thrive on hybridity while also relishing their ability to return. Their condition as undead guarantees their survival. Memes, as multimodal digital artefacts, flourish in chaos and disorder, blending written words with images (moving or still) and sounds. They appear as a main artefact of political commentary as well as reactions on social media platforms. Memes foster transmedia online participation (Jenkins 2006, 2016), hijacking stories, diverting and multiplying them, and ultimately adding layers of meaning uncontrollably. Memes cross borders of medium and challenge traditional storytelling and notions of correctness, often flourishing by reflecting concealed aspects of society.

Memes and transmedia storytelling are important because alternative media has been known to reveal 'the structuredness of media discourse and show how the world might be represented differently by different media actors' (Atton 2015a, p. 2). In speaking about the mainstream media impact after the Arab Spring, Maria Malmström reminds us that it 'seldom has time, or interest to employ an alternative political approach or to follow up and explore the everyday life of people after a tragedy' (2019, pp. 75–6). As alternative media, memes have the capacity to tell those stories that slip through the cracks of an uninterested mainstream media. In this line, Limor Shifman suggested early on that memes might become a form of media that 'serve as alternative routes of expression for marginalized groups, and to what extent they reflect well-entrenched power structure' (2014, p. 173). However important memes may be to lower the threshold of participation and convey marginalised stories, it is essential to recognise that memes were bred within channels that facilitated connections for those who built their ideologies by oppressing others. In their alterity, memes are monsters in as much as they reveal and warn of a monstrous Other.

As a form of horror, 'memes express tensions that can't be spoken in the political correct vocabulary of the mainstream media' (Lovink and Tuters 2018). Viewing memes and transmedia storytelling through the lens of horror and

monsters reveals memes as digital monsters because, in being undead, they can be reanimated 'as good as new, either reproduced in the same form or reincarnated as an enhanced body composed of varying amalgams of organic, mechanic and cybernetic parts' (Chung 2015, p. 55). Once monsters are born, as Cohen suggests, they are impossible to kill. Monsters will reappear, hunt you down, and kill you.

Memes, as monsters, never die. In his book *The World Made Meme* (2016), Ryan Milner theorises memes as multimodal items that spread like a virus, circulate, transform, and resonate. In this form of temporal progression, memes continue to propagate as a result of being reappropriated; they continue to live on. A meme's death, as seen through humour, happens 'when the joke is old, the pleasure spent' (Hardesty *et al*. 2019, p. 8). As monsters of digital horror, however, memes' temporal line is not progressive but cyclical. Memes are revenant items within a digital culture that struggles to let anything die and vanish forever (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). To this purpose, Gretchen McCulloch claims that while memes may die to one group of people, they re-emerge among others:

> Memes periodically shift away from one of their founder populations … . But as long as people are creating culture on the internet, a different group will emerge with a different format to take up the mantle of 'meme.' Memes had shifted yet again, from the Full Internet People to the Post Internet People, the ones who had no recollection of a life without internet. (2019, p. 277)

Memes, McCulloch concludes, do not die; they are reborn. Death has shaped debates within the digital sphere including the right to be forgotten as much as the futility of social media pages. As part of spreading theories on memes, a monster reading also reveals their ability to return, live, and relive, brought back by eager participants seeking to relive characters, events, and emotions. Accordingly, when or if a meme will ever die is impossible to predict because it always retains the possibility of returning. As long as digital media persists, memes will be able to return indefinitely. It is this interplay between sudden death and the inability to die that renders the digital realm and memes as monstrous.

Memes are also monstrous in form and intent. As hybrid and fragmented cultural items, memes police the borders of art, artists, and artistry. As monsters, memes are dangerous because they are 'a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions' (Cohen 1996, p. 6). In their aesthetics' irreverence, memes align with cultural jamming, remixing, and remaking, having been claimed to be the street art of the internet (Mina 2019). As digital graffiti, memes disrupt traditional artistic genres and the very notion of artistry, asking what art is comprised of in the digital era. Meme culture is particularly adamant in threatening well-defined lines that determine who is an author, an artist, or a creator; what constitutes art or a creative practice; and who is a user or producer (Zebracki and Luger 2019, p. 4). Edensor *et al*. call this the 'vernacular

manifestation of creativity', specifically referring to how class plays a role in 'who, what and where is considered "creative"' (2010, p. 1). For Edensor *et al.*, in order to 'honour the non-economic values and outcomes produced by alternative, marginal and quotidian creative practices' we need to understand the vernacular and everyday landscapes of creativity (2010, p. 1). Although it is true that in the digital era, one can generate clever ideas for comic strips without going through editors judging its artistic worth (Douglas 2014, p. 330), we need to consider who is creative beyond those who self-identify as artists as well as 'the instantaneous possibilities for producing "art" via digital path-ways' as a form that complicates traditional typologies and terminologies (Zebracki and Luger 2019, p. 5).

Thesis VIII: Alienation Anxieties

Memes and monsters share yet another common trait: memes and monsters shed light on human anxieties related to alienation. Isolation has been central to gothic themes where plots develop in remote houses, farms, cabins, graveyards, or islands. In horror fiction, monsters frequently appear alone or embody the loneliness of the Other yearning for companionship, such as Frankenstein or the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. Zombies are an exception as they rarely appear on their own. However, a cluster of zombies does not indicate companionship; as Shaka McGlotten argues, zombies' 'sociality differs in that they do not possess the reflective self-awareness or empathetic identification we take as the hallmarks of meaningful intimate connection with ourselves and others' (2017, p. 229). This trait is partly what defines them as inhuman; zombies draw attention to social isolation and communal numbness, transforming humans into monsters by the loss of empathy and feeling.

Memes have emerged within online platforms imagined as communal spaces of participation (Maldonado 2017; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) with infrastructures favouring antagonistic and radically anti-politically correct content. Marwick and Lewis's report on media manipulation and online misinformation suggests that alienation plays a significant role in building this subculture: 'Many chan users post about feeling unable to relate to mainstream culture, reflecting a sense of *anomie*' (2017, p. 29). Émile Durkheim considers the state of anomie as part of the section called 'The Abnormal Forms' that looks at 'deviant forms … in which division of labour ceases to engender solidarity' (1984, p. 291). In this context, the state of anomie is a state of normlessness and disorganisation which stems from the moment when general social rules are no longer observed. The lack of interest in following established social norms leads to collective disorder and a state of anomie. In this context, anomie may be defined as a 'state of moral deregulation that arises from the absence of any communal attachment

providing moral grounds and clear reasons to act, leaving people isolated and anxious' (Courpasson *et al*. 2021, p. 4). Consequently, white supremacists, who have historically wielded dominance and established social norms according to their privilege, often find themselves isolated when engaging with users who advocate for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and migrants' rights. This isolation results from their inability to relate to what they perceive as mainstream culture that has been hijacked by ideals of equality, diverging from the world in which they were supposed to dominate and remain at the centre of privilege. David Courpasson *et al*. (2021) argue that the neoliberal world fosters anomie by reducing work to the individual's experience of earning income without moral or social considerations. However, this experienced anomie within work environments stimulates a hunger for connection with like-minded individuals who share similar values and visions to rebuild their social relationships. In this sense, anomie is linked as much to feelings of alienation as it is to a desire to find a sense of belonging.

Online spaces and meme culture offer participants an opportunity to connect with others through shared feelings of alienation from mainstream culture and politics, regardless of their nature. Progressive liberal standards, in the eyes of alt-right subcultural internet groups, have dethroned the traditional order of things including morals and ethical norms. It is, after all, within the nature of a subculture not only to challenge hegemony and normalised forms, but also to shed light on the feeling of alienation from mainstream culture (Hebdige 1979). Meme culture, among other forms within imageboards and anonymous users including trolls associated with the global rise of the alt-right, emerges as a language of resonance among internet subcultures, expressing their perceived sense of alienation. Common within these terms and definitions is the obscurity of these groups hidden behind anonymity, without a clear sense of their aims beyond expressions of hatred, performing abuse, or the denunciation of what they deem unacceptable. Similar feelings of alienation, as argued at the start of this chapter, are relevant in contexts where promises of change, progress, and 'development' have failed to materialise.

The experience of being alienated in a silent world, hoping to connect with an Other, is embedded within the Arabic word for monster, *waHsh* (وحش). The word *'al waHsh'* (the monster) stems from the experience of life in the desert, symbolising the loneliness of a beast roaming the wilderness in solitude. Stemming from this same meaning, *al waHsh* may be translated as 'beast', a reference to its great strength. This is the connotation used by a female Moroccan bodybuilder on Instagram with over 135,000 followers; she uses the name of Alwa7cha, meaning the female monster. It should be noted that Alwa7cha's presence as a female Moroccan trainer and bodybuilder is seldomly found in the Moroccan datasphere. While the nickname highlights her physical power, her social media presence suggests a female beast alone in the wilderness that is social media. In both its

connotations, the Arabic word for monster does not signify the opposite of a human, as Achille Mbembe (2001, p. 1) has utilised it in the context of discourses on Africa as an animal and a beast. The root *wa-Ha-sha* rather denotes being alone, unfriendliness, and unsociability, mirroring a wild animal in the desert. Moreover, the noun *waHsha* (وحشة), a feminine word, conveys the feeling of being lonely in a dark space and scared, and is consequently associated with the idea of being or encountering a monster. The noun *waHsha* is also related to the idea of missing someone, a yearning to reconnect with the person who is no longer there. Particularly in the Middle East, in everyday language this term is employed in the phrase '*lik wa7sha*' (literally meaning a loneliness has happened because of you). The equivalent in Morocco for 'I miss you' is also embedded in this root: *twahashtek* (I miss you) or *twahashnak* (we miss you), literally meaning, I, or we, feel lonely without you, and written with a 7 or simply with an h indistinctively. While the word for monster in English is mostly concerned with what the monster *does* (*monstrare* ('to show' or 'to reveal') and *monere* ('to warn' or 'to portend')), in Arabic it reflects how the beast *feels* (isolation, aloneness, longing). In both the Arabic root and its contemporary application, the monster is deemed monstrous due to its isolation as much as its loneliness, a solitude that yearns for connection in the midst of an inhospitable and desolate territory.

This experience of looking for connection in a hostile world is fundamental to understanding Helmut Rosa's (2019) concept of resonance. For Rosa, resonance is a momentary connection in a silent and repulsive world (2019, pp. 333–4). Resonance involves affect and emotion touching and transforming the subject and the world (2019, p. 302). Examples of resonance, Rosa proposes, may include a sunset, captivating music, or being in love. Resonance, however, does not represent a single emotional state; this is why, Rosa argues, we can love sad films or heavy metal music, because we are able to connect with an Other within the sadness of a film or in the distorted sounds of electric guitars. Therefore, resonance does not entail merging into unity 'but encountering another as an Other' (2019, p. 826). For this reason, resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship which uncovers differences in people's attitudes towards the world and their different strategies for seeking resonance and avoiding alienation (2019, p. 35). We can find this response in feelings such as despair, disillusionment, fear, alienation and marginalisation, and anomie. Resonance, simply put, is the hope for an emotional connection in a world that has gone silent. It demands a response in the midst of a monstrous world.

By definition, memes are forcefully responsive. According to Limor Shifman (2012), the difference between memetic and viral culture is that memes must undergo significant change as they spread. In other words, memes need to remix. In contrast, viral culture does not. Viral culture includes artefacts that spread quickly from user to user like an epidemic. Memes, as resonance, must be mutually

affected and transformed, not merely repeating or echoing. In co-creative culture, at least in principle, the idea is that creation is a multidirectional process. Memes may initiate a myriad of calls and responses that can happen at the same time and be responded to, or not, depending on participants' interest in the call. This call-and-response dynamic often occurs between performer and audience when the latter is expected to act accordingly at the demand of the former. Imageboards and other social media sites demand that users engage in call-and-response platforms, opening a sphere of resonance where participants and users encounter a world that they recognise and that responds to them through a shared internet language.

It is this added meaning of warding off feelings of alienation that informs this book's analysis of digital horror and its monsters. Memes as digital monsters provide as many opportunities to kill as they do for those killed to return from the dead, find a sphere of resonance, and perhaps even kill in the next meme. Memes accommodate multiple scenarios simultaneously where main characters may be killed and engage in killing in multiple ways. Memes are monsters of the digital age because they profit from transmedia opportunities to transform any storyline into digital horror where chaos, ugliness, and monstrosity breed. Memes police the borders of political correctness and are a product of their own time and place. As much as they belong to the everyday and the ultra-local, they are timeless and global, and they can never completely die. They can be easily decipherable to some groups, but baffling to others. They may use images from old paintings or co-create new, multi-layered pastiche image-macros. In doing so, they may juxtapose a variety of ideologies, cultures, or ways of life. They may consist solely of images, text, or both. Ultimately, they have been bred in environments and infrastructures that thrive on trespassing borders. For this reason, memes and monsters propel discussions on who qualifies as an artist or an activist; what or who is normal or abnormal; who is worthy or worthless; and finally, who gets to live as a human or a monster. And even then, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock asks in the introduction to *The Monster Theory Reader*, '[a]t what point does deviance make someone a monster?' (2020a, p. 22).

Memes are digital monsters because they yearn to create spheres of resonance, sometimes in excess, as explored in Chapter 9, that allow for a moment of connection between one and an Other. The spaces of alienation and belonging may be inhabited by those living in fear that their power may be overruled not only by those who have been forced to live in the margins, but also by groups that have been marginalised and humiliated by those in power. Memes can engage with both humour and horror: 'Comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin … . Both deal in the grotesque and the unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different physical reactions' (Carroll 1999, p. 146). While horror and monsters traditionally were meant to incite fear, they also highlight spheres of affect and resonance in which people can reflect on their own fear

through humour. It is within this interplay of horror and humour that extreme forms of violence are addressed. Memes perpetuate monstrosity in the digital age by both empathising with monsters and embodying monstrous characteristics themselves, often simultaneously. They are haunted and haunting creatures because in their own existence they reverberate a past connection, a past message, an already established chain of belonging. After all, as Robby Hardesty *et al*. (2019, p. 507) claim, 'the soul of the meme is affect, affect for affect's sake, shared because it is possible to share'. The challenge now is to discern whether the soul, mind, and body of memes are grotesque for grotesque's sake, or if they are monstrous because it is possible to be monstrous.

Embracing the World of Monsters

The digital grotesque is concerned with online participants' preference for ugliness, oddity, and abnormality that purposefully challenges conventional notions of order, proportion, and beauty. This preference might be expressed visually, sonically, linguistically, or by a combination of these mediums. Through different forms of expression, the grotesque can manifest to narrate unspeakable horror stories where monsters emerge as governing elites, as zombified ordinary people, as memes warning us of hidden dangers, or as spheres of resonance. The politics of digital aesthetics and memes not only conveys their potential as overtly political tools (with a capital P) but also investigates why certain political ideologies (both big and small) and affects take on specific aesthetic forms and how they, in turn, alter these forms. For this reason, digital aesthetics compels us to ask *what* grotesque culture means in the digital sphere and what that culture *does* and *to whom* as well as *who* is allowed to create this kind of culture and *where*. When examining the digital sphere, one must not overlook the need for a perpetual reformulation of the meaning of 'matter out of place' in order to 're-evaluate our shifting perceptions' (Henderson 2015, p. 14).

The interest in memes, the grotesque, and monstrosity is not solely intended to decipher any palpable political or social change through meme culture. The digital grotesque is primarily concerned with people and genres that are often disregarded as unimportant and inhabit the periphery of the political (with a capital P). Looking at the digital through the interconnected prism of the grotesque, monsters, and horror does not necessarily claim that something is 'new' about memes or digital media, but it offers to open 'new modes of perception that had been concealed or we had avoided' (Chung 2015, p. 62). This does not imply that the stories presented here exclusively revolve around themes of terror, social death, dismemberment, or everyday horrors. As a decolonial tool, the digital grotesque seeks to dismantle expectations of narratives stemming from North Africa,

telling stories of artistic creativity without succumbing to oversimplified notions of disruption or disobedience. The grotesque and the digital work well together because they are both spaces that invite us to pay attention to the hybrid and the in-between, the borders of normality and abnormality, or the colonial and the postcolonial. As Galip (2021, p. 61) accurately suggests, our digital lives are lives lived in-between, and so is the grotesque.

Yet as a decolonial tool, the digital grotesque disobeys the expectations of ruling powers (colonisers and local elites), as well as aesthetic expectations of the digital and the grotesque, even of disciplinary taxonomies as discussed in the conclusion of this book. Studying grotesque memes, among other online cultural artefacts, reveals digital forms of policing, challenging, and perpetuating borders that differentiate the normal from the abnormal, the worthy from the worthless, and the human from the monster through digital culture content and form. The digital grotesque as a term is always dangerously close to perpetuating aesthetic interpretations that include depictions of the other or glamourising the art of an Other. In this sense, the digital grotesque may be read as a source of self-expression, a platform for humiliation directed at ordinary people or elites, but also as a means to create spheres of resonance or spaces in which to glamourise the monstrous and reclaim local perceptions of the grotesque

3

The Case for (Decolonial) Horror

One low-quality video meme features Tom, a cat from the classic animated series *Tom and Jerry*, holding a shotgun as he attempts to shoot Jerry the mouse. Suddenly, two mice who look identical to Jerry, but are larger, appear. The larger mice frighten Tom, who runs away in fear. This meme was shared on Instagram by Moroccan Rap Trolls (@MRT.portail), a leading social media account dedicated to creating and sharing memes about Moroccan rap with over 555,000 followers as of 2 October 2023.

In January 2019, MRT shared this meme to depict a rap feud that had erupted weeks earlier within the Moroccan datasphere. In the meme, Tom represents the diss track '170 KG' (2018) by well-known rapper Don Bigg,[1] who initiated the feud. In the song, Don Bigg unleashes his frustration and anger towards younger Moroccan rappers who, he believes, disrespected and disregarded the pivotal figures of the Moroccan hip hop scene, including artists such as Don Bigg. The three mice in the meme represent three of the most relevant responses, in song form, to Don Bigg's provocative song: the first response is from Mr. Crazy, the second is from 7liwa (pronounced Hliwa), and the third, represented by the largest mouse in the meme, is by rapper Dizzy DROS. Dizzy DROS's track was the most anticipated because both the chorus and the artwork of Don Bigg's track unequivocally indicate Dizzy DROS as his primary target. These songs, along with their accompanying artwork, contributed to this rap feud, which unfolded solely online, primarily on YouTube and then other social media platforms.

The artwork of '170 KG', created by the artist Hamza Benmoussa, who is also a rapper known by the name of Snor, portrays a crime scene where Don Bigg appears as the only survivor of a massacre. Seated on a throne, the rapper is surrounded by skeletons and lifeless naked bodies representing fellow rappers Dizzy DROS, 7liwa, Komy, and Mr. Crazy, with the latter being the only one who is clothed. The floor is covered with blood; two skeletons, deliberately placed at opposite corners

[1] Urban Dictionary simply defines diss songs as 'tracks made by one artist to insult another artist' ('Diss track' 2018).

of the room, imply that this may not be the rapper's first act of murder. However, in contrast to what the artwork portrays, the massacre failed to kill the younger rappers.

Dizzy DROS countered with a song called 'Moutanabbi' (2019b) accompanied by artwork created by the successful Moroccan conceptual artist Hicham Habchi (Figure 1). In his seven-minute response track, Dizzy DROS embodies the persona of Iraqi poet Al-Mutanabbi (915–65 CE), one of the most influential poets in the Arabic-speaking world. Al-Mutanabbi was renowned for excelling at poetic feuds, delivering witty and sharp recitations designed to humiliate and defeat his adversaries. As '170 KG' had done a few weeks earlier, 'Moutababbi' immediately ranked number one in the Moroccan YouTube Trends chart upon its release. The song also gained prominence on national YouTube charts in France, Spain, and Italy. Reaction videos, in which individuals watch music videos and share their opinions about them, were uploaded not only by Arabic-speaking YouTubers, but predominantly by English-speaking influencers with little connection to Morocco. Local online press and radio stations covered the feud, and the rappers involved were invited by talk shows to discuss the event. However, with the release of 'Moutanabbi', the media considered the dispute to be resolved (see, for example, Laabi 2019), bringing the feud to a close.

While the feud could have ended at that point, memes referencing this exchange of songs and creative artwork have endured within Morocco's memetic database, resurfacing as revenant monsters who refuse to die. The artwork for both songs

Figure 1 Cover image for the song 'Moutanabbi' (2019). Artwork by Hicham Habchi.

has resurfaced on humorous social media pages, and still images derived from the event, such as Dizzy DROS sipping coffee during a radio interview after releasing his response track, have been transformed into memes. As much as the original music and images served as a call and response, the variety of emerging memes narrated new stories with each iteration. In each repetition and transformation, the original memes not only survive but also contain the accumulated stories within them. After all, inherent in memes' ethos is the refusal to stop reproducing and repeating, sharing, and creating.

Repetition and transformation, however, provide an additional layer to this story. The creative artwork that originated with the feud, as well as the subsequent memes sparked by the rap battle, narrate a multimedia horror story where rappers and dead poets are continuously killed yet resurface to deliver justice. This rap feud illustrates a moment of online creativity where different digital artefacts work together to create horror in, with, and through the digital. By examining how these diverse creative artefacts work together, this chapter constructs a compelling argument for the presence of digital horror in the Moroccan datasphere. To achieve this, it embeds meme culture within a broader exploration of horror and the grotesque in the Arabic-language Islamic traditions as well as the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East.

Establishing the case for digital horror in the Moroccan datasphere is significant because horror fiction within Arabo-Islamic cultures and created within North Africa and the Middle East in Arabic has received scant attention. This oversight is especially surprising considering that much of postcolonial studies scholarship employs horror tropes to articulate postcolonial critiques such as the return of the repressed, the uncanny, possession and dispossession, excess and the monstrousness of hybridity, and the grotesque, but it has little to say about the genre as such (Gelder 2000, p. 35). Such is the case in Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) and *Necropolitics* (2019), where he enlists gothic tropes, yet the connection to horror fiction is missing from the analysis. In Ken Gelder's (2000) opinion, this is a result of horror being among 'lowerbrow' popular culture and not the middle- and highbrow culture postcolonial studies prefers and privileges. A similar opinion is expressed by Marcel O'Gorman (2015, p. 177), who claims that while terror genres, such as suspense and thrillers, are acclaimed by critics, horror is considered B-grade material.

In reclaiming horror within a rich tradition of oral stories across North Africa and the Middle East, this chapter reveals that, despite limited attention, particularly in cinematic arts, the 2010s witnessed a surge in the creation of horror fiction within digital platforms. The interest in digital horror necessitates a revision of the presence of horror that includes predigital forms of horror in the form of oral stories and traditional monsters. This chapter provides compelling evidence of the engagement of horror in the digital realm, particularly through diverse,

multimodal digital artefacts such as music videos, art exhibitions, e-zines, and memes. It posits that by making a space where horror and its monsters are visible, these stories and their artists reclaim their agency by choosing the aesthetics that best convey the narratives they deem valuable. Addressing the digital as a space in which to imagine and share horror is particularly urgent in contexts where television and radio broadcasting are under the tight control of the state. In such a context, genres and aesthetics are chosen from the top down with little consideration for audience preferences. Embracing horror, as evidenced throughout this chapter, allows for artists' and netizens' own stories to emerge that otherwise would not – or could not – find a suitable avenue for dissemination.

From *Noir* to Horror

The rap battle described in the introduction of this chapter illustrates how a crime scene can be transformed into an exploration of digital horror through participatory storytelling. Illustrator Hamza Benmoussa, the artist behind Don Bigg's song artwork, designed a brutally impactful crime scene that marked a turning point in Moroccan rap. For the first time, a song artwork explicitly depicted and attacked the bodies of four Moroccan rappers recognisable to the audience. When considering Benmoussa's aesthetics in his role as the rapper Snor, the influence of horror in the artist's own work is easily discernible. In his own videos, Snor often ventures into the realms of fantasy and horror. An example of this inclination towards fiction is his successful song 'Hkaya' (Story 2021). The music video begins with an image of a unicorn outside a solitary cottage in the middle of a forest. The central narrative of the video takes place within the cottage, where the rapper is dressed in black with a broken heart made from flowers attached to his chest. A group of dancers fully veiled in black, but whose legs are visible to the viewer, dance along with the music in a dimly lit room. The rapper, the dancers, and the room convey a sense of melancholy that complements the song's themes of relationships with others, betrayal, and heartbreak. In another scene, Snor walks a Dalmatian dog through a deserted forest with barren trees and a thick fog that obstructs the viewer from seeing further ahead. In this scene, the rapper is dressed in a suit and a ski mask, mirroring the Dalmatian's distinctive white and black fur. The misty winter setting, the dancers, the dog, and the rapper's costume add to the fantasy-horror aesthetics inspired by horror and gothic tropes. The artwork for '170 KG' demonstrates Snor's taste for horror by drawing Don Bigg in the middle of a dark room surrounded with blood and dead bodies.

Conceptual artist Hicham Habchi, a friend of Benmoussa, responded to the deadly scene with his artwork for the song 'Moutanabbi'. Habchi builds on Benmoussa's visual narrative, creating a scene which depicts the survival and

comeback of the dead rappers. Now infused with Habchi's own aesthetics, which are highly influenced by classic Marvel superheroes and Japanese manga and anime, the central scene in 'Moutanabbi' depicts Dizzy DROS and the rest of the dead rappers breaking into a well-lit recording studio and subjugating Don Bigg and his entourage. In this scene, Dizzy DROS has been transformed into a hybrid character partially resembling Marvel's Daredevil (his red t-shirt shows their common initials DD) and partially embodying Al-Moutanabbi, the 10th-century Iraqi poet. Reimagined as a Frankensteinian monster, Dizzy DROS is resurrected as an Arab superhero poet, claiming his right of retaliation and avenging the slaying of an entire generation of rappers. Empowered as a poet superhero, the rapper returns to defy the directives of an older and now state co-opted generation of Moroccan rap on behalf of the succeeding generation.

The violence expressed in the artwork of these two songs resonates with what Jonathan Smolin (2013) has defined as Moroccan *Noir*. In the mid-1990s in Morocco, weekly tabloids, fiction novels, and television films with a focus on true crime stories gained immense popularity. As Smolin details, this was a result of the political changes that took place with the end of the toughest years of Hassan II (1961–99), known as the Years of Lead.[2] Broadcasting stories of real violent crimes and deaths helped to reshape the image of authoritarianism from Hassan II to his son, King Mohammed VI. The coronation of King Mohammed VI was publicised as a transition towards democracy. To support this narrative of political and social progress, true crime stories depicted a new state with reformed armed forces focused on protecting rather than oppressing ordinary citizens. Against the grotesque reality of years of persecution, censure, incarceration, and torture – especially severe from the 1970s to the mid-1990s – portrayals of the police in magazines, films, and television shows, by the end of the 1990s, transformed them from an army designed to control the country's citizens into everyday heroes capable of solving complex crimes and keeping people safe. While the narrative aimed to depict the path towards a democratic and developed nation, the result has been closer to a cosmetic change to secure an 'authoritarian transformation' (Bogaert 2018) – in other words, an adaptation to survive. As Moroccan *Noir* is based on real people in a real country, it has limited opportunities to hold the post-colonial state accountable without facing consequences. Undoubtedly, Moroccan *Noir* witnessed, exposed, and intervened during a pivotal period of political transition. Nevertheless, especially since the mid-2010s, online artists and creators have capitalised on digital affordances to craft stories that transcend realism. These artists embrace the creative opportunities that fiction provides to tell their stories, profiting from the diminishing influence of local media gatekeepers on digital platforms.

[2] The Years of Lead started in the 1970s, after the King suffered two coup d'état attempts, and lasted until the mid-1990s.

In the case of the rap feud, the return of the dead began even before Dizzy DROS released 'Moutanabbi'. Immediately after Don Bigg's track was shared on his YouTube channel and social media pages, netizens began posting modified versions of the '170 KG' cover artwork. Moroccan artist Imz (@imz_art) posted a new drawing of the artwork cover (Figure 2) where the dead rappers (Dizzy DROS, 7liwa, Mr. Crazy, and Komy) are resurrected to come back and haunt the killer (Don Bigg) on his Instagram account (4,500 followers, 9 November 2021). In this remake, it is Dizzy DROS who sits on the throne holding Don Bigg's head. Rapper 7liwa gives a thumbs up to the camera, while rapper Komy writes graffiti in red on the wall that reads 'Don Bitch' and '3azzy 3ando Stylo', referring to Dizzy DROS's first album. The Imz_art version emphasises the blood spillage used in the graffiti as well as the dismembered bodies, turning crime into horror as monsters return to take revenge. More memes altering the initial picture and creating new scenes flooded Moroccan social media, evolving in tandem with the release of the various response tracks.

This transformation from Moroccan *Noir* to Moroccan Horror exemplifies new storytelling possibilities. While true crime narratives inevitably silence the victim for life, horror bestows on the dead the power of responding. In his response song, Dizzy DROS returns from the dead transformed into a hybrid of a blind superhero vigilante and a 10th-century Middle Eastern poet. The embodiment of the great Abbasid poet has a significant impact on the return of the dead not only because of Al-Mutanabbi's prowess in poetic battles, but also because the poet was murdered by one of his opponents in 965 CE. In his contemporary embodiment,

Figure 2 Meme based on the original artwork for the song '170 KG' (2018). Artwork by Imz Art.

Al-Mutanabbi is revived into Moutanabbi and, with a slight change in spelling, the ghost of the Iraqi poet now inhabits Moroccan rapper Dizzy DROS. Despite aesthetic disparities, call-and-response songs and artworks collaborated with memes to reimagine a storyline that encouraged the return of the dead. These creative responses shaped and prolonged this event, not only as a rap battle but also as the collective voice of a generation that refuses to be silenced and killed by older, established artists. While *noir* introduced a country where powerful security forces worked to protect citizens from brutal crime, horror allows the dead to take matters in their own hands, demanding accountability for crimes committed. This will be addressed further in Chapter 7. For now, in the following sections, this horror story is contextualised within other legends and monsters that remain alive in North Africa and the Middle East and how these have migrated into the digital sphere.

The Presence of Jinns

The genre of horror fiction has yet to be systematically theorised in North Africa and the Middle East. In cinema, the region had not, until recently, experienced an interest in horror that compares to the popularity of zombie-themed Hollywood productions or Japanese horror films. Particularly in Egypt, Viola Shafik (2005) considers the lack of horror films surprising due to the importance of mummies and Ancient Egyptian mythology in contemporary fantasy and horror films. As Shafik claims, until the 2000s, Egyptian cinema only produced three films (from over 2,500 full-length films) that can be classified as horror. One of these first horror films, *Fangs* (بايناً) (Egypt, 1981), takes inspiration from the character of Dracula. However, *Fangs* failed to achieve the expected success and did not seem to stimulate interest in the horror genre among Arabic speakers. Writing in the mid-2000s, Shafik mentions several possible reasons for this lack of enthusiasm, including violence, religious conservativism, limited production budgets, and a lack of interest from European cinema festivals in horror films from the region. Lebanese filmmaker Tarek Jammal agrees that the lack of horror films in Palestine can be attributed to the fact that the population is confronted with horror in their everyday lives:

> Why are there no zombies in Gaza? – Zombies are not as terrifying as an Israeli bombing, and other real-life horrors and tragedies. Zombies are commonly representative of various fears arising within affluent societies. People who are under constant attack by Israelis or whomever else aren't going to be frightened by zombies. (al-Saadi 2012)

As Jammal suggests, zombie stories addressing panics of consumerism that prospered in the United States are not necessarily relatable elsewhere. This does

not mean, however, that other monsters embodying other types of fears have not thrived in the region. As Jammal continues, what terrifies local audiences are not monsters like zombies or Dracula, but instead supernatural elements such as *jinns* or *jnun* (sing. jinn), demons, and ghosts.

As Jammal claims, jinns and ghosts are commonly associated with the supernatural. The lines that divide fantasy, horror, and even science fiction are nonetheless blurred. Horror and science fiction share a set of conventions and ways of expressing similar fears that bind them together; this has been true since the publication of the first English-language canonical horror text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and includes the Arabic-language novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi (2017). While the birth of gothic and horror literature in English has been celebrated and claimed as part of the genre's foundational myth, the recognition of horror in Arabic-language cultural artefacts has yet to gain traction.

Aside from Egyptian films produced in the 1980s such as *Fangs* (أنياب) (1981) and *The Humans and the Jinns* (الإنس والجين) (1985), horror films across the region have experienced a noticeable upsurge since the 2000s. These include *Kandisha* (Morocco, 2008), *Djinn* (Abu Dhabi, 2013), and *Achoura* (Morocco, 2018), which draws inspiration from the night of Ashura (عاشوراء) when children traditionally light bonfires and fireworks. In Turkey, the film *D@bbe* (2006) and its subsequent instalments, including *Dabbe 5: Curse of the Jinn* (2014), feature jinns. These films have contributed to placing Islamic horror at the forefront of the jinn subgenre and have been followed by Arabic television series such as *L'Ghoul* (Morocco, 2016), *Jinn* (Jordan, 2019), and *Awled El Ghoul* (أولاد الغول) (Tunisia, 2021). These examples challenge the notion that horror is not a prominent genre in North Africa and the Middle East, and the significant presence of jinns in recent films and TV series should be recognised as a significant component of horror fiction in its own right.

Jinns should not be confused with the popularised genie in the bottle from the 'Story of Aladdin'. Jinns, as described in the Quran, are intelligent beings who share some characteristics with humans but are also different from them. Jinns often identify with a gender that aligns with traditional gender binaries, meaning they are perceived as female or male. Additionally, jinns may have descendants or offspring. Jinns possess free will and therefore are able to convert to Islam or live as unbelievers (كفار، كافرون (*kaafirun*, *kuffaar* respectively)). For this reason, some are said to be virtuous, aligning with the believers, while others are depicted as demons or ghouls, representing the unbelievers. As devils, jinns have the ability to assume multiple forms including disguising themselves as humans. Although jinns normally live among their own, they may interact with humans as well as roam in heaven or hell.

While humans are granted eternal youth in the afterlife, jinns are said to remain in a 'state of decrepitude and ugliness' (El-Zein 2009, p. 50). In his book

Jinn Eviction as a Discourse of Power, Mohammed Maarouf (2007, p. 110) claims that fear of jinns does not necessarily correspond to their evilness or ugliness. Instead, the fear arises from the unfamiliar and a sense of difference, encompassing factors including gender, race, religion, sexuality, or nationality. This sense of difference inherent in the jinn – not unproblematically – relates to the sense of otherness, or the Other. Jinns are primarily feared and perceived as evil because they can possess and manipulate humans and force them into wrongdoing. Because humans live under the threat of being possessed by a jinn, and due to the overwhelming presence of jinns in essential acts of domestic activities (Lebling 2010, p. 160), they are sometimes considered as 'masters'. As masters, jinns may be greeted upon entering the home by pronouncing the *Tashahhud*, the testimony of faith of the daily prayers: '*As-salaamu ʻalaynaa wa-ʻalaa ʻibaadi Allaahi aSSaaliHiin*' (اَلسَّلَامُ عَلَيْنَا وَ عَلَىٰ عِبَادِ اللَّهِ اَلصَّالِحِينَ) (Peace upon us and upon the righteous servants of God) even if no human is present.[3] Analogous with this greeting, jinns are often named with euphemisms such as angels, the 'Muslims' or the 'Believers', those 'People from Under the Earth', and other terms due to fear and mistrust of them (Lebling 2010, p. 159; Maarouf 2007, p. 83). The ubiquitous presence of jinns in daily life forces humans to coexist with them, shaping their habits and routines. For those who believe in jinns, it is not uncommon to avoid throwing hot water down the drain, especially at night, for fear of burning and infuriating the jinns who populate these spaces. For this reason, late-night showers or visiting the hammam when it is dark are not advised. However, salt may be added to water as it is believed that jinns have a preference for sweet and dislike salt.[4]

Besides the presence of jinns, horror films connected to the Islamic faith have experienced a growing interest across the globe. The Muslim Horror Film Festival Halaloween, a play of words between Halal (accepted by Islam) and Halloween, celebrated its fourth edition in 2022. Organised by the Global Islamic Studies Center at the University of Michigan, it explores horror films featuring Muslim characters and Islamic themes, asking questions concerning Islam and the Quran in Horror. The films shown in the fourth edition included *Satan's Slaves* (*Pengabdi Setan*) (Indonesia, 2017), *Beddua: The Curse* (*Üç Harfliler: Beddua*) (Turkey, 2018), *Soul* (*Roh*) (Malaysia, 2019), and *Saloum* (Senegal, 2021). Furthermore, the interest in Islamic horror extends to Europe and the United States, where films have emerged that take inspiration from the previously mentioned horror films using the same titles, although the storylines of homonymous films differ from those of their original counterparts. This is the case with *Kandisha* (France, 2020),

[3] This is also a form of salutation recorded in the Hadith of Al Bukhari where in entering a house which is not inhabited one should pronounce these words.

[4] The protective characteristics of salt also appear in other mythological contexts, for example in Britain and Ireland.

Jinn (USA, 2014), and *The Djinn* (USA, 2021). As a horror subgenre, Islamic horror films are marked with a sufficient dose of exoticism to attract foreign funding and appeal to audiences. The widespread interest in Islamic horror, including the jinn subgenre, indicates that excavating the fears experienced by the Other can indeed be a profitable resource for funding. This interest may feed into exotic images of the Other, yet these films also enrich and contribute to diversifying the field of horror while acknowledging the presence of *other* monsters.

As their presence in Islam suggests, jinns and ghouls have been a part of horror stories from popular vibrant oral traditions to contemporary novels across North Africa and the Middle East. Books gathering folktales in Palestine (Aboubakr 2019) and Morocco (El Koudia 2003) include an abundance of jinns and ghouls. However, these books are not categorised as horror stories; rather, they are marketed as part of the country's folklore. Oral stories such as the *Umm lGhoula* (The Mother of the Ghoula) are used in everyday life to foster fear in children, much like the *hombre del saco* (the Sack Man) is in Hispanic cultures. This she-ghoul also appears in folktales such as the *Mother Ghoul and the Seven Daughters*, stories which are passed down from one generation to the next, serving, alongside legends, to remind listeners where fear dwells. Among Moroccan legends, the Black Sultan (السلطان الكحل, *Sultan L-K7al*) features an evil jinn believed to be a symbol of violence, terror, and oppression that is at war with saints according to the maraboutic beliefs (Maarouf 2007, p. 4). Maarouf's work on jinn eviction shows how some of his contemporaries link the Black Sultan to the Alawite Sultan Moulay Ismail, while others claim this jinn to be the Marinid Sultan Abu al-Hasan al-Marini. *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*, includes the presence of jinns and ghouls as well as horror tropes such as decapitation and blood spillage (see El-Ariss 2019). After all, the narrator of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad, faces the constant threat of violent death by her sadistic husband if she stops satisfying his curiosity on how her stories end. In her stories, violence and death, sexual excess, and monstrous forms appear repeatedly. However, despite these recurring horror themes, *The Arabian Nights* is mostly considered a collection of folktales.

As is the case with *The Arabian Nights*, contemporary authors writing horror stories in Arabic are primarily associated with other literary genres. For instance, Ahmed Khaled Tawfik is considered the father of Arabic science fiction and a thriller writer despite his successful horror book series comprising 81 novels called in Arabic ما وراء الطبيعة (*Ma Waraa'a at-Tabiy'a*) and translated in English as *Paranormal*; Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) is typically considered an example of a 'classic' postcolonial Arabic novel; and the writings of Malika Moustadraf are featured as feminist short stories despite the posthumous English translation of her edited collection being named with the vampiric title *Blood Feast* (2022). As these examples evidence, jinns are embedded in legends,

oral stories, literature, films, and television shows within North Africa and the Middle East and beyond. Jinns, whether in everyday life, as elements of religious beliefs, or fictionalised in literature and cinema, persist in the digital sphere.

Possessing the Digital

Technological advances, viewed as indicators of development and modernity, have frustrated expectations that a techno-deterministic understanding of 'progress' would exorcise jinn as long-lasting residues of Moroccan local culture (Spadola 2004, p. 143). Jinn culture, including possession and eviction, has been regarded as a product of popular forms of Islam and not desirable as part of a modern state. This perspective aims to view an Islam where the presence of jinns in scriptures is ignored and popular practices involving jinns are shunned. However, in the digital age, jinns serve to explore, stage, and resolve technological anxieties. The Turkish *D@bbe* films, mentioned previously in this chapter, are particularly adept at addressing fears of the digital. Created by Hasan Karacadağ, these films are influenced by the Japanese director Kiyosho Kurosawa's film *Pulse* (2001), originally titled *Kairo* (回路). While ghosts feature in Kurosawa's film, in Karacadağ's version it is jinns who inhabit the internet to provoke suicides. A digital army of jinns determined to exterminate humans are controlled by the creature Dabbat al-Ard. Dabbe, in Turkish, belongs to the Islamic eschatology as the beast who will appear in the end of times. Also known as *ad-Dajjaal* or *al-MasiH ad-Dajjaal* (المسيح الدجّال), this evil creature will pose as a messianic figure preceding judgement day in a similar fashion to the antichrist figure in Christian eschatology. While the Quran (27:82) mentions a beast of the earth, *Daabbatan min al-ArDi* (دَابَّةً مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ), without specifying its name, the deceitful messiah is mostly depicted in Hadith literature. Contemporary interpretations of Dabbat al-Ard consider this beast to be a disease or some other form of malignant force without asserting that it is a visible monster. Zeynep Sahinturk (2015) argues that in the *D@bbe* films, the fact that the suicide contagion starts in the United States underscores Dabbat al-Ard's omnipotence beyond a Muslim majority country, showcasing its influence even in the realm of tech giants from Silicon Valley. Yet, as Sahinturk (2015, p. 97) adds, the intrusion of technology also serves to narrate the story of Turkey's political evolution from an inherited atheist nation as imagined by Ataturk to the success of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its impact on Turkish society over the previous 20 years. Digital horror in the *D@bbe* films serves to tell a story about power struggles in the digital sphere, as well as fears of an Islamist nation.

Metaphors of jinns have also been instrumental in imagining invisible malignant forces inhabiting digital networks. In his book *Leaks, Hacks and Scandals*

(2019), Tarek El-Ariss discusses beasts and monsters, blood, and the *unheimlich* when talking about digital media in Arabic and in the Middle East region. Rather than engaging with horror fiction or gothic themes, El-Ariss associates horror tropes such as leaking and hacking to traditional Arab literary forms such as *adab* (أدب, literature, culture, civility) and *akhbaar* (أخبار, news, anecdotes, lore). El-Ariss claims that digital platforms such as Twitter exhibit archaic Arabic forms of literary practices that have returned 'with its beasts and monsters to permanently inhabit Arab culture and political landscapes' (2019, p. 29). Furthermore, he connects *The Arabian Nights* to WikiLeaks, and he refers to social media platforms such as Twitter in the Saudi Arabian context as an 'unsafe house' where everything is exposed and to blogging as spaces where users can say what cannot be said otherwise. Notably, El-Ariss describes a Twitter profile centred on leaking secrets of the Saudi Arabian government and its royal family since 2011 as 'a jinn-like figure' (2019, p. 91). Named Mujtahidd, this anonymous profile embodies jinn-like qualities by being an omnipresent, yet elusive, whistle-blower. Through this Twitter account, Mujtahidd knows, leaks, and reveals the inner workings of the Saudi political scene. In spite of the number of horror and gothic tropes (monsters, unsafe houses, blood, and leaks) referred to throughout the book, El-Ariss does not conceptualise these digital jinn figures, bloody leaks, and haunted platforms as a form of digital horror. However, in imagining social media profiles as jinns and platforms as unsafe houses and sources of leaks, El-Ariss's work corroborates the value of understanding digital media through the language of horror, but the equally notable resistance to formulate these examples of digital horror as part of 'Arabic' culture.

Establishing links between jinns and anonymous Twitter profiles mirrors the ways in which trolls have migrated online. Born within North European mythology, folkloric trolls now represent the most controversial of contemporary online participants. Internet trolls are characterised by being offensive or provocative in their online interactions. However, the implications of what online trolling means and what these online trolls are is still not clear, particularly in what concerns online manipulation and misinformation (Cheong 2019, pp. 28–9). Whitney Phillips defines online trolls according to their behaviour online: 'Specifically, trolls are agents of cultural digestion; they scavenge the landscape for scraps of usable content, make a meal of the most pungent bits, then hurl their waste onto an unsuspecting populace – after which they disappear, their Cheshire cat grins trailing after them like puffs of smoke' (2015, p. 33).

While folkloric trolls are often depicted as ugly creatures, giants, or dwarfs, in the Middle Ages, trolls were not thought of as a species but were defined by their actions (Jakobsson 2018). In her definition of trolls, however, Phillips's wording – scavenge, scraps, waste – resembles the ways in which folkloric trolls and ghouls have been depicted as flesh-eating monsters. It is worth noting that the term troll,

from Old Norse and Swedish *troll* and Danish *trold*, entered the English language in the 19th century at a time when gothic literature was thriving. In spite of the popularity of the term, scholars have shown little interest in understanding the connection between these mythological creatures, their migration online, and the role of the gothic genre in their popularity in the English language. Even if the suitability of employing the term internet trolls is still being contested, it is undeniable that, at the time of writing this book, 'troll' is the most broadly used and comprehensive term to define a purposefully cruel comment online (Hannan 2018, p. 220) and other forms of online deviant behaviours.

Interestingly, within the Moroccan datasphere, the term 'troll' has also been used interchangeably with memes. As previously mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the Instagram page of MRT (Moroccan Rap Trolls) emerged in September 2016 with a focus on sharing and posting memes about Moroccan rap and essentially served as a page that trolled Moroccan rappers and their work. The account rebranded as Mrt.portail in May 2022, distancing itself from direct references to trolling culture. This rebranding illustrates a change in content, behaviour, and aesthetics within the page, highlighting the evolving nature of this term in this particular context. From sarcastic, amateurish-looking memes aimed at making fun of Moroccan rappers, the social media page transitioned into 'an independent media of Moroccan rap' as indicated in the 'About' section of its Facebook page. With the trolls disappearing, so too have most of their sarcastic memes in favour of news about Moroccan rap and rappers. When MRT was created, other emerging new meme pages within the national online community opted for names and images consistent with trolling culture, showcasing elements of oddity, sexuality, madness, illness, and monstrosity in general. Some of these pages were and still are called Moroccan Demons, Maghreb D'zab (translates as 'Morocco of the dick'), Moroccan Mehh Memes, Moroccan Madness, and Pimp My Cancer 3.0. Most of these examples illustrate the national specificity of memes serving to warn their target audiences about the content of such pages. The connection between memes, trolls, and these pages suggests that among netizens, at least in Morocco, memes have historically been associated with trolling culture. This connection is not unique to a type of online behaviour but also reflects the taste for a certain grotesque aesthetics.

Beyond meme pages, monstrous creatures have inhabited the digital in the form of websites, podcasts, and YouTube videos. Jinns have been particularly present online. One example is the podcast 'The Hidden Djinn' where its host, Rabia Chaudry, delves deep into the world of jinns. Another example is the content creator and director of the production company Artcoustic, Mustapha Swinga. Swinga owns a playlist devoted to 'Stories and Tales قصة وعبرة' (2021b), as it is called, on his YouTube page. In 11 videos, a majority of which show original animation, Swinga explores stories ranging from traditional Moroccan oral legends

to contemporary subjects. One example is the animated short film 'Filter' (2021a), which aims to raise awareness of social media's negative impact. Another video included in this series is the animated Moroccan folktale *The Mother Ghoul and the Seven Sisters* (2020), which Swinga claims to be a traditional Amazigh story.[5] The story also appears in a collection of Moroccan folktales translated into English and edited by Jilali El Koudia and Roger Allen (El Koudia 2003). In another video not included in this playlist, Swinga explores the trope of the haunted house by featuring in a micro-film with a horror theme and a humorous tone (see Swinga 2019). As part of a section entitled 'Out of the Box', this story is inspired by the 'Chams' meme, a meme featuring the Andalusi song 'Chams al Achya', which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 7. Suffice it to say here that in this micro-film, the narrative centres around a mosquito transformed into a relentless she-monster which becomes the source of Swinga's nightmares (Swinga 2019). Because many viewers can relate to this scene, Swinga is able to explore the concept of the *unheimlich* in this micro-horror-comedy by depicting an all-night battle between an evil mosquito and a human.

The endeavour to connect the Moroccan everyday through horror tropes is also reflected in the work of Moroccan conceptual artists Blizzart and Adil Meslouhi. On their Instagram accounts, @blizzard_ and @ilustradil respectively, these artists mix skulls and skeletons with elements of Moroccan culture such as the red tarboosh, traditional teapots, or Moroccan celebrities (more in Chapter 9). Adil Meslouhi has been particularly adamant in the use of undead creatures in paying tribute to well-known personalities who have passed away. In his artistic work, Meslouhi brings together important Moroccan cultural figures with globally recognised personalities. For instance, his drawing of Chaïbia Talal (1929–2004) alongside Frida Kahlo (1907–54) portrays the Moroccan and Mexican painters sitting together holding hands as a tribute to commemorate International Women's Day in 2022.

Indeed, women and the concept of the feminine play pivotal roles in the creative exploration of jinns and monsters online. While the monstrous feminine will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6, it is essential to acknowledge some of the female contributions to digital horror. Undoubtedly, the mythical creature, devilish spirit, and flesh-eating jinn called Aicha Qandisha has enjoyed a significant influence on digital participants and creators. Her myth is connected to the 16th-century Portuguese colonisation of some Moroccan port towns. According to the legend, Qandisha resisted European settlers, resulting in the deaths of her family and fiancé. For this reason, her name might have originated from the Portuguese word for countess, *condessa*. After these events, as the legend goes, Qandisha's mental health suffered and she became a seductive creature looking for destruction

[5] Amazigh (pl. Imazighen) is the self-named and preferred term to refer to what has been known as Berber.

(Douider 2012, p. 76). There are two homonymous horror films inspired by Aicha Qandisha as mentioned earlier in this chapter – *Kandisha* (Morocco, 2008) and *Kandisha* (France, 2020). Inspired by this mythological figure, a theatrical production was performed at Drayton Arms theatre in London in 2022. Additionally, a musical fusion group from Marrakech founded by Youssef El Mejjad in 1992 was named 'Aisha Kandisha'. Moreover, during the Arab Spring this she-jinn inspired a group of Moroccan feminists to embrace forms of monstrosity and produce an online magazine called 'Qandisha e-magazwine' (Belhabib 2017).[6] The magazine was founded in Casablanca in late 2011 by a group of women in response to the insufficient recognition of feminist demands during the demonstrations coupled with the absence of media support for the feminist cause. The alteration in spelling, *magazwine* instead of *magazine*, seeks to incorporate Darija, thereby acknowledging that Moroccan feminists were the driving force behind this project. The aim was to redefine the perception of Qandisha, and therefore feminists, by adopting the positive adjective *zwine*, meaning beautiful and nice in general. In contrast to other important figures in North Africa, such as Kahina, renowned for her fight against foreign invasions, the myth of Aicha Qandisha has historically carried negative connotations as she frightens children and is viewed as 'an evil temptress who is recognizable by her bestial features' (Bouamer 2019, p. 76) and seduces men away from their wives (Douider 2012). The change in spelling contests Aicha Qandisha's mythical legacy as a she-monster, turning her monstrous power into political empowerment for contemporary feminists.

The reappropriation of Aicha Qandisha for feminist purposes has extended beyond Morocco and found resonance in the work of Iranian artist Morehshin Allahyari as part of her project *She Who Sees the Unknown*. For this project, Allahyari created digital storytelling through 3D modelling, 3D scanning, and 3D printing to explore monstrous female figures of North African and Middle Eastern origin. According to the description of the project on her website, this work delves into the ancient mythical narratives of jinns, embracing the monstrosity of feminine supernatural figures who are powerful. Allahyari hopes to use the framework of 're-figuring' as a ficto-feminist and activist practice against forms of oppression. She is therefore inspired by Islam and jinns to explore not only historical and digital colonialism but also patriarchal systems and the environment from a monstrous-feminine perspective:

> When thinking about technology, potential futures and new worlds, it is perhaps time to think outside of Donna Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg' in order to stretch our imagination to a new set of figures that do not come from white/western knowledge structures. If Haraway claimed to be 'a cyborg rather than a motherly/earthy goddess', I claim to be a jinn rather than a cyborg. (Allahyari 2021)

[6] While at the time of writing the website seems to have disappeared, their Facebook page Qandisha (2011) is still working.

In an interview, Allahyari reflects on jinns and their stories by stating that they inspire conversations about decolonisation because, as less familiar in Euro-anglophone contexts than witches, zombies, or cyborgs, they are creatures that represent the Other and the underrepresented (Doostdar and Allahyari 2020, p. 175). According to Allahyari, the significance of the jinn is that, contrary to angels or devils who only obey (or disobey) their master, jinns have agency in choosing and therefore are powerful beings. In this sense, Aicha Qandisha's myth haunts the digital sphere not only as a figure conceived to scare the patriarchal authority but also as an important decolonial figurehead.

Continuing with a gendered perspective, let us return to the stories of the *ghoula* told in YouTube videos. The masculine ghoul is especially interesting because it is a particular type of jinn which is omnipresent in anglophone culture. The ghoul (غول) denotes, in Arabic, a demon or an evil spirit that feeds from dead bodies. The root of the word means 'to annihilate' or 'to assault', referencing their taste for human flesh. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, in English the term ghoul is also employed informally to refer to someone interested in death and unpleasant things. The adjective *ghoulish* relates to the ugly, unpleasant, or frightening and implies the close relationship between demonic figures, disgust, evilness, and ugliness (Ghoulish n.d.). Similar to jinns, ghouls in Arabic can be male (*ghoul*) or female (*ghoula*). Aesthetically, the pre-Islamic Arab poet Thabit Ibn Jabr, also known as Ta'abbata Sharran, describes the she-ghoul as ugly after meeting and killing a ghoula one night:

> I spent the night bearing down on top of her,
> Waiting for the morning to see what I had caught.
> Then I found two eyes in an ugly head,
> Similar to the head of a cat, but with a forked tongue.
>
> (Cited in El-Zein 2009, p. 182)

Even if ghouls, as is the case with devils, are known to change their form at will, Moroccan sources describe the ghoula as resembling a woman: 'She was said to be very big and have the appearance of a woman, although she had also been seen with the feet of a goat and with considerable hair all over her body and face. She spoke gently to people and was thus able to attract them into her presence, at which point she killed and ate them' (Lebling 2010, p. 169).

Like jinns, ghouls also seem to have gained prominence in audiovisual productions since the mid-2010s, featuring in the Moroccan TV show *L'Ghoul* (2016), the Indian miniseries *Ghoul* (2018), and the Tunisian series *Awled El Ghoul* (2021). Notably, in Morocco, two rap songs published in the same year have the homonymous title of 'Lghoul' (2016). Performed by rapper Muslim with DJ Van, the first of these songs serves as the soundtrack of the Moroccan TV show with the same name (DJ Van and Muslim 2016). The second song is performed by rapper Aminoffice (2016), one of the first rappers to release a mixtape in the local music

scene in the mid-1990s. The Muslim/DJ Van song follows the theme of the show, which narrates stories of local mafias and the deterioration of neighbourhoods due to drugs and addiction. Aminoffice's song portrays the ghoul as the invisible terror that roams the empty streets of the rapper's hometown at night. Rapper Muslim also mentions this evil creature on an earlier record called '7ob Lwatan' ('Love of the Nation', 2009) (Muslim 2014), but in its female form. In the song, Muslim claims that a she-ghoul scared them while they were children and that the fear of the *ghoula* lingers for life. It is only as one matures, as Muslim claims in the lyrics, that *lghoula* is recognised as being present in your own country:

bach 3omrek matfham blli dawla hiya lmas2oula	For you never understand that the state is the responsible one
zar3o fina lkhawf o 7na ba9in f sana oula	They planted fear in us when we were in primary school
melli kona sghar 3allamtouna nkhafo men lghoula	Since we were young, you taught us to fear the she-ghoul
melli kbarna 3rafna belli lghoula hiya dawla	When we grew up, we realised that the she-ghoul is the state
bach 3omrek matfham blli dawla hiya lmas2oula	You'll never understand that the country is responsible
zar3o fina lkhawf o hna ba9in f sana oula	It planted fear in us when we were in primary school
melli kona sghar 3alamtouna nkhafo min lghoula	Since we were young, they taught us to fear the she-ghoul
melli kbarna 3rafna belli lghoula hiya dawla	When we grew up, we knew that the she-ghoul is the country

Embodied as a *ghoula*, the omnipresent and omnipotent power of the state is presented as a carrion-eating female monster with a particular taste for dead humans. In this context, evil jinns have the ability to embody the monstrous actions of the state and hold it accountable without suffering the consequences of naming the state directly. Despite these vivid depictions of ghouls, neither of these rap music videos shows the monster explicitly, corroborating jinns as powerful metaphors of different societal malaises and sources of terror in both masculine and female forms. However, anxieties expressed through jinns and ghouls have not been limited to invisible creatures.

A large number of Moroccan rap and music videos since 2019 have explicitly experimented with recreating monsters in their online content. Free from traditional media gatekeepers, the artwork of songs such as 'Airmax' (Dizzy DROS 2019a), 'Godzilla' (Moro 2019), 'Hkaya' (Snor 2021), 'Makayn Tahed' (Shobee 2021), 'Wra Tabi3a' (Issam 2021), 'Necrophilia' (Pause 2021), 'Mask' (Mons 2022), and 'Queen's Blood' (Alpha the Rapper 2022) all explore horror tropes

from diabolic clowns to demons and zombies, bloody bodies, haunted houses, and chilling cemetery settings.[7] For a decade after rap music videos first appeared in the Moroccan datasphere around the mid-2000s, rap videos adhered to hip hop culture's portrayal of street life, often avoiding conceptual experimentation in their visual presentation. The change in artistic direction in the late 2010s denotes an interest in connecting themes of everyday life with a creative exploration of fiction, fantasy, and horror. These music videos, only shared online, are significant because they support the transition from Moroccan *Noir* to digital horror fiction. To elucidate this transformation, the following section introduces a framework for examining the growing fascination with experimenting with monstrous beings and horror tropes as a means to creatively address social and political concerns.

Gothifying the Digital

Inspired by imperial gothic novels that dared to challenge elements from the European Enlightenment, postcolonial gothic literature reflects on the colonial past to understand how its effects continue to shape and inhabit the postcolonial (or post-colonial) present (Gelder 2014, p. 195). Born between the 18th and 19th centuries to oppose Victorian realism, 'imperial Gothic' (Brantlinger 1990) explores the decadence of an era far from its enlightened and humanist values (Botting 1996, pp. 1–2). Gothic, in this sense, stands in opposition to 'classical' and its values of order, simplicity, civilisation, and elegance as perceived by the European gaze at the time. The gothic is said to bring 'to the fore what is unadmitted in a culture by painting it across, or palimpsestically underneath, time and space' (Lange 2001, p. 42). Postcolonial gothic shares themes and features common to gothic stories including violence and murder, madness, melancholy, mystery, ghosts, spirits and other presences, sexual excess, and subversive desires. Postcolonial gothic differs from imperial gothic, however, because it has the critical purpose of revisiting these 19th-century novels 'to expose and dramatize the "relations of domination" within them' (Gelder 2014, p. 192). In her doctoral thesis, Julie Hakim Azzam (2007, p. 3) states that in order to be considered postcolonial gothic, cultural items do not need to be self-consciously gothic but must speak to issues that are significant to the historical development of postcoloniality. Without explicit awareness of these novels, the postcolonial gothic emerges as a literary genre that challenges narratives of progress and 'modernity', offering counternarratives that scrutinise postcolonial issues such as the failure of national

[7] Beyond this list of rappers, another contemporary music artist who has shown an interest in horror themes is C H E B in his song 'Vampire' (C H E B 2019c). This artist and this song are discussed in Chapter 9.

projects. This failure is transmitted by showing an interest in the domestic and the everyday, particularly concerning 'legitimate origins; rightful inhabitants; usurpation and occupation; and nostalgia for impossible nationalist politics' (Azzam 2007, p. iv). In the hands of postcolonial writers, the gothic genre serves as a means to explore the 'uncanny relationships between colonial narratives of conquest and unspeakable violence, public history and intimate narratives, and the persistence of nostalgia for nation or homeland in the face of the failure of such projects' (Azzam 2007, p. 2). In destabilising notions of 'native' and 'settler', colonised and coloniser, power and ordinary people, the postcolonial gothic offers the chance to negotiate how displacement and belonging coexist. Equally important is the fact that the postcolonial gothic invites postcolonialists to regard cultural production through the lenses of horror without losing the postcolonial condition.

Within contemporary Arabic literature, the postcolonial gothic genre finds its most prominent expression in post-2003 Iraqi novels such as Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2017), published in Arabic in 2010 and 2013 respectively. Haytham Bahoora has played a pivotal role in categorising these novels as gothic, going beyond the label of postcolonial literature. According to Bahoora (2015, p. 190), these novels adopt realistic aesthetics while experimenting with dark forms of humour and the supernatural, monstrosity, and aesthetics of horror. The results are stories that allow the authors to narrate unspeakable forms of violence. These books are considered as postcolonial gothic by Bahoora because they emphasise the haunting presence of the past in the present, a defining characteristic of the genre. Through a monster composed of body parts of those killed in the aftermath of the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* explores the impact of war and of military occupation. More importantly, the book highlights the lack of political, legal, or historical accountability in dealing with structural violence (Bahoora 2015, p. 188). Unsurprisingly, this book incorporates into the main narrative a vibrant and rich tradition of oral stories that revolve around jinns and spirits, attributing magical powers to some of its characters.

Beyond its written text, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers an opportunity to expose different attitudes towards horror within arabophone and anglophone cultural industries. While the book cover of its original Arabic version shows a narrow street reminiscent of many old city centres in the Middle East, in this instance presumably Baghdad, the cover of the English translation shows a dismembered face (Figure 3). The English cover manifests a stronger engagement with the tradition of horror fiction and its monsters in order to capture the attention of the genre's readership, while the Arabic cover dissociates the book from any links with horror despite its explicit title. The anglophone editorial decision may have aimed to attract horror fiction audiences in the same way as Islamic horror films do, by providing a gothic twist. The Arabic original, on the other hand, may have considered

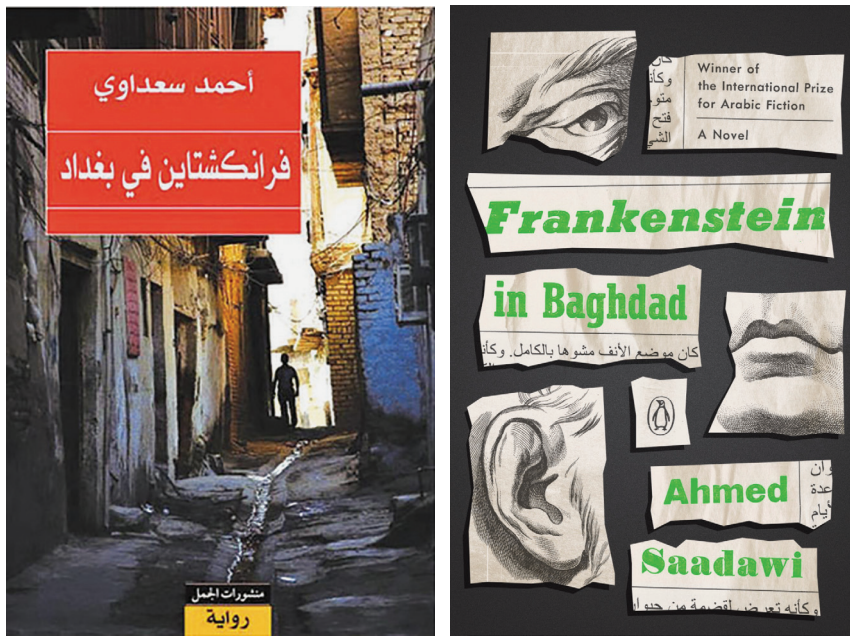

Figure 3 Arabic and English book covers of Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

the English cover too monstrous for its local audience or deemed horror as an unpopular genre in Arabic literature. Even more striking is the case of Antoon's book *The Corpse Washer* (2013), which was originally titled وحدها شجرة الرمان (2010), which translates as 'the pomegranate alone'. Such a change in perspective is remarkable as the author is also the translator of the book into English. The book covers in both Arabic and English capture the shift in genre as the text transitions from Arabic to English (Figure 4). However, the increasing number of films, TV shows, and music videos detailed in this chapter questions these editorial anxieties, suggesting that there is, indeed, a case to be made regarding an increasing appetite for Arabic horror.

These kinds of editorial decisions resurfaced in the English translation of Egyptian writer Ahmed Khaled Tawfik's novels, called in Arabic ما وراء الطبيعة (*Ma Waraa'a at-Tabiy'a*). Literally meaning 'that which is beyond nature', these words can also be translated as beyond nature, metaphysics, or supernatural and can be used to refer to the fantastic or the terrifying. Based on Tawfik's literary series, the novels have been adapted as a Netflix TV show called, in English, *Paranormal* (Egypt, 2020). Set in rural Egypt in the 1960s, the story revolves around Dr Refaat Ismael, a retired doctor who becomes a detective for paranormal phenomena. Netflix classifies the show, among others, as Drama, Horror, and Fantasy, employing the adjectives 'chilling and scary' to describe the series. One of its

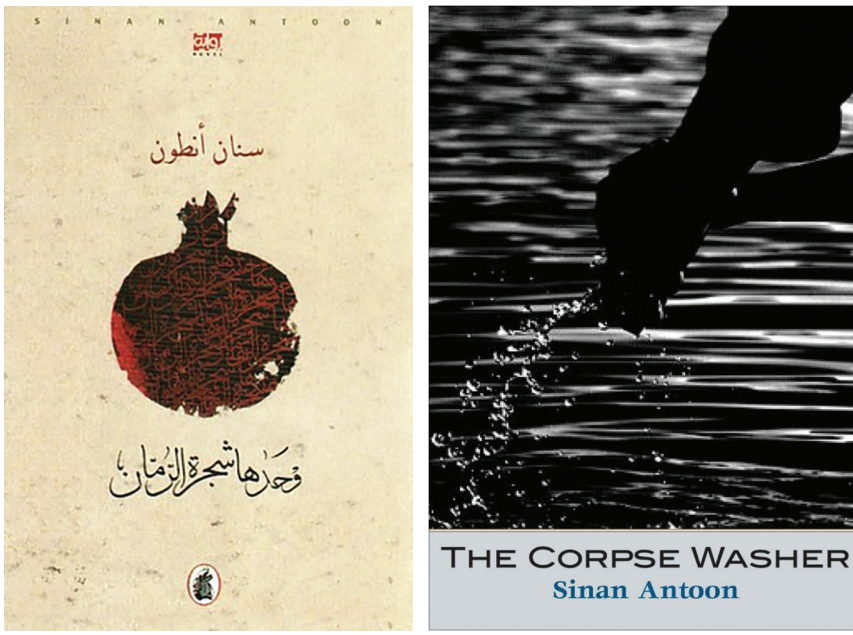

Figure 4 Arabic and English book covers of Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*.

images features Dr Ismael holding a knife and an axe while walking among zombies, a clear reference to Hollywood zombie films.

Under the same title in Arabic, Moroccan rapper Issam performs the song and music video 'Wra Tabi3a' (2021) with the same meaning despite slight differences in spelling. The video takes viewers inside the interior of a Moroccan house lacking any luxurious elements, featuring an old television set playing a football match. As the video clip unfolds, different members of the family that inhabits the house appear. These inhabitants, however, have odd and monstrous faces and figures. Both Issam's song and Tawfik's novels and TV show engage with the horror theme of the *unheimlich* in a pre-digital revolution era. The home and the country appear here as familiar spaces that are somehow scary and full of unfamiliar beings and events. The supernatural embedded in its literal translation speaks about the disruption of normality. This abnormality turns to horror as monstrous figures appear in the scene, scaring the viewers.

Jinns and ghouls inhabiting these homes and spaces, blending horror and the supernatural with the 'un-homely', suggest a decolonial rather than postcolonial perspective on gothic themes. By resurrecting the past in the present, the post-colonial gothic aims at not only staging but also resolving political, historical, and social conflicts within the family and the familial (Azzam 2007, p. 7). This decolonial gothic presents the opportunity to recontextualise horror and gothic

through new monsters in new mediums. Such a perspective, as Chapter 7 expands on, provides a better opportunity to discuss the family, its homes, and its nations beyond the postcolony, but with the postcolony in mind.

Towards a Decolonial Gothic

In late 2021, a second important rap feud took place in Morocco. This time it was not between two different generations of rappers but between Moroccan and Algerian artists. In the span of a month, rappers from the two countries shared over 40 songs on YouTube accompanied by artwork in the form of still images or videos. These artefacts revived both neighbouring countries' recent history of political confrontation, illustrating the countries' rivalry. In creating images of enmity and superiority, some exhibited football matches between Morocco and Algeria, scenes from *The Godfather* (1972), and horror-themed elements including monstrous pumpkins or skulls. In this feud, rapper Dizzy DROS released a track called 'Habeel' (2021) in which the rapper revives two well-known characters, Cain and Abel (Qabil and Habil in Arabic). The story of how Cain, the envious evil brother, kills Abel, the pious son favoured by God, appears in the biblical Book of Genesis as well as in the Quran. In the song, Abel represents Morocco and Cain, Algeria. However, Dizzy DROS's lyrics alter this familiar tale from the outset, interfering to save Abel from his doomed fate. In this track, Cain (Algeria) in fact never kills Abel (Morocco) as the lyrics proceed: '*Ghir had lmerra, a lkhawa ma match Habeel*' (Only this time, my brother Abel didn't die). The survival of Abel presents an opportunity for this devout character to respond to his evil killer. Speaking from the perspective of Abel, Dizzy DROS reclaims the triumph of the more knowledgeable brother who teaches his younger brother Cain (in the original story Cain is the eldest). As the rapper had previously done with the poet Al-Moutanabbi, Dizzy DROS revives and embodies Abel as the dead returning to seek revenge. But this time he is not alone. Abel is not one rapper, but an entire nation. It is not an intergenerational battle, but a feud between countries with strong cultural and affective ties.

Both rap feuds described in this chapter feature bloody relationships within the family, whether these be within different generations who belong to the same music genre and culture (rap and hip hop) or the same region, embodying ongoing political disputes between countries in the Maghreb. The return of the dead invites a continuation of the feud, a call and response where existing social and political tensions are staged if not resolved. The digital realm provides a powerful platform for narrating stories where the undead return, allowing for these stories and their monsters to take centre stage, at least for a time. These stories have emerged for two reasons: firstly, because in its transmediality and global access the digital allows

for a never-ending call and response, and secondly, because there is an evident growing interest to explore what is beyond nature. It is only through fiction that old poets and religious characters can be resurrected and their stories repurposed.

Viewed through the lens of a decolonial gothic, conceptualised from digital monsters that belong to an Other, undead characters emerge as a force that cannot be ignored. The digital sphere allows monsters, which would otherwise remain confined in favour of more palatable genres and aesthetics, to engage with the killers, creating new possibilities for storytelling and aesthetics. A decolonial gothic conceives the return of such historical figures to participate in conversations among local cultures or geopolitics by bringing back ghosts of the past. These ghosts and feuds resonate with their intended audiences and extend beyond the physical borders of the Maghreb.

Part II

Stories of the Undead

4

Animating the Living Dead

Every year on 20 August, King Mohammed VI of Morocco gives a publicly televised speech to commemorate his birthday. Officially, this is known as the anniversary of the Revolution of the King and the People. The day serves to celebrate, as much as to remind and reinforce, the existing special bond between the King as political, military, and spiritual leader of the nation and its citizens. Every year, the King addresses pressing matters such as the country's need for development, the youth, or social disparities exhibited in rural and urban areas. In 2019, King Mohammed VI's speech devoted a few lines to indicating that in order to support Morocco's development, young people should choose the path of technical training rather than a university diploma:

> In this regard, I wish to insist, once again, on the importance of vocational training, especially in villages and suburban areas, to provide youths with skills, and thereby enable them to enter the labor market and contribute to the country's development …
>
> Passing the baccalaureate exam and going to university is not a privilege; it is just a phase in the education process. It is even more important to receive training that opens up prospects for professional integration and social stability.[1]

The way in which the King formulated his plans for the country's development and youth, a leitmotiv in Morocco's official discourse, triggered an outburst of memes in the Moroccan datasphere. One cartoon strip meme (Figure 5) depicts two cats, one displaying the logo of the ENCG (École Nationale de Commerce et Gestion) and the other that of the ENSA (École Nationale Superior de l'Administration). These are two *grandes écoles*, which are elite institutions that follow the French higher education system. In the meme, both *grandes écoles* cats are looking out of a window at another cat with big eyelashes and wearing red lipstick inside a car. Sitting beside her is a smiling mouse with the logo on his head of

[1] The full speech in English is available at the official website maroc.com managed by the Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication (Maroc.ma 2019).

Figure 5 Meme displaying the logos of ENCG and ENSA, two Moroccan *grandes écoles*, and the OFPPT, the Office of Vocational Training and Employment Promotion. Credit to Charaf El Alouany.

the main official vocational technical training office in the country, the OFPPT (Office de Formation Professionnelle et de la Promotion du Travaille). The meme captures university students (the two cats) witnessing how, after the speech, vocational trainees (the mouse) have succeeded in attracting a pretty cat (success in life). Other popular memes echo the same message, criticising and ridiculing the King's words. A number of these memes feature images of famous personalities such as the English actor Jason Statham or Spanish football player Sergio Ramos wearing the OFPPT's recognisable training coats (Figure 6). In another similar instance, a meme shows Elon Musk claiming, in French, that he registered in a vocational school for plumbers after listening to the royal speech ('*s'est inscrit dans un centre de formation en option plomberie après avoir écouté le dernier discours royal*'). Beneath the sarcasm embedded in these memes is a sense that young people's efforts to pass their bac diploma (الحصول على الباكالوريا), the French and Moroccan equivalent to the A-Levels in the United Kingdom or SATs in the United States, and then pay for and study at a university, were being undermined by the leader of the nation. Instead, the King was celebrating vocational training

Figure 6 Two Photoshopped picture memes showing actor Jason Statham and football player Sergio Ramos in OFPPT training-school coats. Author unknown.

(الحصول على تكوين), which traditionally has led to low-paying jobs and limited opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility. This commitment to technical jobs as the primary means to contribute to the country's development meant that other life paths, including pursuing a university degree as well as careers in the arts or sports, were less valuable. Consequently, the speech was perceived as a dismissal of any value in skills related to graduate studies such as critical thinking or cultural enrichment. The phrase *al-Husoul 'alaa takwiin* (الحصول على تكوين), meaning 'technical diploma', was hurtful because it was seen as an attempt to devalue higher education studies, which many young people worked hard to attain. This speech was especially stinging for those who faced economic hardships in pursuit of higher education. Under the pretence of reuniting the King with the people, it reminded Moroccans of the desired social order imposed from above. According to this system, the people are only worth their labour as technicians.

Behind these memes and the laughs they elicited in the comments sections, the everlasting culture of contempt, or, as referred to in North Africa, *hogra*, became apparent. In classic Arabic, the root حقر (*haqara*) means someone or something that becomes contemptible, despicable, or abject. In Morocco and Algeria, the term *hogra* denotes everyday performances of humiliation where the state or its representatives (police, army, local authorities, economic elites, etc.) exercise power over ordinary people, particularly the unprivileged majority. Referring to the Algerian context, Charles Tripp states that *hogra* is a 'powerful word used by many in the country to sum up the nature of the relationship between

"Le Pouvoir" [the state] and the people' (2013, p. 15). *Hogra* may embody any situation of abuse of power where those on top seek to crush and symbolically kill those considered inferior, meaning holding less power. The word is usually uttered by ordinary citizens when they experience a sense of worthlessness, humiliation, and contempt imposed by those in power, particularly the armed forces or political and economic elites.

The existence and use of this word also reveals a critical stance towards power from those who are willing to denounce such mistreatment. The term is employed to expose an unequal power dynamic, often carrying tones of anger and frustration. This anger, Moulay Driss El Maarouf and Taieb Belghazi claim, has a history of triggering social movements: 'hogra is capable of generating random emotions of anger that cross the boundaries over to more organized emotive plans. In other words, it is worth studying how indiscriminate emotions of humiliation are structured by social militants to form reasoned and strategized forms of protest' (2019, p. 15). On 20 August 2019, the words of the King did not lead to street protests or any other form of organised social action. This time, anger as a response was mediated through sarcastic memes with a shared tone of bitterness flooding the Moroccan datasphere for a brief, but significant, moment. Dressed in characteristic uniforms worn by vocational trainees, famous football players, successful actors, and one of the richest men in the world at the time merged, in these memes, with unprivileged people. As vocational trainees, these well-known characters joined the zombie labour army the King's speech seemed to be encouraging.

The speech might have an alternative interpretation, suggesting a way to uplift those who cannot afford the tuition of the *grandes écoles*, which cater only to the privileged few. From this perspective, the King's emphasis on vocational training suggests the opposite of how the memes depict the monarch's words. However, the fact that it was interpreted in this alternative sense reveals how entrenched the culture of *hogra* is. Submerged within an uncontrollable torrent of memes were online participants' contributions to perpetuating *hogra*. These memes depict vocational trainees as a lifeless labour force who cannot expect more in life than minimum-wage employment with limited opportunities for advancement. Paradoxically, these memes further compounded the initial insult by using individuals who had chosen or were forced to choose the path of technical training as objects of ridicule. The culture of *hogra* manifested in the message that the memes suggested, believing that the best choice, if one had the privilege of choosing, would be an elite school modelled on the French higher education system and not local public schools where students learn practical skills and trades. The result is that both the speech and the memes gave visibility to what the phrase 'professional integration' pronounced by the King meant: keeping young men occupied rather than roaming the streets causing trouble and getting their voices heard and their bodies seen. The fact that educational barriers were interpreted by online participants as

a sentence to a life devoid of intellect and reduced to a state of brainless monster backfired by shedding light on an unfair reality of social hierarchies. By encouraging ordinary people not to aspire to anything other than a technical profession, the King failed to acknowledge the implications of his words and the pain they could cause. The speech, after all, thwarted people's agency in choosing different pathways to escape a future predetermined for them. Instead, the elites were choosing for them in an attempt to channel social discontent. Memes were clear in claiming that the King was denying ordinary people the possibility of escaping their assigned role in society. Moreover, dreaming beyond a future the state had laid out for them was explicitly discouraged.

By exploring artistic forms in which young creators and memers have embraced zombiedom as a form of social critique, this chapter delves into the ways in which the culture of *hogra* is illustrated in digital media. Against the backdrop of television channels uninterested in an in-depth, creative exploration of what it means to be considered as 'trash' or disposable, online aesthetics invite depictions of young people that profit from the digital grotesque. This chapter explores themes of oddity, ugliness, and monstrosity in bestowing visibility to those who are continuously marginalised, forced into living as undead creatures. It argues that grotesque depictions of unprivileged bodies form the struggle between reinforcement of the humiliation of ordinary people and embodying the monstrosity one has been forced into in order to fight back. Creative attempts to depict the culture of *hogra* through peculiar-looking faces, this chapter argues, are not only presented as a way of protesting or expressing anger. The chapter suggests that the digital grotesque often acts as the main – and sometimes sole – sphere to host conversations that expose the lives of those forced to exist as socially marginalised beings, akin to living their lives as undead monsters.

Depicting Waste

In 2012, Mohammed Nassib launched the animated cartoon series *Bouzebal* (in Arabic بوزبال) on his YouTube channel (Nassib 2010). With over 200 million reproductions on YouTube from 2012 to 2020, *Bouzebal* has enjoyed widespread popularity depicting the adventures and struggles of a young man from Casablanca. The word *bouzebal* comes from the classic Arabic word زبالة (*zubaala*) meaning rubbish, trash, or waste and زبال (*zibaal*) meaning scavenger. In the argot of Casablanca, *bouzebal* is a derogatory term for an unprivileged-looking young man; as the chapter unfolds, we see how this term underpins class struggles. Through its main character, Bouzebal, the series explores economic disparities and the difficulties of being poor in the largest city and economic capital of Morocco. In each episode, the audience is transported to Bouzebal's world,

characterised by the difficulties in accessing basic health care, the impossibility of stopping an urban taxi, or being mocked for not speaking French. Throughout the series, Bouzebal navigates these situations, sometimes by directly protesting and at other times by trying to take advantage through deception. As an antihero of everyday life, Bouzebal often ends up losing and failing in his attempts to achieve a better life. Growing up on the losing end of a culture of abuse compels Bouzebal to be witty (or at least the character believes he is) and a trickster who works hard to break down the walls that elites have built for him. For this reason, even when he is repeatedly defeated, Bouzebal manages to expose and denounce a rotten system designed to keep unprivileged youth trapped in the social circumstances into which they were born.

Through the character of Bouzebal, Mohammed Nassib imagines an entire television series full of characters whose bodies and faces reflect their privileges, or lack thereof, and a systematic hierarchy based on looks. Bouzebal (Figure 7) is drawn as an odd-looking young man with an asymmetrical face featuring a crooked nose, eyes, and mouth, and uneven teeth resembling the classic Trollface from the 'Rage Comics' meme series. Other characters in the show follow similar aesthetics, and Nassib includes a wide variety of skin complexions to mirror Morocco's multicultural make-up.

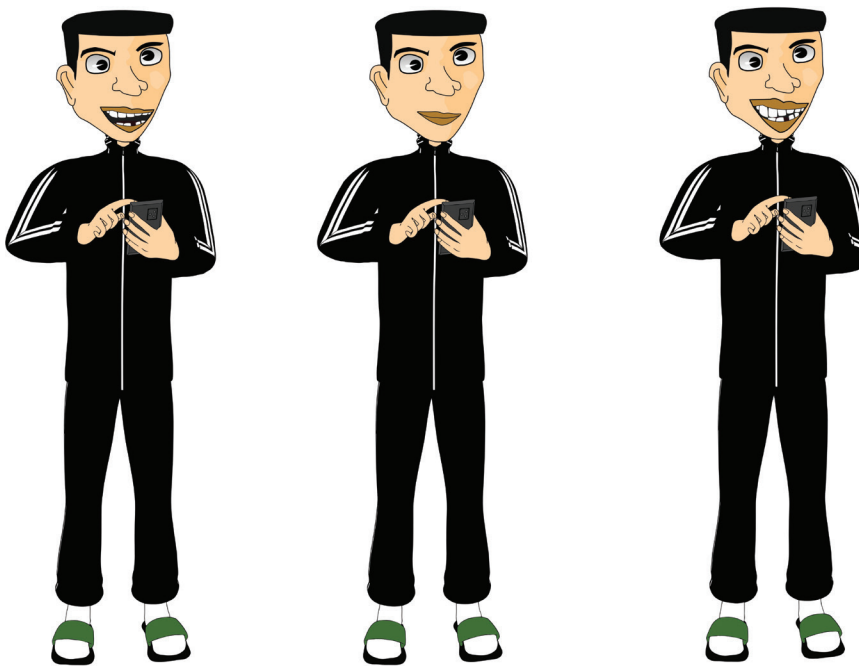

Figure 7 Bouzebal character. Created by Mohammed Nassib.

Within the series, Bouzebal has a female friend referred to as Mcharmla. This term, as discussed in the next section, seeks to strip the female character of her femininity and beauty by associating her with unprivileged young men. In the series, Mcharmla's facial features not only resemble Bouzebal's, but in some of the earlier episodes they also embody her unintelligibility when she speaks. Unable to speak clearly, the term used to name Bouzebal's female companion contributes to the ways in which unprivileged women are shamed and stigmatised for not being 'feminine' enough (see more in Chapter 6).

However, not all characters in this animated series are depicted as grotesque. The character Kilimini (meaning 'posh' in the Casablancan argot) is a young, light-skinned, prosperous, French-educated, and well-spoken urban young man. White Eurocentric beauty is exemplified by Kilimini's straight blond hair that allows for bangs to frame his symmetric face. The character's physical depiction is further complimented by his accent in Darija and his command of French, all implying the privileged social status he was born into and his inevitably successful life (see Chapter 8 for a discussion on Moroccan sociolinguistics). Kilimini represents the country's urban bourgeoisie and its elites enjoying their privilege but also out of touch and unengaged with the everyday struggles faced by people in Morocco. Nassib's portrayal of these characters underscores how physical appearance and language hold the unprivileged masses captive, dictating their prospects for climbing the social ladder. By exaggerating the physical disparities between beauty (Kilimini) and oddity (Bouzebal), the show does not attempt to faithfully mirror society. Instead, it exposes the intimate association between looks, class, and power. As Heather Laine Talley observes, faces play a pivotal role in understanding social differences and devaluation: 'What the face tells the others about who we are determines our status in social relations and systems of power' (2014, p. 13). In a world obsessed with appearances, Talley (2014, p. 12) argues, facial disfiguration is routinely positioned as deadly. While Kilimini's beauty is a sign of life, Bouzebal and his entourage's crooked, troll-like faces present them as grotesque and socially marginalised creatures, devoid of life.

A similar environment is depicted in the comic books *Le Guide Casablancais* (2015) and *Le Casablancais 2: From Casa with Love* (2017) by Mohammed El Bellaoui, also known as Rebel Spirit. Written in Darija with the French translation included in the text, the series *Le Casablancais* acts as a guide to the lives of city dwellers in Casablanca, offering insights into experiences such as attending the market, a football match, or hopping on overcrowded public transport. Two books have been published as traditional comics thanks to support provided by the Institut Français and L'Uzine for the first book,[2] and later the Moroccan Ministry of Culture for the second book. As with *Bouzebal*, *Le Casablancais* depicts everyday

[2] L'Uzine is an artistic and cultural space providing support to young artists and performers in Casablanca.

scenes and characters through the interplay between ugliness and beauty, lighter and darker skin tones and hair colours, and the use of language. The first scene of the first book narrates the experience of travelling on a public bus. This space is reserved exclusively for the most unprivileged who cannot afford to share an urban petit taxi. Buses are regarded as dirty and unsafe spaces, overcrowded with people riding on the steps of the bus, and with open doors or occasionally youth surfing on their rooftops. The scene shows a group of young men with troll-like faces. As the narrator describes them, 'let's say their faces are their criminal records' (كولو وجوه العدالة) (El Bellaoui 2015). In adding to this description, some of these men are holding bottles of alcohol and making funny faces as if to mock the reader, or rather the voyeur, looking into this guide to the 'real' Casablanca. As the story proceeds, the reader enters the bus: a mother carries a baby on her back; an unveiled middle-aged woman complains about the bad smell (ريحة); and the bus is driven by an irate driver with red eyes, among many other travellers. A character with a henna-coloured beard holds a portable radio cassette player and points his index finger upwards while he blesses the nation. In the midst of this claustrophobic environment, a gang of bus controllers is granted an entire page spread. Their deformed, intimidating faces depict them as thugs ready to impose their authority in their limited domain in order to police those who unlawfully ride the bus. The entire scene introduces the variety of city dwellers that roam the city of Casablanca. These people, from Islamists to unveiled women, from fearsome controllers to mothers and babies, all appear trapped in a minuscule space characterised by its bad smell and ugly characters.

In *Le Casablancais*, as happens occasionally with neighbourhood thugs in *Bouzebal*, the power of authority also stems from monstrous looks. Characteristic in this comic book is that people are drawn with blank eyes lacking pupils and irises. The first scene follows the angry bus driver as he becomes exasperated with the demands of his job. The driver is drawn in three consecutive close-up panels where his pupilless eyes turn red. Representations of pupilless red eyes appear in other online cultural artefacts, from rap album covers to drawings on Instagram profiles. Visual artists on Instagram such as Ilustradil and Blizzart or the account @dessinushamaofficial regularly post artwork where human bodies are drawn with blank or red eyes. As with deformed faces, faces lacking eyes suggest that these characters are not completely living, soulful human beings. However, much like deformity, representations of individuals with blank eyes can also bestow a unique sense of power to those depicted in this manner.

In the Moroccan memesphere, bright red eyes are often Photoshopped to denote power. This is the case with Nasser Bourita, the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2017, and extends to the monarchy itself. Bourita's fiery red eyes convey the power of this minister in obtaining political and economic wins for Morocco in the international scene. This same effect has been employed in

memes of the late King Hassan II to represent his power over his opponents. A focus on eyes to communicate anger and power simultaneously may be related to the power of the evil eye, where عين (*'ayn*) means both eye and source in Arabic. Pupilless eyes are depictions of soullessness as much as occult power. Digital cultural artefacts, particularly memes' taste for pastiche, facilitate layers of meanings where a simple picture of a minister can quickly become a showcase of feelings of anger that translate into power. No matter its aim, a bus driver and a minister both become dominant, undead beings in their own spheres of power, a local bus or the international political arena.

As examples of creative artefacts that fully explore, embody, and engage with the digital grotesque, these aesthetic expressions provide a platform for those who have been alienated from the mainstream to take action. Or, as Kristeva states, 'from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master' (1982, p. 2). The character Bouzebal embodies disposable and undesirable men and women. Bouzebal is too poor and ugly to get a *proper* job (to continue with Kristeva's double entendre) and improve his social status. Mcharmla is too masculine and therefore too unattractive to have a space in society other than being friends with Bouzebal and marrying within her own social circle (more on monstrous women in Chapter 6). Relegated to the unseen, the animated cartoons do not appear on mainstream media because they make *unproper* young people visible, with a voice to shape their life experiences and with a substantial internet audience. What is particularly challenging to the 'master', whether the state, media moguls, or the middle and upper classes, is that the digital grotesque grants Bouzebal's ecosystem a space in which to live because of, or in spite of, their monstrosity.

The online success of *Bouzebal* speaks to the success of stories of the grotesque online. *Bouzebal* remains an internet phenomenon because of a combination of semi-professional-looking drawings, an often anti-politically correct sense of humour, the use of vulgar language, and the unconventional appearance of its characters. As a small production with more than 120 videos, Nassib assumes multiple roles, including writing, drawing, and voicing all the characters. Initially, *Bouzebal* proved to be too grotesque for traditional Moroccan media, yet it thrived online for the same reason. The success in viewership reveals that in its oddity, Nassib connects with his viewers, and his characters resonate with a life with which many are all too familiar. Moreover, the world of the digital grotesque provides a home for *Bouzebal* because its troll aesthetics resonate with its audience. In its grotesque yet simple aesthetics, as occurs in meme culture, Nassib transmits complex messages about how people see themselves in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and so forth.

As Theodor Adorno states in *Aesthetics Theory* (1997), beauty and ugliness have historically performed as exclusionary, elitist, and oppressive categories

forged by the dominant orders and forced on the people. In the late Middle Ages, monstrous representations of Jewish and Muslim communities informed ideas about race and racial difference (Strickland 2003). Articulated as 'dirty natives', colonised bodies have also been described in terms of dirt, disorder, disease, and disgust, thus dehumanising those perceived as strangers (Newell 2016, pp. 7–8). European travellers and traders in the 1920s, US presidents such as Richard Nixon (Press Trust of India 2020) and Donald Trump (Shear and Sullivan 2018), and far-right groups in the digital sphere have all utilised descriptions of physical appearance to dehumanise people and entire communities. Even recent studies on ugliness suggest that monstrosity and abnormality have been used disparagingly against marginalised groups (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018, p. 16).

Perspectives on physical oddity have, however, changed in digital media and are central to meme culture. The success of memes includes the use of premade rage faces where poorly drawn, odd-looking characters such as Trollface or 'Challenged Accepted' are not necessarily meant to humiliate an Other. These peculiar-looking characters constitute expressive forms where their crooked faces are celebrated vis-à-vis the pressure to fulfil standards of beauty, perfection, skilfulness, and success. As in rage faces, physical differences and oddity in *Bouzebal* cannot be reduced to a bigoted attempt to dehumanise the character. Instead, *Bouzebal*'s aesthetics intrude on a highly controlled media landscape free of unprofessionally drawn characters and coarse language to present the ugly reality that national media moguls are not willing to show. This is evidenced by the fact that Nassib had to distribute his animated cartoon online because television channels were not interested in the grotesque world of *Bouzebal*. By revealing social inequalities through the odd-looking and amateurishly drawn renderings of his characters, Nassib conveyed a radical narrative in a time that predates the mainstreaming of meme culture.

Unproper Young Men

Two years after *Bouzebal* appeared online, a group of young urban and unprivileged men emerged on Facebook pages exhibiting what many perceived as the grotesque aesthetics of the unprivileged. These men, referred to as *mcharmlin* (sing. *mcharmel*), a name also given to Mcharmla, appeared displaying distinctive hairstyles such as mohawks or creative haircuts (حلاقة in Arabic). Dressed in tight, faded jeans, wearing fake luxury trademark t-shirts, seemingly expensive watches and jewellery, Adidas flip-flops or expensive sneakers, they were occasionally pictured with bottles of alcohol (expensive in Morocco) or stashes of hashish. Besides their aesthetics, distinctive in their images were also the large knives these men held. This emergent urban subculture acquired its name, *tcharmil*, from these

big butcher's knives. The word *tcharmil* in Moroccan Darija refers to a popular olive oil, garlic, and parsley marinade called *chermoula* that is often used in combination with meat. *Mcharmlin* – meaning those adopting the *tcharmil* style – were immediately associated with lowlife criminal *bouzebals* threatening traditional social mores and the comfort of the middle and upper classes. Through Facebook pages devoted to this style and some associated with cities, towns, or neighbourhoods, *tcharmil* aesthetics flourished across the country.

Beyond social media sites, *tcharmil* took centre stage on Moroccan news in 2014 when a group of young men armed with long knives attacked a luxury hair salon in Casablanca. Soon, viral videos of groups of young men threatening ordinary people in the streets were posted on social media, inciting social concerns and a sense of insecurity. Organised pickpocketing and clashes between football ultras in downtown Casablanca were common occurrences. However, the presence of young people with characteristic haircuts carrying knives endangered the image of safety on which the country prides itself. As the guarantor of social order, the King promptly intervened, with the police launching raids against young men under the banner of Operation Tcharmil. This campaign profiled young males solely based on their physical appearance and proceeded to forcibly shave anyone with such a hairstyle. The purpose was to alter the physical appearance that had granted them visibility and unified them as a group. Videos of police forcefully herding groups of young men into large vans circulated on social media. Local news and international media reported on *tcharmil* as violent gangs. The Spanish newspaper *El Pais* (Casqueiro 2014b) compared *tcharmil* to Latin American *maras* despite the absence of fatalities, violent rituals of initiation to become a *mcharmil*, or any organised hierarchy within this new urban subculture.

Mcharmlin were mostly concerned with acquiring visibility by making the aesthetics of the rich undesirable. These young men rebelled against a system where only the elites can challenge Moroccan mores, such as by drinking alcohol or wearing luxury brands unapologetically. Posing with elements that contravene traditional social expectations of humbleness and sobriety acted as the hook to force people into acknowledging the presence of impoverished youth, as well as the power of elites in rendering them invisible. Seen as undesirable *déchets*, *mcharmlin* looks helped institutions of power not only to perpetuate and justify the social marginalisation of bodies, 'but also to keep those bodies in their subjugated place' (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018, p. 3). In other words, because *mcharmlin* threatened the country's status quo, they needed to be erased from the public eye. However, due to their conspicuous aesthetics, *mcharmlin* forced the country to notice, fear, and desire to know about them.

The persecution of *mcharmlin,* as well as the rejection of *Bouzebal* for distribution on national television, may be viewed through Achille Mbembe's concepts of necropolitics and necropower. These terms shed light onto 'contemporary

forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2003, p. 39). Inspired by Foucault's biopower, which delineates the border between those who live and those who die, Mbembe introduces the idea of a master–slave relationship. In this dynamic, the master, in pursuit of accumulating and retaining power, establishes what Mbembe refers to as death-worlds or deathscapes. Mbembe describes deathscapes as 'a new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*' (2003, p. 40). Borders between the living and the dead are, in Mbembe's words, 'no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate' (2019, p. 3). *Bouzebal* and *Le Guide Casablancais* illustrate these borders between life and death, or deathtraps, through their deformed or zombie-like characters. *Mcharmlin* exemplify the danger to those in power of allowing these undead creatures to escape zombiedom. As monsters roaming their deathscapes, unprivileged citizens are excluded from agency and personhood (Cohen 1996, p. 11) because monstrosity encourages systems of domination and dehumanisation (Botting and Spooner 2015b, p. 2). In this dynamic, the master has the ultimate power to create deathscapes where citizens are forced to live as zombies. The fear of being attacked by the monster or, worse, becoming one compels borders to be policed (Cohen 1996, p. 12). The deathscapes materialise in *Bouzebal* and *Le Casablancais* as poor neighbourhoods and public buses, as well as in the brown technical trainee coats in the memes described in the introduction.

The master's tactic to keep zombies ensnared within their deathtraps includes the strict policing of the boundaries of normality. In Morocco, this prevailing normality is rooted in traditional conservative, social mores. Persecuting those who disturb the status quo by questioning their morality has been a common practice in Morocco. For traditional and conservative sectors of Moroccan society, alcohol, as well as sex outside of marriage, both of which are punishable by law, are associated with the morally depraved, whether these are atheists, leftists, shameless higher classes looking up to the 'West', or lower classes with nothing left to lose. However, the state has often capitalised on these negative perceptions to target journalists, cartoonists, activists, or anyone disturbing the status quo. By focusing on individuals with notoriety and influence, such as journalists, activists, or artists, the state seeks to silence critical voices under the pretext of moral depravity without being overtly authoritarian. In the past, mostly men have been publicly shamed by being caught inebriated in the street as the favoured shaming and social ostracisation tactic. For example, the cartoonist Khalid Gueddar was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison in 2010 for drawing a caricature of the King's cousin. In 2012, Gueddar was again prosecuted for public drunkenness when he was on the verge of launching a satirical magazine. More recently, rapper ElGrande Toto was accused of incitement to drug use during a concert and, later, a press conference (Middle East Online 2022). In 2022, despite often appearing on

Instagram smoking hashish and with bottles of alcohol, the fact that the rapper admitted to a room full of journalists that he uses drugs landed him in jail and unable to perform on stage.

The use of alcohol as a source of public shaming is particularly intriguing due to the confusing regulations surrounding it in Morocco. An unclear law from 1967 forbids selling or offering alcohol to Moroccan Muslims. Since there is no way to provide evidence of one's religion (other countries in the region, for example Egypt, explicitly state religious affiliation on the national identity card), interpreting the law is difficult. Debates among political parties regarding the need to change the law have been ongoing since the 2010s, and they gained momentum in 2022 amid a reform of the penal code (Bouanani 2022). The consumption of drugs and alcohol is often kept hidden in accordance with Islam's precepts against consuming these substances. This includes television programmes and films, where drugs and alcohol are mostly absent. Despite this complex relationship with alcohol, an article in the French edition of the *Middle East Eye* claims that one hundred million litres of alcohol are consumed in Morocco per year (Bouanani 2022). To be sure, drugs and alcohol are part of the country's daily life, at least for some, but they exist as a part of the unspoken and the unseen.

With time, moral codes have mutated, and the state has taken advantage of global online movements such as #metoo to persecute uncomfortable voices. Since 2016, accusations of rape or sex trafficking have been increasingly employed against journalists with the purpose of pitting activists against each other. Several Moroccan male journalists have, in recent years, been accused of such crimes, including Soulaimane Raissouni, former editor of the newspaper أخبار اليوم (*Akhbar al Yaoum*), one of the few newspapers that challenge the state's authority in its reports, and journalist and activist Omar Radi. Radi had been under surveillance since 2017; he has been harassed and persecuted for a number of offences, including tweets against Morocco's judicial system and espionage for foreign intelligence. In July 2020, Radi was accused of sexually assaulting one of his co-workers at *Le Desk*, a news website he had co-founded. His colleague, journalist Imad Stitou, was also arrested and convicted of complicity in the rape allegedly perpetrated by Radi. Human rights groups have contested the case against Radi as a fabrication aimed at silencing another critical journalist in Morocco (Stauffer 2022). Particularly significant is that feminist groups such as Khmissa (2020) used Twitter to express their concerns about the instrumentalisation of women's struggles to attack independent journalists. These public cases prove the adaptability of moral codes, where the state sets new boundaries of acceptability, substituting social marginalisation for alcohol consumption with social death by rape. The state relies on deeply rooted beliefs on what is locally morally acceptable at the same time as it designs new forms of humiliation based on global digital movements. Public cases

against journalists show that jail or, in some cases, exile may be the only option for those who refuse to be silent. As activist Afaf Bernani told a journalist at the *New York Review* (Lindsey 2021), the result is a 'symbolic assassination' that aims at stripping 'its targets of international solidarity and makes them pariahs in their own communities, shunned by friends and family who are either embarrassed or afraid to be associated with them' (Lindsey 2021). In the aforementioned cases, the state seeks to lead both Raissouni and Radi into zombiedom not only by forcing them to disappear into invisibility and silence, but also by humiliating them to the point their voices are as good as dead.

In a similar way, journalist Hajar Raissouni, who was accused, detained, and tried for an allegedly having an abortion, claimed that '[c]harges which relate to morality aim at a form of symbolic murder because they involve a loss of reputation' (Saleh 2020). Raissouni is known for her reporting on the Hirak Rif Movement (2016–17), the largest social movement in the country since the Arab Spring. She works for the newspaper *Akhbar al Yaoum*, and her uncle is Soulaimane Raissouni; they are associated with the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), the leading Islamist Party. In 2019, at the age of 28, Hajar Raissouni, along with her fiancé, her doctor, an anaesthesiologist, and the doctor's secretary, were detained on charges of performing an abortion. Her case was part of a defamation campaign aimed at undermining the political capital of the PJD, which had also targeted important members of the party who were 'caught' having extramarital affairs (Boechat 2016). Despite the defence proving that there had been neither an abortion nor a pregnancy, Raissouni was incarcerated and subsequently released only after a royal pardon was issued several months later. By interfering with the borders between private and public life, the state shifted the focus from her reporting to her perceived moral transgression, a matter of particular significance to those affiliated with and voting for an Islamist party. The scandal sought to zombify Raissouni by killing her career as a journalist as well as her reputation, and, by extension, diminishing the power of PJD members by exposing their lack of morality. A similar case of social assassination was employed in the case of the Chinese civil rights activist Chen Guangcheng. In 2010, the notorious activist and his family were condemned to house arrest, which prevented all contact with anyone through phone or social media. His name was censored online to increase his social isolation, a particularly cruel measure since Guangcheng has been blind since he was a child.

In disturbing 'normality', *mcharmlin*, but also *Bouzebal*, *Le Guide Casablancais*, and the memes mentioned in the introduction, challenge traditional and conservative social mores as well as the country's laws. As Julia Kristeva claims, '[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982, p. 4). Exhibiting weapons, alcohol, or drugs,

which each of these real or fictional characters have done at some point,[3] does not, however, seem to justify the King's intervention and Operation Tcharmil. Moral panics connected *mcharmlin*'s aesthetics with masses of uncontrollable groups of young men carrying knives, drinking alcohol, and taking drugs, boasting of the danger they pose but also their immoral attitudes in the public sphere, whether these be the streets or on social media. The role of a monstrous physical appearance in constructing violent, drug-consuming, uncontrollable youth disturbing the country's social order is obvious from the extreme actions of Operation Tcharmil, which violated youths' bodies to change their aesthetics. René Girard (1986) claims that there is a mythological tendency to merge moral and physical monstrosities to justify the persecution of the monster. From this perspective, performances of ugliness or abnormality not only communicate an attribute but also convey a moral failing and an absence of value in the predominant social order (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018, p. 16). Socially killing journalists, political opponents, or unprivileged youth proves effective to drain of social capital anyone who disturbs the country's status quo, thus leading them into a living dead state.

Embracing the Zombie

The concept of the zombie bestows grotesque public exhibitions of morally reprehensible actions with the double function of driving the victim to the social death, and it also exposes a murderous system. The *zombi*, with a distinct spelling from the popular cinematic zombie, was born in Haiti as a form of sorcery in which the dead return at night to continue their work as slaves. Haitian zombis, bred within the horrors of the Haitian experience of slavery, colonialism, and revolt, were then turned into zombies by Hollywood. With the change in spelling, these undead creatures metamorphosed into violent, human flesh-eating, ugly, disordered, heartless, sluggish, and unintelligent monsters. As shown in the films of George Romero, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the monster became less about Black slavery and more about a

> varied signifier capable of incarnating fears of diseases and the body's vulnerability, the uncertainty of life after death, the susceptibility of the polis to outside influences, the fragility of law and order in the face of widespread chaos, and … the rapacious hunger of a capitalistic and increasingly corporate society, but also much, much more. (Lauro 2017b, p. x)

In migrating into popular culture and imaginaries, zombies have been shaped by the legacies of slavery, empire, capitalism, automatisation, and control. Despite

[3] See Chapter 5 for the case of alcohol bottles and memes.

their evolution, zombies, like other monsters, have always been able to speak to opposing narratives: they can be a symbol of slavery or slave rebellion while embodying both power and powerlessness simultaneously (Lauro and Embry 2008, p. 98).

In Morocco, the King's speech in August 2019 revealed the ruling elite's aim to zombify the nation by curbing the actions of individuals who, in spite of systematic socio-economic hurdles, had found worth and gained notoriety. Crossing the borders between death and life, the memes that responded to the speech suggested, is not encouraged by the state. Memes have the capacity to denounce this zombiedom by drawing on the familiar and prevalent culture of humiliation or *hogra*, which resonates with the audience. In order to criticise the master, the memes, as seen with *Bouzebal* and *Le Casablancais*, engage with the narratives used by the state to create these deathtraps: deformity, unpleasant odours, and claustrophobic spaces. In zombiedoms, masters and monsters become interchangeable categories that can be applied to powerful elites when they exert power through fear of persecution, or to unprivileged people when they use their monstrous condition to threaten the elites. In this sense, deathscapes are fluid and have open borders.

In the realm of zombies, Tatiana Prorokova asks who emerges triumphant in the battle between being dead or alive: 'are zombies – dead humans or living monsters? And what side prevails in these creatures – humanity or monstrosity?' (2019, p. 148). In their *Zombie Manifesto,* Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry (2008, p. 94) claim that while Deleuze and Guattari (1987) discuss monsters such as zombies, vampires, and werewolves as 'becomings', they identify the zombie primarily as an 'unbecoming'. A zombie in this sense is a neither/nor rather than an either/or: 'It is not hybrid such as a cyborg, or a pure object: It is a paradox that disrupts the entire system' (Lauro and Embry 2008, p. 94). However, the tendency to disrupt the system is intended to support the status quo, as Stephen King argues in his book *Danse Macabre* (1993). According to King, monstrosity reaffirms the human craving for order in favour of the status quo:

> Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us. We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings … and let me further suggest that it is not the physical or mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which these aberrations seem to imply. (1993, pp. 55–6)

Through their incoherent and deformed bodies, monsters resist any attempt to be part of a systematic structuration (Cohen 1996, p. 6). But in inhabiting and policing the liminal space between life and death, the monster also 'prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through

which private bodies may move. To step outside of this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself' (Cohen 1996, p. 12).

By changing the aesthetics of *mcharmlin*, the police hoped to disempower already unprivileged young men by dispossessing them of their monstrosity, effectively rendering them invisible citizens again. In policing young people's aesthetics, the King, the state, and its armed forces, in collaboration with the middle and upper classes, assumed the role of the monster controlling the borders of the living. It is important to note that while imagining unprivileged Moroccans as grotesque bodies may be argued as an act of self-hatred, within the creative cultural artefacts discussed in this book, the master has already been infected and converted into a monster. In the act of illustrating, delimitating, and revealing the lines of the otherwise concealed construction of the Other, the meaning and signifiers of the grotesque have been changed. This ambivalence is revealed in the interplay of the King's speech and the resulting memes, where the masters and monsters coexisted within all participants who aimed to guarantee the established order, the former by zombifying young unprivileged people and the latter by looking down on technical professions.

In depicting the poor as the monstrous, however, *Bouzebal* and *Le Casablancais* can be interpreted as potentially reinforcing the humiliation that is being denounced. As happened with the memes discussed at the start of this chapter, depicting the unprivileged as a monster runs the risk of falling into the trap of mocking those whose careers are considered as socially inferior. In mocking stereotypical images of unprivileged youth, *Bouzebal* and *Le Casablancais* not only make visible borders between the living and the dead, but arguably also perpetuate physical perceptions meant to dehumanise and humiliate others. As a monster, a character such as Bouzebal 'reveals' but also perpetuates and arguably reinforces established categories that link ugliness with poverty, depravity, and unintelligence. The word *bouzebal*, a decade after the first episode of the show was aired, still carries negative connotations. As a noun, it has yet to be embraced and adopted as a sign of pride or discarded altogether as it is attached to its origins of waste, both physically and socially. In other words, *bouzebal* shows neither compassion nor an understanding that the system has failed them, but it is a word that signals the young poor as useless and as 'waste'. Ultimately, *bouzebal* continues to be an undesirable category in the same way memes that mock the King's speech stigmatise technical trainees, as it continues to inspire further subcategories such as the *tcharmil*.

Looking at this form through a different lens, Adorno claims that the role of ugliness in art is to 'denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation' (1997, pp. 48–9). Adorno

considers such an aesthetic choice a political statement with which to make the socially marginalised visible and carry their voices. While ugly depictions can, at times, perpetuate othering and marginalisation, Adorno argues that even if there is the possibility of losing empathy with the marginalised, 'in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image' (Adorno 1997, pp. 48–9). Przybylo and Rodrigues agree with Adorno, claiming that 'as much as ugliness does irreducible harm to bodies at the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, age, body size, health, and sexuality, it also creates instances of self-articulation and self-affirmation in the face of narrowing and ever-precise standards of normative appearance' (2018, p. 20). Exemplifying this perspective, the case of an Egyptian demonstrator losing an eye, Maria Malmström (2019) suggests, may lead to depression and anxiety not only because of the result of an alternative face structure, but because of its connection with the failed revolution. However, after the depression Kamal, as he is called in Malmström's account, finds in his lost eye a source of empowerment to continue.

In deciphering performances involving dirt, excrement, and marginality as acts of empowerment, Moulay Driss El Maarouf (2014) advocates for what he calls *excrementality*. Looking at music festivals in Morocco through Kristeva's notion of the abject, El Maarouf explores excrementality as a form of coping in an asphyxiating ecosystem: 'The subject, we might argue, performs his marginality and abjectness, thereby – paradoxically – formulating moments of agency by way of depicting self as shit' (El Maarouf 2016, p. 332). Through this notion, dirt at music festivals allows for flows of affect that empower ordinary people to embody and resist marginality. Even though this may perpetuate stereotypes that confine the country's impoverished, those forced into zombiedom can attain visibility by taking advantage of social media's affordances and taste for the grotesque. The triumph of amateurish content online has granted visibility to the undead, and, as Frueh argues, with being seen comes attention, which 'is politically appealing because those who are seen get a chance to be heard' (2001, p. 25).

For 'trash' to become 'excrementality', *Bouzebal*, *Le Casablancais*, and the memes mentioned in this narrative need to be obvious and even exaggerate their interplay with stereotypes. Memes portraying famous personalities in brown coats were striking because of their oddity. It is highly improbable to see a football star donning a Moroccan vocational trainee uniform, unless, of course, it were to became a fashion trend. Within this oddity lies the contempt with which society at large perceives technical training, at least in Morocco. However, it is from this common understanding of oddity, of matter out-of-place, that memes are able to raise questions about the ways in which the state creates deathtraps and how to defy these zombiedoms. Similarly, by depicting the self as *bouzebal*, the show is able to cross the borders between being socially marginalised and a state of being essentially dead to not only live but also

thrive. By characterising and perpetuating ordinary people as dead, at least socially, their lives, and in turn their threat to the social order, are extinguished. As *living* dead, however, Bouzebal, *mcharmlin*, or technical trainees might find in their condition as grotesque monsters the possibility not only of inciting fear and desire, but also of exposing and possibly challenging a murderous system. After all, Haiti's anti-colonial revolution (1791–1804) against French colonial rule was won by self-liberated slaves.

A Grotesque Visibility

The Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa, in his book *Vivre a Ta Lumière* (2022), takes a stand in favour of the Darija word *zmel* or *zamel* (lit. effeminate). This word is currently employed as a pejorative insult to refer to someone as homosexual. Towards the end of the book, Malika, who represents Taïa's mother in the novel, encounters Jaâfar, a gay thief who breaks into Malika's house to steal from her. In a poignant conversation between Malika and Jaâfar, Jaâfar explains that Malika needs to use the Moroccan word *zmel* to refer to her son as gay. In a book originally written in French, Malika asserts that the only word that exists in Darija is a dirty word ('*C'est un mot sale*') and an insult, and she cannot use it to refer to her son. Jaâfar replies:

> Mais tu dois utiliser le mot. 'Zamel'. Il n'y a que ce mot. Ton fils est dans ce mot. Moi aussi je suis dans ce mot. Tu veux qu'il revienne et tu ne veux même prononcer le mot qui le désigne … . Si tu le dis toi, Malika, ce mot ne sera plus sale (2022, p. 190).
>
> But you need to use this word. 'Zamel.' There is only this word. Your son is in this word. But I'm also in this word. You want him to come back but you do not want even to pronounce this word that names him … . If you say it Malika, the word will no longer be dirty.

In this passage, the writer provides an opportunity to discuss the implications of gaining visibility through what has been constructed as dirt. While *zamel* is indeed employed in Morocco as an insult, in this passage, through Jafaâr, Taïa contends that when spoken by a loving mother, the word will no longer carry its derogatory, or dirty, connotation. In her participation in a reality that she would rather ignore, Jafaâr claims, her estranged son will return to her. Because 'dirty words' are the only words available (*Il n'y a que ce mot*), Jafaâr and Taïa refuse to give in to the erasure of gayness. As a gay man himself, Taïa would rather embody dirt than become invisible, which is why his novels often recount his own experience as a Moroccan Muslim gay man. The author chooses to exist, even if this means living as an outcast. In Taïa's argument, once the grotesque is embodied by those who pronounce those words with the love of a mother towards her son, the word might stand a chance to lose its derogatory meaning (*Si tu le dis toi, Malika,*

ce mot ne sera plus sale). These words will bring forward those who have had to remain unseen. For Taïa, who recounts in other autobiographic novels how peers referred to him as '*zamel*', writing the word always in Darija, in spite of writing the rest of the text in French, is an act of agency. Even if Taïa's existence means living as a monster, why wouldn't he own this word that, despite its grotesqueness, allows him to claim his existence? Without suggesting that the use of derogatory words should be encouraged, *zamel* and *Bouzebal* simultaneously exemplify the deathtrap, as well as the resistance to social death, by fighting back and possibly changing words and images that perpetuate the zombiedom.

Characters such as Bouzebal, as well as derogatory memes of technical trainees, raise similar questions to those posed by Taïa: what are the implications of depicting and naming the marginal as socially dead, zombies, or dirt? To what extent does the insult become less about setting up a deathscape and more about exhibiting and denouncing a reality (through words or images) that would otherwise be nameless or invisible? Does the grotesque work for or contribute to resisting the deathscape? What happens when the system is exposed? How does the master control the deathtrap? While being called a *bouzebal* or *zmel* is far from desirable, the rise of Tcharmil Facebook pages, the triumph of YouTube animated cartoons, and memes' reactions to the words of the elites provide open spaces for those presupposed as dead to be alive. Grotesque images and languages, as perverse as they may be, provide refuge to those at the losing end of the culture of *hogra*. Capitalising on the digital realm's taste for grotesque content, the unseen gain agency through their monstrous traits. It is within our power, Taïa suggests, to de-uglify our language and, in turn, our condition of living. This process is undertaken by those (Malika, but also Mohammed Nassib and digital participants) willing to critically employ words and images with the aim of re-humanising those whom the words name, and in turn of exposing a heinous system. Through the perspective of abnormality, Chapter 5 addresses these questions by zooming in on the borders of zombiedoms that determine who should be persecuted.

5

Policing the Borders of Abnormality

The potential for perpetuating monstrosity arises when monsters thrive in disturbing *normality*, challenging the perceived normative order of things. In *The Scapegoat* (1986), René Girard argues that abnormality – whether it manifests physically or in any area of existence and behaviour – becomes a determining factor for who will be persecuted. The greater the deviation from the perceived norm, the higher the risk of persecution (1986, p. 18). While this abnormal category is typically thought to be defined by lack of privilege, elites can also be considered as 'matter out of place', or an out-of-the-ordinary group. The prism of abnormality uncomfortably amalgamates those who stand out, whether due to their lack of privilege or precisely because they accumulate an extraordinary amount of privilege. Such a connection suggests that the people enjoy a certain power over the elites. In fact, as Girard asserts, especially in times of crisis, the people may be inclined to strip the masters of their power: 'Crowds commonly turn on those who originally held exceptional power over them' (Girard 1986, p. 19). Consequently, the privileged masters live in fear that their power may be overruled by the monstrous crowd. This perspective of abnormality informs the analysis in this chapter to explore the borders of extreme binary categories, such as rich and poor or ugly and beautiful, that 'ultimately attract destruction' (Girard 1986, p. 19). Within this analytical framework, this chapter delves into the role of digital culture in policing and negotiating the fear of persecution directed towards the abnormal, whether they are the people or the ruling and economic elites.

In Morocco, fear of the ruling elites is referred to as *hiba* (هيبة) or *hibat addawla* (هيبة الدولة). *Hibat* is translated as looking imposing, and inspiring fear and respect, but the word's literal meaning is deference. The notion of *hibat addawla* is significant because it helps to protect the authority and power of the rulers. In his book *Master and Disciple* (1997), Abdellah Hammoudi argues that symbolic violence or ongoing forms of terror have helped to internalise this fear of the state. Fear, according to Hammoudi (1997, p. viii), is generated by the coercive apparatus seeking to undermine what Kristeva calls the *corps propre*, intimately connecting *hiba* to the culture of *hogra* (humiliation, contempt). Kristeva's famous wordplay

corps propre carries a dual meaning in French that translates as one's own body and as one's clean body. Fear of polluting the *corps propre* reveals the masters' anxiety about being dispossessed of their privilege, just as ordinary people hold the power to threaten the master. In this context, the people gather as a group with symbolic power articulated as the *woulad cha3b* (pl. *weld cha3b*), which means, in Arabic, 'sons of the people'. Belonging to the *woulad cha3b* sets one apart from the vicious political and economic elites and constructs the unprivileged masses as a group capable of undermining the master. In becoming *woulad cha3b*, one is no longer ordinary and therefore belongs to the empowered crowd. These borders of belonging to these powerful abnormal groups, whether the masters or the people, are not always clearly defined, as we will explore.

This chapter examines what it means to cross the boundaries of monstrosity, what Girard terms as abnormality, and contemplates the interchangeability and sometimes complementarity of monsters and masters. With a focus on politics and aesthetics, this chapter analyses the role of digital culture in evoking and negotiating fear of the monster, whether this fear is directed towards the elite or the people. At the same time, it explores the construction of borders, whether these be between the people and the elites or between art and politics. In understanding digital culture within and beyond what has been labelled as artivism, this chapter looks at how the people have employed social media networks and digital artefacts to frighten the elites. This power, as the chapter suggests, is present not only when creating and sharing memes, but also within online 'objects', as in the case of the bottle meme (Figure 8). In the hands of netizens, the bottle meme has become vibrant matter (Bennett 2010) effective in warning of and policing content that might cross the lines of acceptability and legality. Furthermore, working together with the culture of *hogra*, fear in digital culture implies the emergence of new memes that aid in policing and warning users about the borders of monstrosity.

This chapter begins by narrating the waves of persecution triggered by online criticism of the monarchy. Such persecution illustrates what is at stake for those who threaten the overwhelming power of the ruling elites, as well as the anxieties these elites harbour about losing their power to ordinary citizens. The chapter then examines the case of three rappers who were detained and incarcerated in 2019 as part of a wave of persecution. Initially representing the voice of the people,

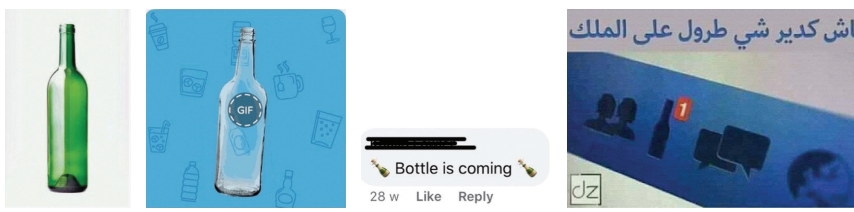

Figure 8 Four bottle memes shared by participants in Facebook comment sections.

one of the rappers eventually professed allegiance to the monarch to avoid imprisonment. Amid the deluge of online content threatening the control of the ruling elites, the chapter discusses a specific meme that has emerged to warn netizens in comment sections about the potential risk of offending the master. The chapter concludes by showcasing a successful instance of collective action against the elites wherein normality is embodied by the people. This section discusses the economic boycott that transpired in Morocco during 2018 and the implications that this boycott had in stimulating conversations on the fluidity of fear and the borders of abnormality.

Online Surveillance and Persecution

By the end of the 2010s, a growing body of research underscored the undeniable evidence that our digital lives are subject to surveillance, whether for political control or economic gain (see Zuboff 2019). The practice of surveillance is, of course, not exclusive to the digital era. Especially in places with high levels of authoritarianism, the daily lives of ordinary people are marked by the omnipresent gaze of the state, actively surveying and nurturing a culture of mistrust and fear. Particularly across North Africa and the Middle East (El-Issawi 2016; Lynch *et al.* 2016; Shaery-Eisenlohr 2011; Smith and Loudiy 2005; Zaid 2016), the practice of surveillance of daily life is well documented and reminds citizens of the ubiquitous power of the state. Tactics include state agents visiting activists' family members, tapping phones, and, most recently, installing spyware software in mobile phones (see Privacy International 2015). The fear of being surveilled has permeated online platforms, particularly during the uprisings in North Africa in 2010–11 when surveillance on social media was an undeniable reality (Moreno-Almeida and Banaji 2019).

Online news websites, journalists, and activists have particularly suffered from this form of persecution and such fear-inducing strategies by the Moroccan state. In 2012, the blog Mamfakinch was hacked using Hacking Team spyware. Mamfakinch was founded and operated by activists associated with the 20th of February movement.[1] Hisham Almiraat, one of the founders of Mamfakinch, claimed that the primary reason the page ceased its activity was fear of surveillance:

> Repressive regimes have understood that the internet is not something to be left in the hands of citizens. They realised censorship is pretty obvious and so those companies are offering them a magic toy that instil fear among people and lead them to self-censorship. The very thought of being surveilled led people to decide by themselves to withdraw. (Privacy International 2015, p. 20)

[1] The 20th of February movement is a pro-democracy movement that emerged from the 2010–11 protests across North Africa and the Middle East and from there spread globally.

The consequences of surveillance technology, Almiraat argues, include eroded trust, diminished engagement, and discouragement of the use of the internet as a tool for self-expression. The team working at Mamfakinch gradually left the media outlet out of fear (Privacy International 2015). Years later, in 2020, Omar Radi, a journalist and activist associated with the 20th of February movement, discovered that his mobile phone had been hacked. Following the analysis of Radi's phone, Amnesty International's Security Lab determined that the device had traces of surveillance technology developed by Israeli spyware company NSO Group (Amnesty International 2022). As detailed in Chapter 4, that same year, Omar Radi was accused of rape and is still serving jail time at the time of writing.

Ordinary citizens in Morocco have also been targeted based on their social media activity. In 2008, Fouad Mourtada was sentenced to three years in jail for creating a satirical Facebook profile using the name of the King's brother. Although he received a royal pardon shortly after the incident, it is important to note that the 2011 Constitution and legal codes in Morocco clearly prohibit insulting the King or the royal family.[2] In 2012, Walid Bahomane, who was just 18 years old at the time, was accused of 'defaming Morocco's sacred values' for posting pictures and videos on Facebook that mocked King Mohammed VI. That same year, another young man was sentenced to three years in jail for posting a video online insulting the King. The online response to Bahomane's incarceration took the form of the Facebook group titled 'Mohammed VI, ma liberté est plus sacrée que toi' (Mohammed VI, my freedom is more sacred than you). This page encouraged members to defy the master's sacredness by posting caricatures of the King. Although the page existed until 2019 (last accessed on 16 January 2019), it was relatively inactive, with most of its content posted during the first months of 2012. It is no coincidence that detentions peaked in 2012 as part of the contingency strategy to supress the uprisings that had engulfed the region since December 2010. This Facebook page is noteworthy because it capitalised on the same language that the monarchy used to assert its special (and abnormal) status as 'sacred' (removed in the 2011 Constitution but present in previous charters) to challenge the master's privilege.

After 2012, punishments for online mockery of the monarchy diminished. However, a new wave of persecution targeting digital participants occurred in autumn 2019. In 2019, the cultural association Racines was ordered to be dissolved because it hosted an episode of the show '*1 dîner 2 cons*',[3] broadcast on YouTube, where some of the guests criticised the political measures enacted by

[2] Article 46 of the 2011 Constitution states: 'The person of the King is inviolable, and respect is due to Him.'

[3] The name of the show plays on words reverberating in the French film *Un dîner des cons* (lit. the diner of fools), transformed here as '1 diner 2 fools'.

the King. The court argued that Racines violated the law that forbids associations to perform activities outside their scope. Accordingly, as Racines was a cultural association, it was prohibited from engaging in political activities. This case serves as a stark reminder to those operating in the cultural domain to stay away from explicitly political content, especially when it involves criticising the monarchy. Additionally, this case is noteworthy because it is uncommon for the state to prosecute a cultural association in court.

That same year, well-known YouTuber Moul Kasketa (literally the owner of the hat) was arrested and sentenced to four years in jail following the release of a video in which he complained about the King (*H24info* 2019). Born Mohamed Sekkaki, the influencer claimed that the monarch's speeches had not materialised into tangible action. However, his arrest was influenced by the fact that Sekkaki had previously insulted Moroccans for their inaction and for their tendency, as he claimed, to follow like sheep, an offence punishable by law. The YouTuber has also faced charges for drug possession, scamming, and sexual extortion (see Chapter 4). In addition to journalists, activists, and influencers, the 2019 campaign against netizens also included ordinary people. This new wave of detentions became so aggressive that alongside hashtags in support of specific individuals, the hashtag #FreeKoulchi (Free everyone) emerged to encompass all those who had been detained in the online crackdown. Alongside the hashtag, black and white memes with pictures and personal details of those detained were shared on social media sites. This surge of state-induced terror for criticisms expressed online coincided with a revitalisation of anti-establishment protests not only in Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, but also in places such as Hong Kong and Chile, among many others.

A few years earlier, in 2016–17, the Rif Movement, or Hirak Rif in the North of Morocco, had gained momentum. Protests at the time included those over the lack of an oncological hospital in the region and the death of Mouhcine Fikri in 2016. The need for an oncology unit is connected to Spanish colonial experiments that left the inhabitants of the region with high rates of cancer. Meanwhile, a video of Fikri's death was quickly disseminated online, showing the moment when the fishmonger was crushed and killed in a garbage truck while attempting to retrieve his fish; earlier, the police had confiscated Fikri's fish and thrown it in the garbage truck, accusing him of illegal commerce. Mass arrests in the Rif, including of its main leaders such as Nasser Zefzafi in 2017, and protests in the mining town of Jerada in 2018, demonstrated that social mobilisations had been reignited by the so-called Arab Winter (see Chapter 1).

These waves of prosecutions reminded and warned citizens and online participants of the limits of criticism as well as the power of the omnipresent state. If the state were to exceed a given level of prosecution, the image of progress and development the country strives to convey would be disrupted. Selected persecution during a particular critical moment allows the state to send clear messages

to ordinary citizens: persecution of those who deviate from the borders of normality, that is, those who do not respect the country's red lines, can occur at any time. In 2019, the country experienced a period of relative leniency where meme pages and satirical content involving the King had become part of the Moroccan memesphere (more in Chapter 7). However, it was then time to send a reminder of the fear that could be induced, directed at a younger, tech-savvy generation that had grown up under King Mohammed VI's narrative of change, democracy, and human rights.

Long Live the People

The fear-inducing strategy unfolded in the autumn of 2019, when two rappers were arrested. The rappers Simo lGnawi, Weld L'Griya, and LZ3er released their song and music video titled '3acha Cha3b' (Long Live the People, 2019) on YouTube. While the first two rappers were arrested, the third eluded prosecution p for reasons that remain unclear. The lyrics of the song engage with themes that denounce youth struggles and the country's malaise, themes often voiced by other rappers or in chants at football stadiums. What sets this song apart, however, is that it explicitly blames the royal family and holds them responsible for people's grievances, employing metaphors and playing with language referring to and insulting the monarch. For example, in his verse, Weld L'Griya plays with the ordinal number sixth, in reference to Mohammed VI, singing:

> كلبنا سادسنا... حاكمنا ضالمنا
> Our dog is our sixth, our ruler is our oppressor

This sentence also references a story that appears in the Sura al-Kahf (The Cave) (18:22) of the Quran. This passage mentions a number of companions, possibly four or five, with the sixth being the dog.[4] In the song, Weld L'Griya also refers to the King as the emir of addicts (أمير المدمنين). Al Mudminin (المدمنين), meaning the addicts, is derived from the root *damina* (دمن), which means to intoxicate. This term is using wordplay with the King's title, Amir Al Mu'minin (أمير المؤمنين), meaning the leader of the faithful. The rapper continues to insult the King by changing the country's motto 'God, the Nation, The King' to 'God, the nation, and the third has to go' ('الله الوطن، الثالث يمشي').

[4] سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَٰثَةٌ رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًا بِالْغَيْبِ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ قُل رَّبِّيٓ أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِم مَّا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَآءً ظَٰهِرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِم مِّنْهُمْ أَحَدًا (They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog – guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], 'My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone.') (From the Sahih International English translation of the Quran).

The three rappers allude to the culture of fear in a hashtag added to the description of the YouTube video. The hashtag says in Arabic #لا_تخف_ان_الله_معنا (Do not fear because God is with us). The song also includes references to fear in one line that says:

خسرنا معاكم العمر.. مابقاش ليا علاش نخاف
We lost a lifetime with you, there is no reason left to be afraid

Attacks against the monarchy are evident from the title of the song. The phrase *3acha cha3b* (Long Live the People) stands in direct opposition to demonstrations of reverence to the King through the phrase *3ach Lmalik* (Long Live the King). During anti-colonial rule demonstrations, protesters held banners on which they had written 'Long live Islam!', 'Long live Morocco!', and 'Long live the Sultan!" (Geertz cited in Entelis 1989, p. 57). Together with the title, parts of the lyrics and the hashtag encouraged people to fight for themselves and not for the monarchy, in spite of a culture of fear. The song, with its insulting lyrics and clever wordplay that targets the King, along with a title that praises the power of the people, crossed the boundaries of acceptability. The music video had a significant impact: by 13 January 2023, it had accumulated over 40 million views on YouTube since its release on 29 October 2019. This underscores the fragility of the monarchy in the hands of three relatively unknown rappers. Their detention had a double effect: it sent a message that the digital sphere was policed, but it also provided the rappers and their song with exposure to a broader audience.

While the song was problematic due to its explicit lyrics, it was effective beyond its radical lyrics because of its aesthetics. In 2019, there were numerous examples of Moroccan music videos that were professionally shot, edited, and colour corrected. This video, however, employed a relatively crude production, showing three unsophisticated-looking rappers sitting in a dimly lit room. Its amateurish quality helped bestow credibility on the rappers as members of the *woulad cha3b* (sing. *weld cha3b*), that is, the abnormal, underprivileged sons of people. The music video's primary shot shows the three rappers sitting back to back in a dark room. Each one takes centre stage as they sing their own verses. Shots of the two rappers who were detained, lGnawi and Weld L'Griya, intersect when they are rapping their verses, showing their naked torsos with cuts and wounds which evoke the signs of torture. Throughout the video, superimposed over the main images, is a filter resembling graph paper on which squares and symbols randomly appear. Furthermore, the video is framed on the sides by a white smoke effect, infusing the entire clip with an atmosphere of fantasy. Far from a carefully curated video and a mindful selection of their outfits, the limited number of shots and the technical constraints render the video's appearance unprofessional and lacking in production resources. This deliberate lack of interest in aesthetics contrasts the highly political message.

In deciphering the politics of artivism, Aldo Milohnic (2005, p. 7) argues that the primary goal behind political theatre, songs, and other expressions is not to create an aesthetic, but rather a political effect. Drawing on studies of amateur actors in theatre (Eagleton 1985; Ridout 2003), Milohnic considers that when an activist engages in creative or cultural performance they are 'not an artist, but he/she is still not without a "knack for art;" an activist is an artist as much as is inevitable, no more and no less; the artisanship is a side effect of a political act' (2005, p. 7). An activist, however, may only be conceived as an amateur activist (artivist) because, beyond their lack of concern for aesthetics, they also express disrespectful attitudes towards political, social, or legal grand narratives. In finding themselves between the world of art and politics, artivists are capable of posing those naïve questions that are seldom heard in parliament or asked by professional politicians (Milohnic 2005, p. 7).

From this perspective, the song '3acha Cha3b' undeniably has a political effect in narrating memories of suffering and preserving them within the digital archive, as evidenced by its continued presence on YouTube. However, a lack of engagement with aesthetics and artistry can also suggest an artistic choice that amplifies the idea that indifference to aesthetics can function as a political message. In this sense, grotesque aesthetics do not necessarily denote a lack of interest in art, as Milohnic suggests, but may be an artistic choice that contributes to emphasising the authenticity of the rappers as *woulad cha3b* and enhances the song's political impact. This suggests that an apparent disregard for aesthetics can serve as a political statement, embodying the essence of the concept of the digital grotesque. As such, the perception of carelessness prompts the audience to identify these rappers as victims of the system they are denouncing, increasing their credibility and that of the song's message. The three rappers' aesthetics, which are unpolished, rapidly made, and 'ugly', form a sphere of resonance, aligning them with other unprivileged young men rather than with the trendy and flashy aesthetics of affluent artists. With a recent past of persecution based on the aesthetics of the *tcharmil* style (Chapter 4), unprofessional videos and images capitalise on the credibility that these images bestow to make the title of the song '3acha Cha3b' (Long Live the People) even more poignant. Their appearance reaffirms their membership not only of the people versus the elites, but affectively connects them to groups of dispossessed people, emulating Bouzebal or the *mcharmlin* discussed in Chapter 4.

Viewed through the lens of horror, aesthetics denotes not *hiba* (fear) so much as disgust towards the ruling elites. As Adriana Cavarero suggests, 'more than fear, horror has to do with repugnance' (2011, p. 7). As the lyrics claim, there is no reason to be afraid, but what the song conveys through the lens of the digital grotesque is an aversion to a leader who has failed the people. Images and lyrics suggest that the rappers do not simply intend to symbolically kill because, as Cavarero claims, killing would not be enough (2011, p. 8).

The intent is to 'destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability. What is at stake is not the end of human life but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies' (2011, p. 8). The song and video show a society and a leader not under threat of being socially killed, but something worse: being violently disfigured, dismembered, and abhorred, even if only symbolically.

The release of this song and the detention of two of the rappers prompted a memetic frenzy. This time, however, it was the King who responded to the people through a fictionalised persona created by witty memers. Some memes portrayed the King searching for, or replying to, the disloyal rappers. One meme shows King Mohammed VI at a cybercafé wearing a set of headphones and pointing at a computer screen. The caption of the picture reads 'عاجل محمد سيكس سجل كوبلي ديالو باشيجاوب ولد لكرية ولغناوي ولزعر تسناو الكليب من القصر' (Breaking News: Mohammed VI has recorded his verse to answer Weld L'Griya, LGnawi and LZ3ar. Wait for the clip from the palace). The meme imagines a King willing to invest his time in a rap feud employing the same tools to answer those who had challenged him. Interestingly, the meme was posted again in February 2021 when Moroccan rappers were feuding with their Algerian counterparts (see Chapter 3), showing the transformation and storytelling abilities of meme culture.

Although this meme may seem to diminish the King by placing him as the target of a rap battle, it also portrays him as capable of engaging with the rappers, speaking the language of the people. By engaging with the rappers on their terms, the King appears to be fearless as well as skilled in knowing how to fight back. This grants the monarch an important dose of authenticity. Instead of inhabiting a passive space of weakness where the ruler is simply the target of the people's mockery, memers bestow enough street credibility among youth on the King for him to be one of the *woulad cha3b*. This credibility is reinforced by another version of this meme in which the King sides with Moroccan rappers battling their Algerian counterparts. This second meme solidifies the monarch as the leader and defender not only of the entire nation but also, most importantly, of young people. Ultimately, both memes reimagine the monarch's image as siding with Moroccans, even with those considered as *woulad cha3b*, allowing the King to cross the border from normal to abnormal.

This memetic event reached its climax and an eventual end in an interview with Weld L'Griya following his release from detention. In the interview, the rapper, appearing visibly uncomfortable, asserts that he had not insulted the King, and at the end of the interview, Weld L'Griya pronounces the words '3ach Lmalik' (Long Live the King). Embedded in those words is the rapper's admission of defeat, his return as a subject of the King, and accordingly, his means of avoiding prison. After this interview, the Facebook meme page Moroccan Black posted a meme video mash-up featuring the three rappers' song, followed by the

image of the King with red eyes flanked by two large green glass bottles.[5] The last segment of the video replays the moment when an embarrassed Weld L'Griya proclaims his loyalty to the King. The video ends with the credits of the show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a classic meme that signifies an awkward situation which embarrasses the protagonist (more on this meme in Chapter 7). The meme mocks the rapper's fear of persecution as well as exposing the monarch's power (illustrated by his red eyes) in curbing opposition. The summary of the rise and fall of these three rappers is encapsulated in the caption of this microfilm, which reads 'قولبنا ولد العبد عاش الشعب يعني عاش الملك' (He fooled us son of the slave, long live the people means long live the king). The caption transmits the anger of ordinary people because, after all, the song also criticises Moroccans by referring to them as slaves. In the storytelling of this event, this meme narrates how Weld L'Griya followed the path of many other rappers and important figures who may have once symbolised dissent but had since been silenced and co-opted. Nonetheless, Weld L'Griya's smirk, appearing when the rapper pronounces 'Long Live the King', and the laughs in the comment section, reveal that the master may be able to police the red lines, but the people also know how to play the game. Present in this 50-second video meme is the omnipotent ruler with red eyes armed with two green bottles that, as the next section discusses, act as powerful objects of policing and warning, but which also attest to the yearning for resonance in the midst of the fearful wilderness.

The Bottle Meme

The meme video responding to Weld L'Griya's interview is one of many examples where an image of one, or several, bottles appear. The bottle meme appears in different shapes and forms, including emoticons and GIFs, and is ubiquitous in the Moroccan datasphere. Exclusive to the online sphere, the bottle meme acts as a cautionary symbol, signalling that participants have crossed the state's red lines and criticised or mocked the royal family. The bottle meme is meant to allude to one of the best-known and favoured ways that Moroccan security forces torture or threaten to torture: rape with a bottle. Amnesty International (2015) documents several accounts of this method being used to threaten and torture detainees. Online, any mention or imagery of a bottle has come to signify a reminder and a warning of a history of torture. This memory of physical (and not just symbolic) violence serves to keep the culture of fear alive.

The visual meme of the bottle (it also exists in the form of text) frequently appears in satirical posts aimed at the monarchy. One example is a meme that reads in Darija: 'When you make a troll about the King' (فاش كدير شي طرول على الملك)

[5] See Chapter 4 for more discussion on red eyes.

(see Figure 8). This meme presents the bottle as part of the Facebook system of notifications, turning a defiant act into a warning call. Another meme situates the King next to shelves filled with different kinds of bottles and reads in French: 'Please choose your favourite size' (*Veuillez choisir votre taille préférée*). Participants also use the bottle as a form of response in the comment section, where they may tag others or simply react to these memes with the laughing emoji. Other users add comments to images of the bottle such as 'be ready' or omit the image altogether and write 'the bottle is calling us' in English or Arabic. By incorporating the bottle into pictures or in the comment section, users not only police the boundaries of what is legally permissible but also employ humour and laughter to explore the tensions between power, torture, and fear as a common experience and the memory of fear among those who have been persecuted.

The meme of the bottle also serves to showcase the abnormal power of the monarchy. One meme, composed of three vignettes, depicts the King inside a stark room. The room is recognisable to Moroccan internet users because it is in the house of Skowza, a popular Moroccan gamer and YouTuber. Skowza's viral video, posted in 2017, features him complaining about the poverty in which he lives and crying with desperation (Moushahir L'YouTube 2017). The King in the meme says:

> – (Image 1) ايلا كانو الدول لوخرين عندهم سلاح مقود
> If other countries have dope weapons,
> – (Image 2) نوريك السلاح لي عندي انا يضرك خاطرك
> If I show you the weapon I have, your conscience is going to hurt you,
> – (Image 3) هانتا اخويا غير قرعة وقامع الباشار
> Here my brother, only a bottle and I can oppress humans.

The meme incorporates Skowza's phrase 'your conscience is going to hurt you' (يضرك خاطرك), originally meant to invoke feelings of empathy by shaming the rich for ignoring economic inequalities in the country. The phrase conveys the message that poverty is a problem for society as a whole. Uttered by the King, however, the phrase conveys the message that the ruler does not need to be rich to hurt and humiliate his people. The addition of amateur-looking fake tears to the image of the King adds to the contempt with which the poor are looked upon. The bottle of the third image adds insult to injury since the bottle is a threat of real violence. The image underscores the contrast between the hardship experienced by the majority and the monarchy's vast resources. Without investing in expensive weapons, a mundane object such as a bottle is used to subjugate people, while the monarch leads an opulent lifestyle with luxury cars and palaces.

A banal object – a bottle – has taken on a monstrous life of its own in the Moroccan digital sphere. In this context, the bottle may be looked at through what Jane Bennett (2010) calls *thing-power*. An ordinary object made by humans turns into a thing-power when it becomes a vibrant item manifesting 'traces

of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience' (Bennett 2010, p. xvi). Through this lens, a subject experiences a 'thing' as uncanny (W. J. T. Mitchell cited in Bennett 2010, p. 2) yet familiar. The significance of thing-power is that it speaks to the agency of objects and the intimate connection between humans and things. For Maria Malmström (2019, p. 88), photographs as thing-power serve to counter the rule of Sisi in Egypt, which aimed to eliminate certain Egyptian bodies by turning them into terrorists or non-humans. These photographs 'build up an archive that says what the News cannot express. It allows me [Malmström] to recall details from past events that the mainstream media deprives us of (which erase personal things and emotions)' (Malmström 2019, p. 90). The bottle meme produces a similar effect of reminding people about torture and the emotions behind the loss of family members to state persecution especially – but, as evidenced throughout this book, not only – during the Years of Lead. Effectively, the bottle has come to life as a digital monster serving as an agent of fear and power, as a cautionary signpost of possible future consequences, and additionally as an object that unites the people against those in power.

In the satirical Facebook meme page The Moroccan Throne, inspired by the TV show *Game of Thrones* (GoT), the bottle emerges as a vibrant object that has come back to haunt the ruling elites. The page, boasting over 70,000 followers as of July 2022, has two administrators located in Morocco. Its content is dedicated to mocking the monarchy through images and text featuring the bottle. The motto of the page, written in English, reads 'Bottle is coming' as a wordplay on the famous catchphrase 'Winter is coming' from GoT. In the show, this phrase serves to warn of difficult times ahead, while it resurfaces in the Facebook page to bestow on the bottle the power to harm. In this context, the bottle acts as a metaphor of power even more powerful than the monarchy itself. One example of this thematic amalgamation is a meme that draws on a scene from the last episode of GoT. This scene shows the character Samwell Tarly advising a council of powerful leaders that the next ruler should be elected by the people. In the meme, Samwell says in Arabic, 'علاش ماتخليوش الشعب يختار شكون يحكمو' (Why don't you let the people decide who governs) to the leaders, who are replaced with the laughing faces of King Mohammed VI, his son Prince Moulay Hassan, and Aziz Akhannouch, a well-known businessman, close friend to the King, and former Minister of Agriculture and Prime Minister of the country since 2021. As in the scene in GoT, the Moroccan elites view the establishment of a democratic system in which the people have a voice as a laughing matter. Reactions to this meme in the comment section depict laughing emoticons and bottles. Further comments to this meme read 'be ready' together with a picture of a bottle or the phrase 'the bottle is calling us', both originally written in English. On this Facebook page, the bottle meme and its acquired meaning within The Moroccan Throne's

iconography stand at the crossroads between what is entertainment and what is political, what is a banal object and what is a thing-power. More importantly, in the insolence of mocking the elites through a simple object, the bottle meme simultaneously serves as a warning and as a challenge to power dynamics rooted in fear and humiliation. As with other memes, it suspends hierarchies temporarily, allowing citizens to criticise political power while avoiding the consequences of explicit criticism through formal political groups (Hardesty *et al*. 2019, p. 8; Li 2011, p. 83). In this sense, the bottle in the Moroccan memesphere combines an active peer policing of the red lines as well as a sphere of resonance where the people mock the red lines and the culture of fear.

The bottle meme exists exclusively as part of the language of the internet, as Gretchen McCulloch claims (2019, p. 260), because it is created, shared, and understood by a particular internet community. Arguably, then, the bottle meme is an example of a digital thing-power that benefits from memes' spreadability and ubiquity to perpetuate the uncanny power it has grown to sustain. Where individuals may risk persecution for raising their voices against the elites, the ubiquitous meme bottles serve as the collective voice of the masses.

Traditional media often employs a tactic known as intentional overproduction (Amanda D. Lotz cited in Mina 2019, p. 85) to purposefully create a variety of creative artefacts such as TV shows, songs, and commercials. Online, an intentional overproduction of memes or hashtags helps to push a narrative (which can be a political agenda or a product) with the aim of gaining traction and being picked up by traditional media, thus attracting an audience. Social movements also utilise a range of multimedia platforms such as YouTube, television, comic books, and music to advance their aims (Mina 2019, p. 110). This combined action that profits from intentional overproduction will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, where digital artefacts such as memes, the characters of the animated cartoon *Bouzebal*, and hashtags act as effective thing-powers to protest distinctions between the elites and the *woulad cha3b*.

The Boycott and the People

In spring 2018, a youth-led economic boycott started to gain momentum across Moroccan social media, with anonymous Facebook groups calling on consumers to stop buying a number of products.[6] The aim was simple: to pressure three companies (Afriquia Gaz petrol stations, Sidi Ali bottled water, and Centrale Laitière (Danone) dairy products) to lower their prices. As symbols

[6] It has been argued that in fact the call for a boycott began as early as 2015 (*Al Jazeera Centre for Studies* 2018).

of national and international economic and political elites, these companies represented the growing disparity between the country's rich and the underprivileged majority. The boycott went viral and succeeded in exposing an endemic culture of *hogra* present in the country that has been contested in many of the recent public protests in North Africa and the Middle East, including, but not exclusively, the Arab Spring in 2011. The 2018 boycott was successful because it united the masses in punishing the economic elites. Corner shops in every neighbourhood stopped selling the targeted products because no one wanted to buy them (Eljechtimi 2018). These products became symbols of the country's economic disparities and of the opulence of the rich. No ordinary person wanted to be associated with supporting the status quo that damaged ordinary people. As a result, these companies reported suffering significant economic losses; for example, Sidi Ali claimed to have lost 20 per cent of its profit (Berrada 2019). This occurred to the delight of rival companies, which suddenly saw their products leading the market or gaining clients and disrupting the monopoly previously held by the targeted companies. Reports and news coverage concurred that the people had won as the boycott successfully led to a reduction of prices. Some of the targeted companies required many months to recover from the financial blow delivered by the boycott. These companies, especially Centrale and Sidi Ali, invested in remarketing their products to gain back the trust and affection of consumers (more in Chapter 9), which included, of course, lowering their prices.

The creator of the animated YouTube cartoon *Bouzebal* released a video in 2018 (Mohammed Nassib 2018) featuring the main characters from the show. In the video, the characters say:

Bouzebal:	*Salam, Lemgharba kamlin, hadi risala l ay wa7ad 7urr w 3andu damir*	Hi, all Moroccans, this is a message to everyone who is free and has conscience
Bouya (1):	*Dwina salkhouna*	We spoke, they beat us up
Bouya (2):	*Hdarna cheddouna*	We talked, they locked us up
Bouya (3):	*3abbarna 9am3ouna*	We expressed ourselves, they oppressed us
Bouzebal:	*Walakin, btida2an men lyoum, makayn ghir taqafat al muqata3a*	But, starting from today, the culture of boycott is all there is
Bouzebal (1):	*Nqat3o* Sidi Ali	Boycott Sidi Ali
Bouzebal (2):	*Nqat3o* Afriqia	Boycott Afriqia
Bouzebal (3):	*Nqat3o* Centrale	Boycott Centrale
Bouzebal:	*W zit, w ssukar, w dgig, w ay madda mghallinha 3lina, jayya noubtha fel muqata3a*	And oil, sugar, flour, and any other item that they make more expensive, its turn will come to be boycotted

The video is prefaced by the following message:

> المقاطعة نوع من انواع الاحتجاج السلمي موجه لاصحاب الشركات التي تخلط السياسة بالمال.
> الى حين تلبية مطالبنا عبر تخفيض اسعار السلع التي اثقلت كاهل المواطن البسيط. (لسنا خونة ولسنا مداويخ)
>
> The boycott is one type of peaceful protest directed against the big corporations that associate politics with money. Until our demands are met by the reduction of the costs of goods that burdens the shoulders of the 'ordinary citizens'. (We are not traitors and we are not fools.)

Through the motto and hashtag #مقاطعون (boycotting, *mouqati'un*), the narrative of boycotting allowed ordinary people to hold elites accountable for the country's long-lasting economic disparities. *Mouqati'un* meant identifying a niche in the political field whereby people could find a common enemy without being jailed for criticising the monarchy or accused of lacking patriotism. In contrast to the Arab Spring, this time people were not protesting against politics or governance, or demanding democratic changes. Unlike the examples of online criticism, these were not addressed against the failure of the monarchy to fulfil its promises of development. Instead, the campaign targeted an economic objective (private companies) with a concrete plan (lowering prices), even if the affected parties were also political elites. Interestingly, one of the boycotted products is part of the Société Nationale d'Investissement (SNI) or National Investment Company (merged with ONA (Omnium Nord Africain) in 2010), a private holding owned by the Moroccan royal family. Prior to 2012, ONA was the largest shareholder of Centrale Laitière, which was then sold to the French company Danone. Afriquia Gaz belongs to the conglomerate Akwa Group S.A., whose CEO and chairman, Aziz Akhannouch, is Morocco's Prime Minister at the time of writing and features next to the royal family in the GoT meme. Meanwhile, the CEO of the company that owns Sidi Ali is Miriem Bensalah Chaqroun, a prominent Moroccan businesswoman. Forbes has consistently listed her as one of the most influential Arab women in North Africa and the Middle East under the category of family business. Behind this seemingly straightforward collective action was the ideological aim of showing the elites that their power was not limitless and that they were, in fact, the abnormality in the system, not 'the people' they relentlessly tried to zombify.

Because this online campaign was not organised by a particular civil society or political group, it proved challenging for the state to supress it. During the Arab Spring, it was relatively easy to create a narrative that presented the newly formed 20th of February movement as enemies of the state. Defamation campaigns, such as accusing its members of drinking alcohol or not fasting during Ramadan (Chapter 4), both of which transgress traditional country mores, was not going to work. In 2018, without identifying any clear leaders, the deep state could not accuse the supporters of being Algerian secret agents, Christians, or homosexuals

as they had done in 2011. Ordinary people gathered around a leaderless and apparently apolitical (that is, not siding with a concrete political party or ideology) movement that nonetheless united many Moroccans against the abuse of the rich. The protest was not against the state but against the symbols of economic elites, making this a class struggle similar to the 1981 bread protests (see Paul 1981 for more details on these protests). It was common knowledge to many that these companies were owned by rich people with connections to the political sphere. Mediatising protests through popular digital platforms and cultural artefacts, such as hashtags and memes on Facebook or cartoon characters such as Bouzebal, shared by a wide number of participants, made it extremely difficult for the state to employ abnormality in creating a particular group to persecute. However, the people were successful in making these three companies the figureheads of abuse and therefore determining who had to be persecuted.

Participants and memes also targeted well-known personalities who, in spite of being part of 'the people', the *woulad cha3b*, had not publicly supported the boycott. This was the case with the rapper Muslim, who complained on Instagram Stories that he was being coerced to publicly support the movement. While the boycott was something the rapper fully supported, as he claimed, Muslim did not believe the movement needed his sponsorship as it had already gained enough notoriety. It is worth quoting Muslim's words here at length:

> *Bach nwadd7o l2omor, b nnissba l muqata3a: lmantiq, l39al, ttawajjouh dyali, lmabadi2 dyali, l2aghani dyali kay 9oulou 3la annani tab3an m3a lmuqata3a. Ana b9it b3id 3lach? Jouj 7wayj: Ma bghitchi nban rakeb 3la lmawja, tani 7aja chouft had lmuqata3a ma katstahelchi chi da3m men 3and bnadem ma3rouf li2anna hadi ashal ma ymken y3melha chcha3b, tfahemna? Ana dyal lmahamm ssa3ba, ana khallini lchi 7aja li machi aji w 3melha, ana dyal chi 7aja ab3ad w a3ma9 men lmuqata3a d lma w l7lib, tfahemna? Ana kan9ol lhad lmu9ati3un 3la slamtkoum! Wa akhiran wella 3andna chcha3b ki tta7ed w ki ddamen 3la wa7ed l7aja. Fa Bravo ta7iyyati, akhiran fiyya9nakoum. Fa choukran l ssa7afa 3la dik lma9alat w dakchi lwa3er li ketbouh, w choukran l joumhour dyal 3la sebba, Peace*[7]
>
> So to clarify things regarding the boycott. The logic, the reasoning, my direction, my principles, my songs say that of course I am with the boycott. I stayed far from this, why? Two reasons: I didn't want to appear as I'm riding the wave. Second thing, I saw that this boycott does not deserve/need any support from famous people because this is the easiest thing that 'people' can do, do we understand each other? Me I am for the difficult missions, leave me for something that you can't just go and do. I am for something further and deeper, than boycotting water and milk, do we understand each other? I say to these boycotters, Congratulations! Finally, we have people that are uniting and in solidarity for something, so bravo! I salute you! Finally, we've

[7] Muslim's words have been uploaded as a YouTube video (Starnews401 2018).

> woken you up. Thanks to the press for all those articles and all the good stuff they wrote, and thanks to the audience that only needed a reason [to doubt me]. Peace.

The internet did not respond favourably to these words. Previously, Muslim had belonged to the *woulad cha3b* thanks to his lyrics which, more often than not, spoke about the corruption, poverty, and hardship experienced by ordinary people, as I have asserted elsewhere (Moreno-Almeida 2018). Telling people that he should only be called on for impossible missions (*ana dyal lmahamm ssa3ba*) came across as pretentious and suggested that he did not consider himself part of the people as the memes suggest. Memes repurposed this phrase to flood social media, showing the rapper as a wannabe superhero. One meme posted by Moroccan Rap Trolls presents Muslim dressed as Superman with the words in Classic Arabic 'رجل المهام الصعبة' (the man of impossible missions). Another meme reads 'ديك ختك لكبيرة فرمضان، انا ماشي ديال غسيل لماعن، انا ديال شي مهمة صعيبة' (Your older sister during Ramadan: 'I'm not for washing dishes, I'm for some difficult mission'). By sarcastically reproducing the rapper's words, these memes presented Muslim as an artist who thought of himself as something special and distinct from the ordinary. After all, the success of the boycott was possible because of people's pride in being part of the *woulad cha3b*, who were the targets of abuse by the economic elites. Other artists easily gained symbolic capital from this sense of pride by supporting this grassroots movement without upsetting the main patrons of the arts, that is, the state. An example of this is Don Bigg, who swiftly sided with the boycotters even though he was extremely vocal in 2011 in defending the regime against the protests aligned with the 20th of February movement and the Arab Spring. However, it was too late for Don Bigg, as memers did not differentiate between the two rappers, Muslim and Don Bigg. One meme shows these two rappers under the banner '*3ach Lmalik*' (Long Live the King) and lGnawi, LZ3er, and Weld L'Griya as '*3ach al-cha3b*' (Long Live the People). In Muslim's view, however, his reach as a successful artist should only be used to speak about issues that were being silenced. For this reason, Muslim did not think that a boycott that was already successful needed his support, and he declined an opportunity to please the people as a result. However, in his claim to abnormality, his words were instead decoded as arrogant.

Two years later, the political effects of the boycott resurfaced in the form of a new law meant to regulate social media. YouTuber Mustapha Swinga, boasting one million followers on Facebook (29 April 2020), posted a leaked version of the 22.20 bill. The bill included a law whereby people who call for boycotts could be sentenced to six months to three years in jail. There were no doubts that one of those most affected by the 2018 boycott, Akhannouch, was behind this initiative to change the law. Ordinary people protested on social media, particularly

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to voice their opposition to the bill. Nizar Khairoun, a counsellor who was then in charge of political and institutional communication and served as one of the Prime Minister's counsellors, responded to some of these comments in an attempt to clarify the reasons behind this bill, insisting that it had yet to be debated in parliament. On Monday, 27 April 2020, it was mentioned that the leaked documents were merely an initial draft that had already been discarded. The then Minister of Justice, Mohamed Benabdelkader, and Mustapha Ramid, Minister of State in charge of human rights, also responded via social media platforms, demonstrating official concern over the issue. This appears to be a favourite and often used tactic in the state's handbook, consisting of the following: instead of passing a restrictive law that could cause people to organise against it, the deep state leaks a much harsher law to provoke a reaction. Subsequently, they revert to the original restrictive law, creating an illusion that they have actually listened to people's complaints.

Two years after the boycott, the selected targets that had suffered its consequences needed to strategise to prevent it from happening again. To ensure the bill passed quietly, it was discussed by the ministers during the Covid-19 pandemic and the holy month of Ramadan. Morocco had been in lockdown since mid-March 2020 and by the start of the holy month of Ramadan in mid-April, the rules of the lockdown had become particularly harsh. With families concerned about news of the pandemic and the social and religious practices of the holy month, a law that restricts online social protest being passed during a time when people could not protest physically seemed appropriate. A similar strategy was employed during the Covid-19 pandemic in other countries including Hungary and the UK, where the rights of LGBTQ+ people were severely restricted by ruling out changes to the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, capitalising on the limitations imposed by lockdown restrictions. The boycott certainly demonstrated the power of ordinary people and social media's cancel culture. The pandemic, however, revived new fears of online organised activism initiated by the people.

Digital Jinns

Regardless of the effectiveness of these new laws or of the waves of prosecution directly aimed at digital media, memes are a difficult target because, among other reasons, individuals can hide behind their intentional overproduction. Memes do not require much to create an impact such as that made by the song and music video '3acha Cha3b'. Through Photoshop, memers possess and manipulate the master's body at will. Those creating, sharing, and commenting on memes become, momentarily, affectively united as a force to debate and challenge the absolute power held by the monarchy. They may be anonymous or too numerous, making it difficult for the

state to persecute them. The cases discussed here suggest that while the state has well established strategies with which to persecute artists, journalists, and influencers, their success in controlling forms of amateurish activism is less obvious. Well-known personalities, artivists, and anonymous digital netizens face different borders when it comes to the country's red lines. While rappers have to carefully measure their words, hoping they remain within the red lines, memes exposing and sometimes challenging the power of the elites can be more daring. New language, however, emerges as a warning sign that images and words may invoke rage among the elites.

Modifications of pictures, adding text and effects, glitches, and the copying and recopying of low-quality image-macros, as well as state-promoted bots, navigate under the radar unseen and unknown. While a few may suffer the state's wrath, as happened in 2019, not all will. Even if participants and page administrators are found, persecuting ordinary people without connections to political groups or associations has proven problematic for the state in the past as it may lead to social unrest and challenges to the progress, democracy, and 'development' narratives that the state wishes to promote. The fact that many of these problematic memes add the logo of the page sharing it shows a lack of concern for any form of persecution. Moreover, occasionally mocking of the King does not seem to trouble users, whose reaction is generally positive. Yet a repetitive theme and a recurrent meme can unveil challenging perceptions of the monarchy's official image. In this sense, the bottle meme captures fear as much as a desire to mock the system. More importantly, the bottle shows the power of digital objects to become alive and to act as monstrous entities policing the borders of acceptability.

In a similar way, in some instances activists have incorporated fanlike tactics to provoke dialogue and mobilisation: 'These fan and fanlike activities raise the decades old debate about the politics of culture and what "counts" as a political act' (Brough and Shresthova 2012, p. 5). This differs from activists using cultural production as a political tool. Memes stand within and beyond this art versus politics dichotomy. They stand within it because they can and cannot be considered as art (if an artist creates a meme and claims it to be art, it can be), but they may also be political (with or without the capital P). Memes stand beyond this dichotomy because, while the stories conveyed by the memes discussed in this chapter are inherently political, their visual aesthetics and language denote a raw effective, creative, and artistic understanding of society and life experiences. In its dissemination and accumulation, one single object, such as the bottle in the Moroccan datasphere, accumulates the complex history of torture, the fear of persecution, the culture of humiliation, and the master–disciple relationship as Hammoudi (1997) refers to an entire nation. Moreover, the bottle meme lives in the borders that divide elites from the people, creating a space of resonance shared by the *woulad cha3b*. Those participants who establish instances of political participation through their online cultural production focusing on issues silenced

by state-controlled media and politicians emerge as digital jinns, appearing when recalled, acting not solely as amateur activists, but also as boundary keepers of abnormality. Memers are not necessarily activists in the traditional sense, but they can occasionally act as such. Due to their agency as thing-power, memes also emerge as digital jinns to narrate *unproper* stories, impersonate noteworthy characters, and alter the narratives of important events.

Part III

Home Wreckers

6

Diaries of a Monstrous Woman

In April 2022, Mohammed El Mahdi Bensaid, the Moroccan Minister of Youth, Culture, and Communication, addressed a question in parliament concerning the YouTube trend 'روتيني اليومي' (*routini lyawmi*, my daily routine). This subgenre of YouTube channels and videos gained its name from the use of words such as '*routini*' (my routine) or '*yawmiyat*' (lit. diaries), followed by the name of the female host of the channel. Examples of *routini lyawmi* channels are Yawmiyat Hayat and Mi Naima Al-Badaouia, both of which will be discussed later in the chapter.[1] These videos gained wide popularity in the Moroccan datasphere by the end of the 2010s by portraying women, mostly from unprivileged backgrounds, carrying out domestic chores such as cooking, washing clothes, and tidying up sitting rooms. With its roots in cooking tutorial videos, *routini lyawmi* started with women recording themselves at home, cooking and posting recipes on their social media accounts.

In the beginning, the videos only featured the hands of the presenters;[2] but with time, the camera zoomed out to reveal other parts of female bodies as well additional rooms in their humble homes.[3] As a result, some of the women in these videos hide their faces, covering them with veils or masks, or expose only their back to the camera, while others prefer to speak directly to the camera. The videos gained notoriety, however, because some women began wearing revealing clothing typically reserved for indoors and normally only seen by other women or close male family members. Dressed in garments that reveal parts of their bodies or that accentuate their figures, the videos evolved to show women making movements perceived as too sensual while carrying out their daily household tasks.

[1] The account @yawmiyathayat joined YouTube in September 2020 and by January 2023 had over 23 million views (Yawmiyat Hayat 2020).

[2] See, for example, the account @oumsami5 with over 133 million views (January 2023) (Oumsami5 2018).

[3] The account @naima.beauty (191,000 subscribers (February 2023), February 2017, over 25 million views) is an example of this evolution (Naima Beauty 2017).

Throughout the MENA region, audiovisual production companies have a history of editing foreign films and television shows to delete any scenes or storylines considered inappropriate. This is the case for romantic kisses between lovers, stories about abortion, and homosexual characters. The film *Much Loved* (Morocco, 2015), directed by Nabil Ayoush, was banned in Morocco because it narrated the lives of prostitutes. Paradoxically, the effect of banning the film in Moroccan cinemas triggered what is frequently called the 'Barbra Streisand Effect', meaning it brought more attention to the film and caused the opposite of the intended effect in censoring it. As a result, the film was uploaded online to be watched and shared widely and even played behind the closed doors of public cafés.

Routini lyawmi videos have generated controversy because some people believe these women threaten traditional mores and shame themselves publicly by purposefully revealing their bodies in order to gain views and monetise their videos. For this reason, the Moroccan magazine *Maroc Hebdo* (Hafidi 2022a, 2022b) has called this phenomenon 'digital prostitution'. Despite claims that these videos are sexually provocative to the audience, there is no total body nudity or explicitly sexual content that would violate YouTube community guidelines and policies. These women, however, have been accused of threatening the Moroccan family, and their online lives have been debated in the Moroccan parliament. Minister El Mahdi Bensaid addressed parliament, claiming that there are no laws with which to regulate these videos (العطاتري 2022). In that light, why are these videos and the women who make them considered so outrageous and blamed for wrecking the Moroccan family? After all, in Morocco, as in many other countries around the world, websites that offer free pornographic content are available to anyone with access to the internet. Why are some sectors of society frightened of 'ordinary' women exhibiting their 'ordinary' lives and capitalising on them?

In thinking of *routini lyawmi* as horror videos that generate desire and disgust simultaneously, this chapter elaborates on an intersectional analysis of gender and class in the digital sphere. Because these women challenge the category of what it means to be an 'ordinary' woman, this chapter analyses these videos through the perspective of the monstrous feminine as theorised by Barbara Creed (1993). Drawing on Kristeva, Creed argues that the monstrous in contemporary horror is ingrained in religious and historical configuration of the abject, particularly in relation to 'sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alterations, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest' (2020, p. 213). Sigmund Freud's view of female sexuality as a 'dark continent' for psychology also reinforces the idea of female sexuality as something foreign, scary, and dangerous. Horror sheds light on a patriarchal system that considers *routini lyawmi* videos and the women who

produce, star in, and share them as a threat to the social order and status quo created by men. As Jeffrey Cohen claims when discussing the monstrous Other as women and non-whites:

> Given that the recorders of the history of the West have been mainly European and male, women (She) and nonwhites (Them!) have found themselves repeatedly transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought. Feminine and cultural others are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack. (1996, p. 15)

A monstrous feminine perspective reveals, as this chapter argues, that the threat these videos and these women pose is their desire to enter the public digital space and earn an income from the fear and desire of those who dictate the established social order.

In her study on Arab women, Instagram influencer Zoe Hurley (2021) suggests that a feminist postdigital framework helps to reorientate postdigital practices in the Global South. Decentred from a concrete geographical location, a Global South feminist postdigital perspective considers 'social actors on the margins of power who also have uneven access to the empowering effects of technologies and realize that social media affordances could impact some more positively than others' (Hurley 2021, p. 3). This framework pays attention to the ways in which technology can contribute to female oppression. The feminist postdigital compels us to critically analyse the notion of affordances from a gendered perspective as well as to question notions of women's empowerment when it comes to social media and women in the Global South. As part of a feminist postdigital framework, the digital monstrous feminine compels us to analyse online spaces as another layer of monstrosity. Online, instead of denying the monstrous feminine, 'we embrace her for her possibilities and for her teeth' (Massanari and Chess 2018, p. 540). Rather than searching for warriors, we search online for monsters as a way of gaining bodily agency in a culture – in this instance, the digital – used by the 'manosphere' (see the following section) and traditional patriarchal systems that aim to silence them.

These monstrous digital women are intended to form the foundation of Moroccan traditional society. Yet, in exposing their intimate daily lives through the affordances of digital media, they reveal intricate debates on privacy and class, amateurship and women, as well as monetisation of content, as explored in this chapter. Criticisms of these videos have mostly addressed these women not necessarily as victims (and therefore passive and castrated in Creed's terms), but as assailants (and thus active agents who might castrate). As Creed contends, the monstrous feminine speaks more about male fear and less about female desire. In order to understand the role of *routini lyawmi* in revealing these moral panics on

social media, this chapter traces some anti-feminist social media pages and their language. Horror, and more specifically the occult, therefore scrutinises the masculine and masculinity and reveals the 'man in crisis' (Clover 2015). The occult encompasses elements such as witches, black magic, and possession, all familiar to MENA traditions and beliefs shaped as jinns and سحر (*siHr*, magic). Thereafter, the chapter unravels the two categories that distinguish woman in Morocco: the 'good' traditional girl and the 'modern' liberal feminist depicted as grotesque. This situates *routini lyawmi* videos in a liminal space and therefore as a threat to the established categories. The home as a space created by the 'good' woman, once a familiar and protected site, is now alienating, fearful, and *unheimlich*. As un-homely and uncanny spaces, these videos are recoded from the privacy of ordinary homes as endangering not only norms of what is deemed to be public and private, but also borders of class visibility. Social media, imagined as a space for youth, characterised by bright and well-curated images, now faces intrusion by impoverished women exhibiting their unprivileged houses through home-made, amateurish videos. Their economic gain and popularity only serve to make them even more monstrous.

Misogyny in Digital Cultures

Digital platforms have played a significant role in perpetuating the monstrous feminine within digital media (Massanari and Chess 2018). Misogyny was ingrained in the origins of meme culture, closely tied to trolling culture (Phillips 2015, pp. 2–3), although with time memes have come to cater to a wider range of ideologies, including feminism (see, for example, Rentschler and Thrift 2015). In terms of gender dynamics, while Morocco and the MENA region may have their specific struggles, they are by no means exceptions, but rather one example of the global difficulties experienced by women, including the gendered dimensions of social media's affordances and limitations (Sreberny 2015). In the post-Arab Spring, the region's datasphere mostly reproduced global anti-feminist meme culture with little engagement with memes (in favour of others such as hashtags and written posts) on feminist Facebook pages.[4] Such anti-feminist networks have been referred to as the manosphere.

The term manosphere refers to groups of social media pages, profiles, blogs, and other online communities where men with shared misogynistic and anti-feminist beliefs gather. The manosphere includes new online subgroups which have emerged such as incels (standing for 'involuntary celibate') and betafags (someone lacking social skills). According to Debbie Ging (2019), the migration

[4] The Moroccan meme ecosystem resonates with broader debates on whether the left is too serious to meme (see Chapter 2).

of these groups online has radically changed their tone and communication strategies, for example, referring to themselves as men's rights activists. To Angela Nagle, these social media groups cannot simply be theorised as paternal, patriarchal masculinity because some of these online communities better reflect forms of 'rejection of authority, traditional family values and expectations of adult male roles of responsibility' (2015, p. 147). Despite the common use of anti-feminist language, George Hawley (2017) argues that the manosphere overlaps with, but does not equate to, the digital alt-right. The difference in the United States, Hawley contends, is that the alt-right is primarily concerned with racial issues, although they also oppose gender equality, seeing men and women as suited for different social roles. However, acknowledging their lack of homogeneity and internal conflicts, Ging claims that 'ostensibly contradictory masculine formulations – alpha, beta, jock, geek, straight, gay, Christian, and atheist – can coalesce around any number of contentious issues or flash point events when the common goal is to defeat feminism or keep women out of the space' (2019, p. 653). It is because of their common views on feminism and women's empowerment that these groups share terms that also work in other languages and cultural contexts.

A meme posted on May 2022 on the Facebook page Moroccan Demons (2016) reads in English: 'He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you (Friedrich Nietzsche).' 'Red pill Morocco' and the 'Awkward Look Monkey Puppet' meme appear below the quotation (Figure 9).[5] The reference to the red pill originates from *The Matrix* (1999), a film that has become synonymous with claiming intellectual awakening or wokeness and a willingness to learn uncomfortable, and often frightening, truths. In the context of the manosphere, taking the red pill has become a central image used to claim awareness of the feminist determination to eradicate men. Taking the red pill, therefore, means to know what they perceive as the 'real truth' behind feminism. In this meme, Moroccan Demons mock how the Red Pill Morocco Facebook public group and other Moroccan anti-feminist pages have become the same monster they claim to be fighting.[6] Within the comments, some users affirm their belief that feminist and patriarchal ideologies are two sides of the same coin, suggesting that both want the annihilation of the opposite gender. Besides the widely spread and ill-perceived notion behind this meme that feminists' aim is to subjugate and control men, it is interesting to note the penetration of alt-right language among the Moroccan datasphere evidenced by terms such as 'red pillers', but also the co-optation of Nietzsche as the alt-right philosopher par excellence.

[5] More about this meme in Know Your Meme website (Philipp 2019).
[6] Created in March 2020, it was previously named 'الحنانات' and was changed in May 2022 to Red Pill Morocco.

Figure 9 'Awkward Look Monkey Puppet' meme. Shared by Moroccan Demons Facebook page.

There is a historical pattern where German Nazism, and now the US alt-right, have embraced Nietzsche as their leading philosopher, arguing his misogynistic ideas in spite of voices that claim that Nietzsche has been misinterpreted (see more in Prideaux 2018). The genesis of the association between *The Matrix* and Nietzsche is a comment by Richard Spencer, one of the leaders of the US alt-right: 'You could say I was red-pilled by Nietzsche' (Wood 2017). Another Moroccan anti-feminist page also employs this globalised alt-right language with Nietzschean philosophy to affectively and politically unite the manosphere internationally. The anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ+ (but also ableist and racist) Facebook page Patrinietzshy claims to focus its attention on 'Simps'. In their About section, the page describes itself as a space where 'Simps are sold here on wholesales or instalments' (هنا يباع ال Simps بالجملة والتقسيط). Simps, originally short for simpleton, had been employed since the 1990s as internet slang to refer to someone who is deemed 'too nice'. The term has also been claimed to be an acronym for 'Suckas Idolising Mediocre Pussy'. For this reason, it has acquired a specific connotation within the manosphere to name men who treat women with kindness and respect in pursuit of a sexual or romantic relationship. The term has

also metamorphosed in fan culture as a way for fans to claim to be 'simps' for their favourite celebrity. In Patrinietzshy, however, the term is clearly employed to make an anti-feminist statement. This is supported by the name of the page, which amalgamates patriarchy and Nietzsche. The use of obscure terms is not casual, as it acts as a form of gatekeeping of the manosphere. The aim of being offensive is to dehumanise women, for example incels employing terms such as 'femoids' (female humanoids) (Chang 2020) that unequivocally position women as the monstrous Other.

'Good' Women, 'Ugly' Feminists

Beyond the manosphere's explicit Other (i.e., women), renewed digital far-right ideologies have explicitly divided women into different categories (i.e., good and bad). United by Islamophobia (Froio and Ganesh 2019), the far right in Europe and the United States has depicted feminists in the Global North as 'Islamist' lovers (Ging 2019) or as lovers of anyone except white men (Massanari and Chess 2018). Mainstream anglophone and other European media outlets have a history of encouraging this division, portraying women who live in Muslim-majority countries, and veiled women in general, as oppressed by both patriarchy and religion (Mahmood 2005, p. 7), in contrast to liberated, unveiled women dressed in European garments. Such distinctions have led some far-right groups to present themselves as protectors of 'Western' women and liberators of oppressed Muslim women (Berg 2019). Conversely, the Moroccan right (or rather the far right, as argued elsewhere (Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021)) has presented itself as the protector of veiled women, portraying Moroccan feminists as ugly creatures enthralled by morally questionable 'Western' women.

An in-depth analysis of memes shared by the now defunct ultra-nationalist Facebook page Moroccan Nationalist Memes shows women mirroring two categories: the good Moroccan veiled woman versus the grotesque monstrous feminist. During its first year of existence, from April 2019 to April 2020, this page posted 179 anti-feminist memes out of a total of 1,639 memes (Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021). These memes targeted well-known feminist activist organisations, namely Moroccan Outlaws 490 and MALI (Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles, Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms), and, to a lesser extent, the LGBTQ+ community. In order to construct feminists as the monstrous Other, they were usually depicted, on this page, as angry women with deformed faces, wearing few clothes or garments such as short-cropped t-shirts, and often shown with short, brightly dyed hair in colours such as green or pink. To further emphasise their adherence to Eurocentric notions of feminine freedom, these women often appeared smoking and drinking wine while texting

on their mobile phones. In opposition to these images, veiled women are seen dressed in neutral colours with serene facial expressions, acting as custodians and protectors of the traditional Moroccan (Muslim) family. In these memes, veiled women symbolise the good girl who always appears as silent and composed, following traditional social mores that hold these characteristics in high regard as desired for a respectful woman.

Ironically, however, this dichotomy fits within coexisting postcolonial ideological principles: liberal secularism imported from France versus local Islamism (Cavatorta 2009). Such distinctions are shared by the state and by foreign (European and North American) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which have encouraged division between the feminist cause and Islamist women's groups to the benefit of the state (Jay 2013; Salime 2011). Such was the case in the early 2000s when the new King Mohammed VI sided with feminists, presenting himself as a supporter of women's causes and, in turn, containing the rapid growth of Islamist groups. Such a preference was informed by the fact that while feminists were demanding rights for women, it was Islamist groups who had historically questioned the institution of the monarchy. Despite, or because of, this instrumentalisation, feminists and feminist associations exist in Morocco's national imaginary as a homogeneous group of liberal, upper-class, French-speaking women who reject traditional mores and Islam. Coinciding with the way in which the Facebook page Moroccan Nationalist Memes presents them, feminists are frequent targets of hostility from internet trolls.

In early 2020, a group of Moroccan women posted a video meme to launch their new feminist association. This video was a recreation of the 'El Violador eres Tú' meme, which went viral after November 2019 when women's protests in Chile inspired the feminist collective Las Tesis from Valparaiso to write, perform live, record, and post on their social media the song 'Un Violador en Tu Camino' (A Rapist in Your Way). Chilean women performed the song blindfolded to protest against femicide, directly blaming the police, judges, and then President Sebastian Piñera for the lack of action in response to the raping and killing women. As the songwriters claim, in Chile only 8 per cent of rape trials end in conviction, as the chant expresses: '*Son los pacos, los jueces, el Estado, el presidente. El Estado opresor es un macho violador*' (They are the police, the judges, the State, the president. The oppressive State is a male rapist). The choreography of the chorus was then reproduced in France and Spain, but also in India, Tunisia, Turkey, and Morocco, featuring the following lines: '*Y la culpa no era mía, ni dónde estaba ni cómo vestía, El violador eres tú*' (And the fault was not mine, neither where I was nor how I dressed, the rapist is you).

As the meme went viral, a group of women in the northern city of Tetouan reproduced the video to launch the project 'ديناميةجسدي حريتي' (Dynamic My Body My Freedom). Headed by visual artist and activist Khadija Tnana, the Moroccan

version rewrites the lyrics in Darija to reorient the conversation towards the freedom of women's bodies. The song begins as follows:

شكون أنا	Who am I?
أنا الساس أنا الرأس، حرة	I am the pillar and the head, free!
حرة بعقلي وفكري	Free with my mind and my intellect
حرة فقلبي وجسمي	Free in my heart and in my body
وشكون تكون نتا باش تحكمني، حرة	And who are you to command me, free!
مسؤولة، كادة، كاملة ومكمولة	Responsible, capable, whole and complete
شكون تكون نتا، باش تحكرني	And who are you to oppress me
مغتصب حكار، أناني جبار	Rapist abuser, selfish titan
والمغتصب هو نتا	And the rapist is you!
والمغتصب هو نتا نتا نتا	And the rapist is you, you, you!
والمغتصب هو نت	And the rapist is you!

In contrast to the Spanish version, which features simple and repetitive lyrics, the Moroccan version of the song was more complex. Elaborate lyrics contrasted, however, with a performance that came across as rather amateurish even for a flash mob, which is not expected to be performed by professional choreographers. In the Moroccan video, performers are uncoordinated in their choreography; some of them clearly do not know the lyrics or the movements, and some are seen laughing while others maintain serious and solemn expressions (see video in Midootje 2020). The result was that the meme video lost its militant effect as one coordinated movement and chant in unison. Nevertheless, the video soon went viral in the country, with its performers themselves becoming characters starring in memes and social media pages.

This was not the first time that an unpolished performance was nationally mocked. The opening ceremony of the 2013 FIFA Club World Cup in Agadir provoked general indignation across the country. The event brought together different traditional music groups and performers including a Marrakchiya, a group of *shikhat*, and a Gnawa band, who received little rehearsal time or stage direction. Located in the midst of a large football stadium, these groups appeared underwhelming to say the least. The amateurish tone of the event failed to meet the high expectations for an inaugural show akin to those for other events such as the Olympic Games or a Superbowl halftime show (Bennis 2013). As one of the elemental arguments of this book, aesthetics in cultural production matters, and digital media is no exception. In the case of institutionally funded and coordinated events such as an opening ceremony for an event that draws a large global audience, a lack of professionalism shames those who feel part of the community. Such events

serve as a showcase to promote the ability of a nation to successfully organise international events, which includes the artistic creativity framing the event. Through the unprofessional appearance of the event, the national organising committee communicated their lack of concern for creativity.

Amateurishness, when not purposefully sought, may still support the intended message, as argued in Chapters 4 and 5. In the case of the 'El Violador eres Tú' meme, one comment by user chaila شايلا on the YouTube video of the Platform My Body My Freedom expresses this idea:

> الفكرة و الكلمات.. عندهم معنى لكن اللحن و الإلقاء.. ضحك اغلب الناس لي تفرجو فهاد الفيديو، بغيت نقول ان هذا لصالحكم، هاد الطريقة غاتجعل الفيديو ينتاشر فالمغرب كاملا،وبهذا يوصل الميساج ديالكم. حرة#

> The idea and the words, they have meaning, but the melody and diction made most people who watched this video laugh. I'd like to say that this is for your benefit, this method will make the video circulate in all Morocco. Therefore your message will be received. #free

While the video did indeed circulate, the message was primarily mocked and not taken seriously. As a rehearsed video, instead of a performance, to support a street protest, as is the case of the original version, this meme video did little to shed light on the feminist cause (especially as it aimed to raise awareness of the use of female bodies, such as in the case of journalist Hajar Raissouni (see Chapter 4)) because the debates centred on its low quality and the lack of artistry by the organisers and performers.

Following the release of this video, a blindfolded Khadija Tnana became a meme and thus was memorialised as a memetic monstrous woman. Memes' grotesque aesthetics served in this case to shame feminist activists, and the amateurish quality worked to their disadvantage, further ridiculing these women. However, while the ugly and the grotesque have a political role to play, as argued in Chapters 4 and 5, it seems that when it comes to women and feminists, amateurish content does not translate in the same way. The manosphere has control of the digital grotesque and uses it to its advantage. They create symbolic value out of carelessness, amateurishness, and occult language while using it to exploit female monstrosity. This monstrosity is recalled not only in the case of liberal feminists, as the rest of the chapter contends, but also whenever a 'good' woman dares to step outside the roles she has been assigned and ventures into digital spaces on her own terms.

The Effects of Digital Manspreading

Shaming women online has been an effective way of digital manspreading, a term coined by Brande Easter (2018) to explore 'how claims to online space, made through the affordances of digital infrastructures, are gendered, material, and

embodied' (Easter 2018, p. 677). Women's presence on social media has initiated debates across the Muslim world and the MENA region on whether it is licit for women to show their faces on social media. Annabelle Sreberny (2015) sheds light on a Twitter thread that gathered over 10,000 comments regarding the Saudi cleric Ahmad 'Aziz al-Ghamdi affirming, to a Saudi woman, that it was permissible to post a picture of her face on social media. The replies, Sreberny reports, ranged from congratulations to death threats. These debates render the face of digital media as a battlefield where combatants compete for control over public digital spaces or exploit them as a continuous source of shame.

This acquired visibility may act as a double-edged sword when it comes to Muslim women's self-(re)presentation practices. A perceived hypervisibility and agency threaten what Omnia El Shakry (2013) calls the 'patriarchal bargain'. By this, El Shakry refers to granting women in the MENA region presence in public spaces as long as they stay politically silent and adhere 'to bourgeois norms of respectability' (2013, p. 84). Rapper Ilham El Arbaoui, aka Ily, a social media star with more than 1.6 million followers on Instagram (March 2023), has put this bargain into question by publicly exposing matters traditionally kept within the private sphere, such as family affairs and being in non-marital romantic relationships. Ily released her first hit song 'Khelouni' (Leave Me Alone) in 2018, gathering more than 20 million views on YouTube by 2021. The music video shows a confident and daring rapper exhibiting behaviour aimed at disrupting conservative social norms. Shot at night, the video shows Ily with two friends smoking and drinking at a table beside a swimming pool. The song is an 'ego trip', a type of song where the rapper evidences their value in terms of finance, sexuality, music, and so forth and seeks to differentiate themself from other rappers. Ily's controversial relationship with fellow female rappers and frequent appearances with male performers have enticed the curiosity and criticism of social media users. In recent years, her Instagram followers have been invited to view the most intimate aspects of her life, such as her difficult relationship with a man she alleges to be her father, the famous *chaabi* singer Abdelaziz Stati, and with her former boyfriend, the popular rapper 7liwa.

In 2018, Ily was invited to perform at the music festival L'Boulevard. Nearly two decades after female rapper Widad won first prize for best rap group, the festival gathers an audience of around 30,000 people each day. Invited by the collective Block 10, Ily took the stage that year to perform one song as an up-and-coming rapper. The audience, however, did not receive her well; they booed and threw bottles of water at her. In the midst of insults calling her, among other slurs, *qaHba* (lit. Arabic for 'whore'), the young rapper bravely finished her performance but left the stage visibly upset. Having attended concerts in Morocco for over a decade, I have witnessed audiences being vocal in showing their discontent if their favourite rappers are not on stage. Nevertheless, this response towards a new and young female rapper was particularly extreme, tough, and cruel. Ily's romantic

relationship and her relationship with her estranged father proved to be detrimental on stage, as the audience showed little interest in her music. The fact that Ily shared her love story with the well-known rapper 7liwa crossed the lines of public propriety, and the public gave her its response. While it attracted the curiosity of social media users, it also had a negative effect on her credibility as a rapper.

In 2020, Ily released the song and music video 'Baba' (Dad, 2020), in which the rapper remembers her childhood with her father Abdelaziz Stati. In the lyrics, Ily sings 'Even if I grew up alone, your picture is always in my heart' (*Wakha kbert ghi bouhdi m3aya wehda ou nta sortek kayna dima fqelbi ldakhel*). Ily's song was released after she had made several public statements about her complicated relationship with her father, who publicly denied being Ily's father in 2018 (Tantani 2018). Ily, on her side, had asserted her identity as an artist, rapping in the song 'Khelouni': 'My name is Ilham not the daughter of Stati' (*Smiti Ilham machi Bent Stati*). Consequently, posting old pictures of herself with Stati and recreating memories of her father during her childhood in 'Baba' marked a change in Ily's public attitude towards him. This song also played a pivotal role in rehabilitating her damaged image after the events that occurred at the rapper's first performance on a big stage. What initially started as digital shaming proved to have real-life consequences. Beyond social media policing, digital shaming caused Ily to fear performing live and affected her public artistic persona.

In their work, Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2014, p. 102) claim we need to understand digital shaming as a continuation of the political use of shaming throughout history. As they state, shaming involves active participants engaging in public, physical, and brutal spectacles of humiliation, such as mutilation and whipping, leaving permanent physical scars as marks of shame. Women especially have suffered from these practices, including those accused of witchcraft or unmarried mothers forced to wear a scarlet letter on their clothes (Hess and Waller 2014, p. 103). Shame shapes and reshapes the social spaces in which bodies move (Sundén and Paasonen 2018, p. 647), and this includes public spaces such as festival stages and social media platforms. In Morocco, the noun 'shame' is uttered as an exclamation, 'Hshuma!' (حشومة), about a situation that relates to the speaker's own mores and point of view. The word for being shy, حشومي (*7eshumi*), is derived from the same linguistic root, *H-sh-m*, intimately connecting the two meanings. Furthermore, Edward William Lane's *Arabic–English Lexicon* (1863, p. 577) notes the discussion among authors who claim that the word should also be translated as 'anger'. Moroccan women, as occurs in many other places globally, are encouraged to be حشومية (*7eshumiyya*), meaning modest, shy, and quiet, at least publicly, and not to be the cause of shame or anger (حشومة). Failure to conform to these expectations renders women, especially young ones, insolent, unattractive, and unsuitable for marriage. One of the ways in which a woman may be shameful, as the case of Ily reveals, is public exposure of sexual desires.

Local media in Morocco has sought to create content concerning subjects considered as shameful. For instance, a show on Hit Radio on the topic of sex that aired at 11pm hosted by the sexologist Samad Cherkaoui Benalla, aka Doc Samad, stopped broadcasting in 2017 after six years on air, allegedly because it lacked an audience. Cherkaoui was especially upset because, after a tumultuous year involving sexual aggressions in the country, he believed these kinds of programmes were very much needed (Savage 2017). That same year, the web show *Sex'Pertise* was launched on YouTube, claiming to be the first show devoted to sexuality in North Africa and the Middle East. Hosted by Rania Laabid, a journalist and activist for feminist causes, the show is mainly in French and Darija and invites academic and religious experts to engage with a wide audience. In a roundtable organised by EROSS@DCU in March 2022 for the event Queer Maghreb Matters, Laabid claimed that while people interviewed in the street were extremely respectful when responding to questions on the matter, the internet reacted differently. Although the show did receive positive comments online, there were also insults and criticisms.[7] Hosted by the YouTube channel of Le360, an online news site with 1.5 million subscribers known for being a mouthpiece for the state, the show spoke about matters such as masturbation, hygiene, and performance as well as harassment and sexual aggressions. Despite its connections to the deep state, it dealt with matters that are otherwise taboo. However, Laabid claims that *Sex'Pertise* finally ended because male technicians refused to continue working for the show.

Sex and sexuality remain taboo subjects in Morocco, as evidenced by a recent book written by Layla Laâlej (a fictious name), originally named *Rabat Sex Stories* but eventually published as *Rabat Love Stories* (2022). *Rabat Love Stories* perpetuates orientalist tropes that have equally deceived both local commentators and activists (Chraibi 2022). The book is an example of how creative discussions about sexuality fall prey to orientalist and Eurocentric perceptions of beauty and women's bodies. Similar criticisms have been articulated about the work of the young illustrator Zainab Fasiki. Fasiki has made a name as an artist by drawing naked women as a form of protesting the lack of freedom Moroccan women have to show their bodies. Her first book *Hshouma: Corps et Sexualité au Maroc* (Shame: Body and Sexuality in Morocco) (2019) has unsurprisingly been championed by French institutions and media (see, for example, Bergé 2017) because it supports the well-known, problematic ideas of *laicité*. However, early in her career, comments on her Facebook page highlighted the fact that her drawings were mostly of skinny women, reflecting the preferred Eurocentric body type and beauty standards. Although now deleted, Fasiki posted a response to this comment, justifying her drawings by claiming that she prefers to promote a 'healthy' lifestyle. Rania

[7] Watch the roundtable online at Eross@dcu (2022).

Laabid (2020) denounced Fasiki's aesthetics in an article written for the website of the women's magazine *Plurielle Maroc*. In the article, Laabid claims that while the world has saluted the courage of Fasiki's book in breaking taboos in Morocco, the result is deceptive. Among other arguments, Laabid finds fault in Fasiki's use of French instead of Arabic or Darija as well as the expensive price point of the book, which catered to European pockets rather than its intended Moroccan audience. Most importantly, Fasiki's words and style in addressing local feminists' concerns lacked nuance and perpetuated Eurocentric perspectives that victimise Moroccan women, particularly those who choose to wear a headcover. A common criticism from Moroccan journalists reporting on these books is that the authors have missed an opportunity to break feminists' concerns free from limited and limiting frameworks of Eurocentric binaries (oppressed versus liberated women).

Speaking about sexuality and human bodies is an opportunity to understand the power dynamics and intersections of colonialism, neoliberalism, religion, and, in particular, women's bodies. The complexity of local feminist movements may be viewed through the case of a group of young female rappers who conceal their faces on their social media accounts and music videos shared on YouTube. As previously suggested, heated online debates prove how sharing pictures of faces and bodies can be problematic for women's self-presentation. As a result, women in the region are discouraged from showing their bodies and faces online. Many choose to use pictures of flowers, digital avatars, ski masks, or surgical masks (especially after the Covid-19 pandemic) as a way of escaping social media's demands for images representing the self (Ghazal 2021). Like some male rappers such as Snor (see Chapter 3), female rappers Chimera la Bruna, Minerva, Alpha the Rapper, and Madrina, among others, began their artistic careers covering their faces completely or partially with different types of masks, using artwork and avatars. Covering their faces in order to maintain an online presence without suffering public slander on stage must not be equated to following Islamic modest fashion codes. The artwork of Chimera la Bruna's song 'Freesoul' (2021) shows an avatar of a woman wearing a black ski mask with a naked torso and holding a mic, an image drawn by Zainab Fasiki. The lips of the woman in the picture are as red as her eyes, which emit red lightning, a sign of power as suggested in Chapter 4. Alpha the Rapper's avatar for her song 'Fatality' (2020) depicts a masked woman in a tight body suit, resembling a female superhero, holding a sword and a fireball. Their creative performances might not fit within Eurocentric notions of female empowerment and women's agency – after all, they are covering their faces instead of showing them. As part of their exploration of the rap scene, however, this strategic choice shields young women from unwanted attention and harassment in their daily lives, granting them an initial safe space to start their careers. Additionally, this technique allows them to fight digital manspreading and an already overmasculine rap scene while they explore their artistry, keeping

the audience's attention on their rap skills, music, and artistry in their chosen avatars and images. A different case, as the last section of this chapter contends, is that of 'ordinary' women (versus artists) who, in creating content online through their bodies and labour, have been accused of defying not only traditional mores but also the well-established dichotomy between the good woman and the liberal feminist.

Exposing the Everyday *Unheimlich*

The proliferation of visual content online has exposed, as we have discussed, the blurry lines between public and private expectations of female roles that now need to be renegotiated in the digital sphere. Traditionally in North Africa and the Middle East, outdoor public spaces, such as the street, have been associated with men, while private indoor spaces, such as the home, have been associated with women. As Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji explain, 'Moroccan families often highlight the fact that their female members are closely tied to their homes, the ideal woman in Moroccan imagery being one who leaves her house only when absolutely necessary' (2006, p. 89). The fact that women must master the art of taking care of their home and family through their cooking and cleaning skills adds to their symbolic capital, making them desirable for marriage or examples of good wives, especially among low-income families (Ait Mous 2011). This expectation holds even for women from urban backgrounds who may have other jobs outside their homes or belong to privileged environments (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006).

The Moroccan YouTube subgenre *routini lyawmi* addresses unwritten rules that bestow the role of homemaker primarily on women from unprivileged backgrounds. While women in *routini lyawmi* may be daughters, wives, or mothers, they fail to fit into these traditional prescriptive roles. These videos showcase the talents of women in washing clothes, always by hand, cooking their best recipes in small kitchens from scratch, washing dishes, or tidying up and cleaning their *beldi* (lit. from my country, meaning traditionally Moroccan) living rooms, which also act as bedrooms. These videos showcase Moroccan homes that one could find in traditional and low-income neighbourhoods, such as those described by Fadma Ait Mous (2011) or Cristiana Strava (2017) in their work about Casablanca. European-style sitting rooms and apartments belong in middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods in urban centres. *Routini lyawmi* videos do not show upscale houses, but rather traditional houses haunted by the shame of run-down living spaces. Compared with the young, stylish female influencers proliferating across digital media within the region, *routini lyawmi* results are amateurish, featuring low-quality videos, shot with little staging of homes or professional lighting, and sparsely edited (if edited at all). The amateurship of the videos exposing ordinary

lives is increasingly grotesque due to the number of well-curated accounts showing lavish and luxurious lifestyles. These are not expensive houses or yachts, and the women do not use filters, do not have mainstream 'perfect' body types, do not appear wearing luxury garments or jewellery. The millions of views accumulated by these channels are a testament to the fact that people enjoy these videos, or at least feel a sense of familiarity and excitement (or excitement in their familiarity). In their success, however, *routini lyawmi* videos expose, online, what should remain within the 'secrecy' of one's home.

Anthropologist Cristiana Strava (2017, p. 336) links the everyday and routine practices of women through the framework of the un-homely. The term un-homely, rather than uncanny, is a translation of the word *unheimlich* that arguably remains closer to the German word's etymology. Through her interlocuter Amina, Strava argues that women's 'routines of daily care do as much to reproduce affects of un-homeliness as they do to contain them' (2017, p. 331). Together with other researchers (Das *et al.* 2008; Navaro-Yashin 2012), Strava argues that in the unprivileged neighbourhood of Hay Mohammadi in Casablanca, the *unheimlich* as the un-homely uncovers forms of liveable spaces from uncertain futures and precarious homes. The perspective of the *unheimlich* suggests that *routini lyawmi* videos, by showcasing how impoverished women transform their modest homes (by cooking, cleaning, etc.) into liveable spaces, offer spaces of empowerment for these women. As Strava narrates, 'through the bodily performance of daily routines and home-making practices, Amina worked to shore up her confidence in herself and in the future' (2017, p. 338). Online media affordances add to this heightened sense of self the opportunity to take control of their own futures, at least economically.

YouTuber Mi Naima Al-Badaouia is a middle-aged woman who, in 2019, started her own YouTube channel (مي نعيمة البدوية 2019). By May 2022 the channel had gathered more than 150 million views, with 17 videos having more than one million views each. Born in Moulay Yacoub, a small rural town in the mountains near Fes, she is married with children. Mi Naima, as she is known, gained her fame nationally in her regular appearances on the YouTube channel Marbouha TV (2016), owned by her neighbour Younes and his wife Samira. Younes's mother, Lala Hada (who also has her own YouTube channel (لالة حادة | Lala Hada 2018), were friends until Mi Naima accused her neighbours of not sharing the profit from their channel, primarily gained because of Mi Naima's popularity. At that point, Mi Naima started her own YouTube channel to continue showing her everyday life in the Moroccan countryside and to profit economically from this exposure. On her channel, videos show Mi Naima cooking traditional Moroccan dishes, shopping in the souk and mall, and having lunch with her family. Her most viewed post as of May 2022 is a 25-minute video capturing a family celebration. The video includes the sacrifice of a sheep and a 15-minute session of singing and

playing traditional drums. Her videos are minimally edited and typically filmed by a young man who familiarly calls her *khalti* (auntie) Naima and whom she greets at the start of each video. Mi Naima is endearing and charismatic, yet her power lies in how she has turned her everyday unpaid labour into economic profit. She has successfully turned 'everyday' life in a rural area of Morocco into desirable digital content that is worth watching, sharing, and, therefore, being monetised. Online exposure has also elevated Mi Naima to the status of an 'influencer', but this new role has not always played to Mi Naima's benefit. In 2020, she was imprisoned for three months for sharing a video in which she denied the existence of Covid-19 and encouraged people not to follow the sanitary measures imposed in Morocco that year (Menara.ma 2020).

Prominent Moroccan personalities such as journalist and radio host Ridouane Erramdani and the actress Kaoutar Berrani (LeSiteInfo.com 2021) have publicly reacted to Mi Naima's content. In one video, the YouTuber wishes evil and cancer on those who do not appreciate her work and press the dislike button. In their social media posts, both Erramdani and Berrani criticised Mi Naima for her lack of education and condemned her ill-willed desires. They even called for the eradication of YouTube channels of this type, referring to them as 'a virtual epidemic plague' (وباء الطاعون الافتراضي). Some online comments regarding the news of her imprisonment (see, for example, Djebbar 2020) reverberated with the narrative that Mi Naima is a monstrous, dangerous disease. User Sam claims: '*C est une inculte qui manque cruellement de connaissances! Et ce genres de personnes sont dangereuses!*' (She is an uneducated person who is sorely lacking in knowledge! And those kinds of people are dangerous!). Other users called out those who, alleging their superiority, were only looking to silence her:

> Quoi, on s'acharne sur une pauvre femme illettrée des bidonvilles ? Elle n'a fait que s'exprimer librement.Fini la liberté d'expression avec le covid? Une vielle femme qui fait un écart de conduite dans les réseaux sociaux,c'est le moindre de nos soucis en ces temps-ci et puis c'est grâce à ce genre de personnes que certaines peuvent se sentir supérieures et cultes même si elles ne valent pas mieux en fait.
>
> What, we're going after a poor illiterate woman from the slums? She only expressed herself freely. No more freedom of expression with the Covid? An old woman who misbehaves in social networks is the least of our worries in these times and then it is thanks to this kind of people that some can feel superior and cult even if they do not actually know better.

The danger posed by an unprivileged middle-aged woman suggests that her voice is constructed as monstrous not only because of her gender, but also because of her class. The evolution of these types of channels to provide sensual content raised the number of sources and tone of criticisms.

The success of daily routine channels has led other women to start channels with content that includes images of naked legs, low-cut necklines, or underwear. To capture an audience, videos on these channels include explicit hashtags such as '*fesses*' and 'ترمة', both explicit words referring to the backside in French and Darija, together with '*routini*' and 'France', 'Maroc', 'Algerie', and 'Saudi'. Such was the case with the now defunct Hanan Routini Lyawmi, a channel created in January 2022 that boasted more than one million views and over 10,000 subscribers after a few months (April 2022). The proliferation of these videos compelled the opaque organisation the Moroccan Office of Human Rights (Bureau Marocain des Droits de L'homme (BMDH), which should not be confused with the activist group L'Association Marocain des Droits Humains (AMDH)) to call on the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA, Haute autorité de la communication audiovisuelle) to put an end to these videos. In a message sent to HACA president Latifa Akherbach, the BMDH claimed that 'these women and young girls appearing on the "my daily routine" videos, who are most of them married and mothers, are responsible for the dislocation of homes' (K.B. 2020). These videos, according to the president of the BMDH, are 'obscene and violent' and are available for adults and minors, yet they have not been censored by YouTube. These videos, according to this letter, pose a 'real menace for family structures … [because] they incite disrespect and depravity of morals within homes' (K.B. 2020). Two years later, as detailed at the beginning of this chapter, this petition arrived at parliament. Addressing the matter, the Minister of Youth, Culture, and Communication reiterated the lack of laws to regulate such content politically, inviting people disturbed by these videos to denounce the issue through the judicial system as a private matter. In this act, the minister eludes the disciplinary responsibility of the state, leaving the practice of shaming and punishment in the hands of individuals and the Moroccan judicial system.

For critics of *routini lyawmi*, these videos and these women are too ordinary, too unprofessional, some too sexy, and most of them too poor and old (in the case of Mi Naima, but this also applies to the artist Tnana) to deserve a space online. The fact that they are 'exposing' themselves is problematic, but the fact that they are doing it shamelessly and gaining money for it is unforgivable. Through the language used by critics of these female monsters, these women are an abomination that publicly threatens patriarchal rules that regulate the sensuality of unprivileged Moroccan women's bodies also within the public digital sphere. They are horrifying because, as Barbara Creed suggests when speaking about the consequences of the protagonist from the film *The Exorcist* (1973) blaspheming in front of two priests,

> a woman has broken with her proper feminine role – she has 'made a spectacle of herself' – put her unsocialized body on display. And to make matters worse, she has done all of this before the shocked eyes of two male clerics. (1993, p. 42)

Thus, in this case, it is the 'good' women, as role models of motherhood and homemaking, who are threatening traditional mores by showing and revealing, on public social media platforms, the privacy of their homes and their bodies. As expressed by lawyer and activist member of Collectif 490/Moroccan Outlaws Ghizlane Mamouni, the Moroccan penal code categorises rape in the chapter on Family and Public Order rather than the chapter on Protection to Individuals. In cases of sex outside wedlock, abortion, or homosexuality, Mamouni explains, the provisions are focused on protecting public order and morality instead of individuals.[8] As Mamouni reminds us, this code was established by the French rule in Morocco and inspired by Napoleon's code of 1810 and has not changed since the 1960s. Indignation from online participants, local NGOs, and political groups shows the lack of accountability of critics whose focus is on preserving morality in public spaces, rather than addressing issues such as poverty, unsanitary living, old laws inherited from the colonial rule, and impossible futures that especially affect unprivileged women. Moreover, online criticisms also indicate, as Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2014) contend, that ordinary people use the affordances of digital media as a new form of surveillance. The online outrage is picked up by traditional news media and, in this case, by people with important social media followings to contain the spread of these gendered and classed monstrous viruses that seek to destroy the social order.

Shame plays a pivotal role in regulating and limiting women who produce social content that challenges societal norms, but it can also be seen as a source of empowerment. Feminist, postcolonial, performance, and digital media theorists have suggested that shame can have transformative potential (Kapchan 1994; Pedwell 2013; Sundén and Paasonen 2018). In this context, shame is evoked from the discomfort of some viewers not being able to control or dictate women's bodies. Shamelessly, these women are gaining economic profit out of their lack of shame in exhibiting their own, often precarious, homes. It is in this way that the women behind *routini lyawmi* resonate with criticism of *shikhat* (sing. *shikha*).

Moroccan female professional performers (singer-dancers), called *shikhat*, are known to challenge the Moroccan moral system (Ciucci 2012). In one of the first studies on *shikhat*, Deborah Kapchan identified how these performers 'trace the patterns of propriety and impropriety in Moroccan culture' (1994, p. 82) through their bodies of shamelessness. As with *shikhat* before, *routini lyawmi* threatens the boundaries of what is public and private. More importantly, these women emulate *shikhat*'s transformation of sexuality into a product of consumption, as Kapchan asserts, turning themselves into 'a fetishized commodity occupying the margins of Moroccan society' (1994, p. 83).

[8] Talk given at the roundtable 'Queered Women', organised by the research cluster EROSS (Expressions Research Orientations: Sexuality Studies) at the Dublin City University conference Queer Maghreb Matters, March 2022 (Eross@dcu 2022).

The danger remains that these women, both *shikhat* and *routini lyawmi*, may fall into the neoliberal trap that frames women's empowerment in terms of economic success. Particularly in the case of the *routini lyawmi* women, one could argue that these are, in fact, empowered women in the sense that they have taken economic control of their own lives and, arguably, their households. However, thinking in these terms feeds into notions of 'platform capitalism's optimism for empowerment through consumerism' (Hurley 2021, pp. 1–2). For this reason, instead of the language of neoliberal power (empowerment versus disempowerment), that of horror and the monstrous woman opens the doors to discuss these women's social and political actions. Debates emerging from these women's presence online revolve around the threat to traditional social mores and social roles; the visibility or invisibility of economic hardship; the burdensome labour of homemaking and working motherhood; and oversimplified notions that speak of social media affordances as guarantors of women's empowerment and development. In exhibiting poor homes using unedited bodies and videos, *routini lyawmi* women take a step further than *shikhat*, who do not perform in their own homes. As such, *routini lyawmi* shame not only themselves but also their homes and their families. In his book, Tarek El-Ariss cites Andallah Al-Ghadhdami in referring to Twitter as 'a house made of glass for whosoever enter it is no longer safe' (2019, p. 99). From Al-Ghadhdami's insights, El-Ariss concludes that digital compulsion and radical exposure lead to the collapse of the hidden, breaking down the space of the private. *Routini lyawmi* YouTube videos instigate such a feeling of transparency, exposure, and unsafety. What these women do is threaten patriarchal roles embodied in men's idealisations of what makes a home homely and turn those homes into gothic *unheimlich* spaces controlled by monstrous sexual women as disruptive as the legendary Aicha Qandisha.

The Return of Aicha Qandisha

The history of monstrous Moroccan women threatening traditional roles may also be linked to the myth of Aicha Qandisha. As detailed in Chapter 3, Aicha Qandisha is one of the most influential female creatures in contemporary feminist culture and media. She is described as having the body of a beautiful woman but with goat's hooves. Deborah Kapchan describes her as 'an attractive and dangerous she-demon' (2007, p. 112), while Bertrand Hell (2002) characterises her as arrogant and insensitive. In her analysis on spiritual possession in Morocco, Cynthia Becker (2020) has collected stories on Aicha Qandisha, who is claimed to be a dangerous spirit. She is particularly unsettling in matters relating to sexuality, including resolving infertility, impotency, or laying with unmarried men (2020, p. 155). Drawing on Vincent Crapanzano (1973), Becker suggests that Aicha Qandisha embodies female qualities seen as problematic such as treachery and

sexual insatiability, as well as men's inability to live up to social expectations (2020, p. 155). Possession by Aicha Qandisha in men and women, Becker observes, results in screaming loudly and disrobing, as well as ripping off head scarfs: 'Possession by Aisha Qandisha relies on the performance of marginalization and rebelliousness against both personal responsibility and gender norms on a conservative, patriarchal society' (2020, p. 156). Similarly to how Aicha Qandisha is said to invade the beds of men with whom she decides to lay, women in *routini lyawmi* and *shikhat* reshape an intimacy beyond the control of men's desires.

For Iranian artist Morehshin Allahyari, the Moroccan monster Aicha Qandisha is a source of decolonised empowerment. In her project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (Allahyari 2021), traditions and myths allow her to explore the catastrophes of colonialism, patriarchism, and environmental degradation in relationship to North Africa and the Middle East. These figures, the monstrous, the dark goddess, and the jinns, are an opportunity to transmit the rage she felt 'against a system that admired womanhood that was linked to being a good obedient wife and a sacrificing mother' (Doostdar and Allahyari 2020, p. 174). Largely aligning with the perspective of liberal feminists, Allahyari embraces the monstrous due to her interest in the 'bad girl figure, the non-religious, slightly anarchist, sometimes *slutty* and always intimidating' (Doostdar and Allahyari 2020, p. 174).

Debates surrounding the cultural significance of *shikhat* as part of Morocco's national culture also emerged in 2022. After the television show *L'Maktoub*, which told the story of the daughter of a *shikhat* who is bullied at school but eventually becomes proud of her mother, aired during the holy month of Ramadan, the series gained popularity not only on television but also on YouTube. Criticisms have been directed towards the positive promotion of *shikhat*, which to this day is considered as 'obscene, socially offending and religiously forbidden' (Rahhou 2022). *Shikhat* and *routini lyawmi* are seen as similar to Aicha Qandisha, as seducers of men, stealing them from their wives. Moreover, these women exhibit Moroccan women's ordinary bodies as sexually active and desirable for all to witness. Adding another layer of meaning, instead of a comfortable and familiar setting, *L'Maktoub* and *routini lyawmi* shed an uncomfortable light on the hardships of everyday lives. Such a complex portrayal disrupts the dichotomy of deviant feminists versus 'good' women, revealing highly entangled forms of femininity. In the act of exposing and exhibiting everyday routines, these women do more than uncover their bodies to the viewer; they reveal a reality that the state and its people know but prefer to keep concealed.

The following chapter will delve into the topic of the *unheimlich* in digital media through the lenses of the postcolonial gothic. This framework links the digital grotesque and the *unheimlich* not only as expressions of individual's homes and bodies, but also in the idea of homewrecking as the decay of the postcolonial national project.

7

Dis-meme-bering the Nation

At this juncture in the book, it is evident that online content has not shied away from raising critical voices, even daring to challenge the country's red lines, particularly when it comes to criticising the monarchy.[1] During the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010–11, a study on humour on Facebook pages by Mohamed Mifdal (2016) revealed a surge in political satire. Despite this increase in critical content, Mifdal (2016, p. 58) notes that netizens remained hesitant to express likes on satirical posts that overstepped the red lines influenced by daily media reports on the Syrian revolution and civil war that resulted from the uprisings. In the aftermath of the uprisings, sometimes not unproblematically labelled as the Arab Winter (see Introduction), however, Morocco experienced a period marked by a decline in online content-related persecution from 2016–19. This period of relative calm for netizens was corroborated by the former Moroccan Minister of Justice, Mustapha Ramid, in 2015. The King, Ramid claimed, had ordered him to refrain from pressing charges against citizens criticising the King, expressing his desire for Moroccans to respect him rather than fear him (Morocco World News 2015). In the 2010s, the younger generation of online participants had grown up under the rule of Mohammed VI. Since ascending to the throne in 1999, the monarch's reign had been promoted as the guiding force steering the country towards a democratic future, erasing, in turn, the memory of the extreme repression during the Years of Lead.

Despite the decrease in persecutions and the minister's statement, between 2016 and 2019 digital media continued to be under scrutiny. In January 2016, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, enabling users to make calls over the internet through apps such as WhatsApp and Skype, were blocked in Morocco, causing significant discontent among the population. This measure especially impacted personal communications with the Moroccan diaspora. The same year, a new Press Code was introduced, replacing jail sentences for journalists

[1] This chapter includes excerpts published in Moreno-Almeida (2020).

with significant economic fines for crossing the state's red lines. The crucial point was that journalists would face imprisonment if they could not afford to pay the fine or if charges were pursued through the penal code. While this new code was meant to be a step towards democratic change, as discussed in Part II of this book, uncomfortable voices were silenced through other strategies such as character assassination. A new wave of persecutions for online content began in autumn 2019. However, this previous period of calm witnessed a global boom of meme culture. The popularisation of memes, together with a certain relaxation in state persecution for online content-related criticism, contributed to the proliferation of satirical meme pages in Morocco.

In Morocco, humour has historically been part of public culture, from the outdoor performances of the *halqa* tradition and television shows, to the more recent humour festivals dedicated to comedy, and then online with YouTubers, animated cartoons, memes, and trolls.[2] Considerable research has been devoted to the study of satire and humour in cultural production in the country (especially by scholars at Ibn Zohr University in Agadir (see Chaib 2011)) and in particular the role of political satire in Moroccan media published in the 2010s (Bouhmala 2018; el Khairat 2015; El Marzouki 2015; Mifdal 2014, 2016). This research aligns with the global increase of political humour and of studies that look into political satire, communication, and activism in relation to digital media as seen in the work of Day (2011), El Marzouki (2015), and Ferrari (2018). Political satire existed after the country gained independence in 1956, but mocking the King was not tolerated. Comedians were required to redirect their political humour towards members of the government. Several expert scholars on Moroccan politics (Boukhars 2011; Brumberg 2002; Combs-Schilling 1999; Errihani 2013; Hammoudi 1997; Maghraoui 2011; Zartman 1990) have exposed this strategy as a part of authoritarian practices. Criticism directed at elected government officials and the political opposition deflects from the monarchy being held responsible for the country's malaises, and jokes the institution's expense, and creates the illusion that Morocco is on its way to democratic change. The focus on politicians also perpetuates the notion that the country needs the King as arbiter and as the guarantor of stability (Maghraoui 2011, p. 681). For this reason, despite a long history of political jokes, such humour often occurs behind closed doors or is whispered in cafés or other public spaces in North Africa and the Middle East (Kishtainy 2009, pp. 57–8). As expressed by Ahmed Sanoussi, a well-known Moroccan comedian and member of the comic duo Bziz et Baz, during the last years of Hassan II's rule: 'Dictators detest political satire … . They cannot laugh and they cannot bear to have anyone else laugh at their pomposity, their arrogance and their power. But humor helps us cope. Humor is the tip of tragedy' (Hedges 1995).

[2] *Halqa* (meaning 'circle') is a performance in a public space that includes music, dance, storytellers, and fortune-tellers.

As part of the efforts to control, sanitise, and depoliticise humour, in recent years stand-up shows have been festivalised.[3] The Festival Marrakech du Rire is part of a highly successful government strategy in which the country funds cultural production (music, cinema, graffiti, etc.) and turns it into a festival under the high patronage of the King. This serves to break from the authoritarian past and 'to enhance the image of Morocco as an authentic yet modern, tolerant, and diverse country' (Graiouid and Belghazi 2013, p. 262). Founded by renowned French-Moroccan comedian Jamel Debbouze, the festival is promoted as '[t]he largest comedy festival in the Francophone world' (Latrech 2022). It is, however, far from the free, open-air *halqas* that can be heard and seen around the popular square Jemaa El Fna in Marrakech. The event takes place in theatres, with pricy tickets starting from 900 DH (£72) per show. Although performances are later broadcast on national television, the live audience is limited to mainly middle- and upper-class Moroccans as the shows are conducted entirely in French (see Chapter 8). On its surface, the festival gives the impression of a state that encourages laughter and mockery, particularly in the eyes of international audiences. Its underlying purpose, however, is to control and co-opt humour and aspiring humourists, especially those in the French diaspora. While some criticism is allowed, it is far less than what is seen in the examples of political satire shared online involving the King, as this chapter discusses.

Humour as a survival strategy is highlighted by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, p. 47) when he states that fear is defeated by laughter. Laughter, Bakhtin claims, 'liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from fear that developed in man during thousands of years: the fear of the sacred, fear of prohibitions, of the past, of power' (1984, p. 94). The connection between fear and laughter, humour and tragedy, especially under authoritarian regimes, underpins this chapter. In this regard, while political satire may work to trigger social change (see Bouhmala 2018; El Marzouki 2015), political humour can also act as a diagnostic tool with which to understand the cultural ecosystem: 'jokes are not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behaviour, but they are social thermometers that measure, record and indicate what is going on' (Davis 2009, p. 9). From this perspective, Moroccan amateur media activists, as El Marzouki refers to online participants involved in political content, use political satire not only 'as a communicative strategy to criticize regime power, [but also to] negotiate democratic change, and demand solutions to social and economic problems' (2015, p. 283). Reflecting on political satire through horror, this chapter contends, brings to the surface important narratives that speak of the nation as an un-homely home. By providing a critical perspective on memes devoted to mocking the symbols of the postcolonial nation, the chapter does not

[3] For more on the festivalisation of urban spaces, see Belghazi (2006).

just reflect on changing attitudes towards the state's red lines, namely the King and the nation. It also argues that in their grotesque nature, memes dismember, or rather 'dis-meme-ber', mainstream narratives of the postcolonial nation enforced from above by the country's elites. Following the official motto of Morocco as expressed in Article 4 of the 2011 Constitution and the national anthem, 'God, the Nation, and the King', this chapter reads daring content involving the latter two as an assault not only on power, but also on the construction of an idealised postcolonial national project. Through the notion of the postcolonial gothic, dis-meme-berment denotes memes utilising the digital grotesque to expose the shortcomings of the postcolonial nation.

Horror and Humour in the Memesphere

The emergence of sarcastic digital vernacular terms as part of meme culture suggests an intrinsic connection between memes and humour. One of these forms of sarcastic digital jargon is the 'lulz', which translates as a form of laughter derived from 'LOL' (laugh out loud). Reinforced by the anonymity of memers, the 'lulz' displays a twisted form of 'LOL' standing on the fine line between irony, cynicism, and hatred (May and Feldman 2019; Miller-Idriss 2017). Originating within imageboards and their digital infrastructures (see Chapter 2), the 'lulz' defies liberal perceptions of what is politically correct as a strategy to spread through the laughter of participants. Memes thrive on this appetite for anti-politically correct sarcasm, leading to a specialised language mostly reserved for imageboard users that differentiates between types of memes according to their level of sophistication and obscurantism. Normie memes are those digital items which are recognisable, overused, and that everyone understands and therefore are dismissed as unimaginative and uninteresting. On the opposite side are dank memes, those that are difficult to decode and are perceived as creative, original, and exciting. The repository website for memes, Know Your Meme, describes normie as 'a slang pejorative label for an individual who is deemed to be boringly conventional or mainstream by those who identify themselves as nonconformists' (Roy 2015). Dank memes are, however, defined within the parameters of humour as 'ironic expression[s] used to describe online viral media and in-jokes that are intentionally bizarre, or have exhausted their comedic value to the point of being trite or cliché' (Don 2014). Although the distinction between normie and dank memes may be unknown to broader audiences, humour, even when offensive, remains one of the reasons for the success of memes (Shifman 2014). As researchers have argued, this is most probably because humour creates opportunities for bonding over common enemies, whether they be oppressive rulers (see Fluri 2019; Pearce and Hajizada 2014; Wedeen 2013), a patriarchal system (see Griffin 2020), climate

change (see Boykoff and Osnes 2019), or efforts to dehumanise an Other (see Massanari and Chess 2018; Yoon 2016). Memes' tendency towards particularly offensive humour, as part of their inception myth, in combination with their grotesque aesthetics, is where laughter meets horror.

Noël Carroll (1999) contends that horror and humour are intimately related. Although horror and comedy might provoke different responses in the audience, '[c]omedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin' (Carroll 1999, p. 146). Citing Robert Bloch, the author of the novel *Psycho* (1959), Carroll adds that their connection is underlined by the fact that both horror and humour deal with the grotesque and the unexpected. Accordingly, they are both 'necessarily linked to the problematization, violation, and transgression of standing categories, norms, and concepts' (Carroll 1999, p. 152). Although predictable, this reasoning finds its resonance with Bakhtin's understanding of the shared elements between humour and the grotesque as part of the carnivalesque. To Bakhtin (1984, p. 10), the carnival is a time when hierarchies, privileges, norms, and prohibitions are, at least temporarily, suspended.

An examination of some of the most popular and daring Moroccan Facebook meme pages reveals a clear affinity for the grotesque to achieve comedic effects. Slurs and references to demons and trolls, mental health illnesses, deformity, and racialised bodies are abundant in pages that, following the tenets of meme culture, are designed to cause strong reactions among the audience. These pages, some of which have already disappeared, include Moroccan Demons, Maghreb D'zab (translates as 'Morocco of the dick'), Moroccan Black, Moroccan Mehh Memes, Moroccan Madness, Moroccan Rap Trolls, and Pimp My Cancer 3.0. Their irreverent content thrives due to the anonymity maintained by the administrators of the pages, making them nearly impossible to contact. Throughout my online ethnography, I attempted to contact the administrators of these pages via Facebook messenger to inquire about their work. Most of my messages were ignored, and some were even mocked.

One of the most active pages, Moroccan Demons, offered me a brief opportunity to exchange a few words with two of the site administrators. Moroccan Demons is a group of memers who have a history of sharing memes critical of governance as well as other social issues. As the administrators of this page explained, they started their first page, called Moroccan Assholes, in 2015. Facebook took their page down several times, likely due to its provocative name. Consequently, they rebranded as Moroccan Demons. Under a new name since 2016, Moroccan Demons has gathered over 200,000 likes (February 2023). During our brief chat, the administrators said that their new name was determined by the will to present an alternative cultural commentary: 'we chose demons as a symbol of being straight to the point, to present the dark side of humans without pushing policy that tries to describe the situation as perfect' (Message exchange with

author, 5 December 2019). Unfortunately, our exchange was brief because the administrators expressed a high level of distrust in discussing their social media profile with anyone. Analysing the sarcastic memes this page has shared over the years, their demonic name and image serves as an example of how many of these pages combine humour and horror as a way of dismantling messages of development and progress employed to market the image the country wants to portray.

Trolling the Master

Prior to the proliferation of visual culture on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, public pictures of the royal family were limited to those officially distributed to the press or those displayed on the walls of coffee shops, hotel lobbies, and every official building in Morocco. With the vast reach of the internet, photographs of King Mohammed VI, in particular, along with his son Prince Moulay Hassan and other members of the royal family, have evolved into a more candid portrayal of the monarchy. In the digital era, many of the photos available online show the King wearing informal attire and engaging in informal activities such as taking pictures with ordinary citizens. These paparazzi-style photographs imagine the monarch as a renowned film or pop star, marketing the King as friendly and close to the people. This shift in public representations of the monarchy is significant in a country where rulers have been shaped as sacred figures and where criticisms of the royal family continue to be one of the red lines in the country. As a reminder, Article 46 of the 2011 Constitution requires respect for the King and positions him above the law ('the King is inviolable, and respect is due to Him').

Behind the proliferation of non-official content, there appear to be well-curated efforts to profit from social media affordances to transform the image of the monarchy. At a time when pictures of the monarch remained limited to public appearances, an ordinary citizen began to share a suspiciously large number of intimate images of the King and the royal family. The images were shared on a personal Facebook account by Soufiane ElBahri (سفيان البحري) and also on his Facebook page, Soufiane ElBahri: Roi du Maroc Mohammed VI, which gained 3.4 million followers between 2009 and January 2023. It seemed unbelievable in the early 2010s that he could have access to these images of the King and could share them without repercussions. His social media activity raised suspicions from some Spanish newspapers, who suggested that ElBahri might be an online spy working for the Moroccan secret services (Casqueiro 2014a; De la Cal 2018). Other pages which tried to emulate this content, collected throughout the research for this book, no longer exist, and ElBahri's page has not gained followers but rather has lost a hundred thousand subscribers since 2019. Although the account

and page might have served as a marketing strategy to promote the monarchy's popularity before, and especially during and after, the 2010–11 uprisings, this type of content is not as noteworthy a decade later.

The explosion of meme culture, together with images depicting a new and informal digital monarch, opened the door for users to be creative in Photoshopping and generating memes of the King. The change in attitude towards the King is visually apparent in a meme shared by the satirical news Facebook page Le36. The meme presents an older, formal photograph of the King and a current, informal one, responding to the ten-year challenge hashtag (#10yearchallenge) which went viral at the beginning of 2019. In the first image, the monarch wears a suit, while in the second the King is dressed in shorts with a sleeveless tank top adorned with a marihuana leaf and American flag, holding a tote bag. The unusual and daring attire of the latter hints at a Photoshopped picture. Despite this, the second image represents new attitudes towards the King and the inviolability of his persona in public display, profiting from new digital tools and new aesthetics trends.

As part of memes of Mohammed VI during the hashtag #10yearchallenge trend, one meme showed two pictures: one with King Mohammed VI with his former wife Princess Lalla Salma as the older image, and a second one of the King with the German Moroccan UFC fighter Abu Azaitar as the current one. This photo collage sarcastically addresses rumours surrounding the King's private life: his divorce (only made public in summer 2019) and an alleged romantic relationship with the relatively unknown sportsman Abu Azaitar. Both rumours were intensified by the lack of pictures with his former wife versus the numerous Instagram posts on Abu Azaitar's page where he appears in informal settings with the monarch. A later meme posted on 14 February plays with this same narrative, showing Abu Azaitar with the message 'Joyeuse Saint Valentin' (Happy Valentine's Day). Behind a rather meaningless image of a public figure extending Happy Valentine's Day wishes lies a daring message to the throne: ten years ago, the King was the master (handsome, heterosexual, married to a woman, and the righteous ruler), and now he has become a meme (and the antithesis of all the above). This time, however, mocking the monarch shows not only a lack of fear, at least at the time, of openly discussing the King's romantic life, but also the fact that his approachability may have become problematic.

In an era when traditional symbols of power may not resonate as effectively with young people living in the digital age, looking friendly and approachable in pictures posted on Facebook may work to connect with the new generation. On the one hand, these pictures realign the monarchy with a new generation, speaking the language of digital media. Humorous memes and casual outfits on social media also perform renewed forms of bonding with ordinary people, which contributes to the positioning, both nationally and internationally, of Morocco as a liberal and modern country. On the other hand, these memes run the risk

of demystifying the traditional sacredness of the King, aligning him too closely with ordinary people and therefore threatening his legitimacy. As Rahma Bourqia argues, excessive references to modernity might convey the message that the King renounces the legitimacy he has inherited; however, an insufficient dose 'would open the way for a militant defence of modernization' (1999, p. 251).

Historically, simple garments such as the traditional white djellaba have contributed to presenting the King as an ordinary man, 'blurring distinctions between men so that each man becomes an Everyman, formed through gazing and mimicking the king' (Combs-Schilling 1999, p. 183). A meme of King Mohammed VI and his son visiting the Élysée Palace to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War in 2018 challenges this function of traditional attire. The official picture shows the King wearing the traditional Moroccan black cloak or *selham* (سلهام). In a meme posted by Moroccan Demons, the image is modified to depict the King and his son as Batman and Robin, ridiculing the royal family through the traditional garment. Mocking the *selham*, in spite of its Moroccanness, ridicules the King and his use of such a marker of national material culture to blend with ordinary people. Traditionally, the Moroccan King has sought to visually blend with other ordinary men by not wearing a crown or jewels that differentiate him from the others. At the same time, in wearing the white robe or the cape, other men participate in a ritual that blurs and complicates 'the boundaries between self and monarch, individual and ruler, for the two – in some domains – become fused' (Combs-Schilling 1999, p. 184). Mocking the cape has the opposite effect to what Combs-Schilling argues is the purpose of wearing the white robe. Instead of facilitating bonding with the ruler, the cloak helps memers to comically depict the King and his son as rather odd superheroes.

It is essential to remember that the success of memes is partly dependent on their capacity to provoke strong reactions among netizens. Featuring the royal family in memes, jokes, rap songs, or any other cultural format, as previous chapters have evidenced, grants attention to and the survival of the cultural artefact. Mocking the King ensures traffic to a social media page, increased views, reactions, and engagement in general. The uglier, odder, and more vulgar the elites appear, the more strongly these memes threaten the state's red lines, and the more views and engagement the cultural item will garner. In blurring the lines between the sacred and mundane, however, we should consider the symbolic capital the monarchy may gain in appearing as approachable. Such an image, arguably, dangerously humanises the monster, an issue this book discusses further in Part IV. Regardless of the dual-edged impact of reshaping the image of the King through memes' intrinsic grotesque aesthetics, these memes show the potential to question the ways in which memers can assault the symbols of the postcolonial nation. By altering the King's persona, memes are able to disintegrate the sacred figure of the

monarch and, with grotesque new representations, dismember one of the three symbols of the nation. In what follows, I further develop the notion of dis-memeberment by analysing other memes that question the success of the postcolonial national project.

Memories of Al-Andalus

During the first months of 2019, the popular song 'Chams al Achya' (The Evening Sun) became a viral meme. In Morocco, this song is the soundtrack of Eid al-Fitr celebrations marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Every year, public television plays this tune, which emotionally resonates in Moroccan homes on this sacred day. As familiar as this song is to many Moroccans, it exists in the background played on television sets. In an interview with BBC Arabic (كراشة, 2020), Abdel Salam Al Kheloufi, a Moroccan researcher who specialises in music heritage, situates 'Chams al Achya' as the Andalusi motif of the morning and evening sun. The lyrics of this *zajal* (زجل), sung in colloquial Andalusi Arabic, tells the story of one person falling in love with another person and asking the evening not to end. Al-Kheloufi claims the song, authored by an unknown figure, was popularised by the acclaimed Moroccan singer Mohamed Bajeddoub. Practised throughout North Africa, the consumption of Andalusi music or Andalusi nuba (*Nouba Andalusiyya*) in everyday lives is mostly not commonplace. Traditionally confined to the upper classes and to a passive position by most of the population, the emergence of TV, radio, and digital media, and its performance at festivals such as the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music, means that Andalusi music is now heard well beyond its traditional urban centres of Chefchaouen, Fes, Oujda, Rabat, and Tetouan.

Andalusi music received its name during the colonial era; before that, it was only known by its stylistic elements, *al aala* or *noubat al aalaat* (turn-taking of instruments) (Shannon 2007, p. 321). Its new name supports the genre's connection with the linear narrative of a glorious past when the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula. This traditional music serves to effectively bind Al-Andalus (711–1492) to postcolonial Morocco (1956). Andalusi music embodies nostalgia for Al-Andalus as a golden era, evoked and remembered in the formation of Morocco's (and Algeria's) postcolonial national identity. Andalusi music has become emblematic of a 'new national identity, providing a model of "high culture" to rival (or perhaps supplant) that of Europeans, authenticated by an unbroken historical tradition' (Langlois 2009, pp. 213–14). Andalusi music has been, and still is, particularly important for the nationalist urban elites that recreated, with its new name, the linear narrative of a glorious past that engaged with the nationalist urge during the struggle for independence

to evoke the image of an ideal precolonial and unbroken history (Langlois 2009, pp. 213–14; Shannon 2007, p. 321).

Contemporary music genres have seldom sought inspiration in Andalusi music, favouring instead local Moroccan popular musical styles such as Gnawa and chaabi, as well as instruments such as the gimbri or the qraqeb. During the 2000s, heirs to Nass El Ghiwane's fusion music, Hoba Hoba Spirit, Darga, Khansa Batma, and Mazagan – to name just a few – experimented with mixing local sounds with pop and rock. Actress and singer Khansa Batma entered the music scene in 2001 with her first album, *Sharq wa Gharb* (East and West), featuring Moroccan traditional songs performed on European instruments. Two years later, Batma released her second album, *Ala Abwab El Sahra* (At the Doors of Sahara, 2003), intended to depict a journey that connected southern Spain and North Africa all the way to Sudan. For musicians interested in innovating with new sounds to appeal to broader urban youth audiences, Andalusi music was already too entrenched in the Moroccan establishment, upper classes, and national holidays. One exception is the 2008 rap song 'Attarikh' (The History) by the well-known group Fnaïre. Now rebranded as global music, this rap group from Marrakech released the single as an homage to Morocco's 12 centuries of history. By choosing Andalusi music, Fnaïre linked past and present, situating themselves within a particular music tradition shaped by Moroccan elites.[4]

In the digital sphere prior to 2019, Al-Andalus was mostly referenced in line with mainstream political narratives. Discourses began to change with the explosion of meme pages sharing content about Morocco's historical past. Serious memes were posted on pages engaged in reminiscing about Moroccan history without a pre-established political agenda. However, the use of humour in some of these pages has been mostly reserved for local reactionary alt-right meme pages grouped as the Moorish Movement, as further discussed in Chapter 9 (more in Moreno-Almeida 2021; Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021). Thriving on social media, new symbols of Moroccan nationalism that are only present online have appropriated Al-Andalus to speak about Morocco's illustrious past. In their memes, the Moorish Movement has fused this historical episode with at least two other distinct slogans: the Nasrid (1230–1492) motto Alhambra ولا غالب إلا الله (*Wa-la ghaaliba illa Allah*, There is no victor but God), which can be found in Arabic on the walls of the Alhambra in Granada;[5] and Donald Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again', adapted for Morocco as 'Make Morocco Great Again'.[6] While Moroccan nationalists, in their struggle for independence from

[4] I have further explored this song in Moreno-Almeida (2016).

[5] As Eric Calderwood (2018) points out, this motto reappears on Moroccan buildings and on the cover of the newspaper *Titwan* as a way to link Moroccan history with Al-Andalus.

[6] In the region this motto has also emerged as 'Making Arabia Great Again' or 'Making Iran Great Again' (Jones 2022).

European powers, used Al-Andalus to construct an essentialised and homogenised, progress-oriented history of the nation based on the assumption of cultural continuity (Burke 1998, p. 5), digital artefacts produced by the Moorish Movement suggest a changing perspective that blends new forms of patriotism, illiberal ideologies, and the language of the anglophone alt-right. For the first time, instead of taking pride in the diverse North African dynasties that ruled over Al-Andalus, and in Morocco's role as the custodian of the legacy of Al-Andalus (after Jewish and Muslim communities were expelled from Iberia after the fall of Granada in 1492), North African ultra-nationalist trolls have been capitalising on digital culture's affordances to reimagine the present symbolic value of Al-Andalus.

The 'Chams' Meme

The links between Al-Andalus, the Moroccan establishment, and the unique interest in it among new meme pages underpins the peculiarity of the 'Chams al Achya' meme (henceforth, 'Chams' meme). Interpreted by the Moroccan singer Abderrahim Souiri, the song 'Chams al Achya' (Y. OU 2014) assumes a central role in video memes shared online,[7] all of which have a similar structure: the video begins with a real-life event that goes awry, at which moment the image slows down, turns to black and white, and the song 'Chams al Achya' comes on; the video then ends or is followed by other video memes, as we will explore later. The event is always a brutal episode of failure: a car accident, someone falling, a fight, and so forth.

The song's revival beyond its connection to traditional events and settings (Eid or traditional concert settings, both live and on TV) may be explained through the way the song has been repackaged within digital popular culture. The meme has reinvigorated Souiri's career, introducing him to a new generation of young people on social media. Comments on the YouTube video of Souiri's 'Chams' song dating from 2019 express the fact that it is the meme, specifically, that brought digital participants to the song. User hihi eee says '*Ta7yya lss7ab lmemes*' (Shout out to the meme people), while other users write 'When you realise your music is a meme in 2019' and 'Just came from the meme lol', both originally written in English. These comments reveal that while the song is played every year on television, it is the meme that made these users search for and rediscover the song, in turn bringing Andalusi music and Souiri himself back to life for youth culture in 2019. It also suggests that the song has been lying dormant for years, mostly relegated to passive consumption except among those invested in Andalusi music,

[7] Adnan Sefiani's version of 'Chams al Achya' (Oriental Music 2018) sounds similar to Abderrahim Souiri's; however, it is the latter that has been mostly identified with the voice behind the meme.

and lacking any active engagement, at least online. While the song has long been among the background sounds associated with Eid inside Moroccan homes, it was rarely seen as worthy of attention before it became a meme.

The original beauty of this song, together with the formality of its performance, contrast with the mash-up of low-quality excerpts of violent moving images to induce laughter. From formal settings of the Andalusi orchestra, whose members dress in seamless white djellabas and sometimes red tarbouches, the meme visually transports the audience to a new and grotesque world. Humour is sometimes extended by incorporating the closing credits of the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* TV show into some versions of the meme to simulate a micro-short film. The closing credits and the music of this HBO show, which chronicles a fictionalised version of the life of Larry David (the producer of Seinfeld), have become a meme inserted into other memes narrating everyday mishaps to add a humorous effect. The *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song meme remixes the show's opening and closing song 'Frolic' by Italian composer Luciano Michelini. Like 'Chams al Achya', this song has also enjoyed a second life since Larry David discovered it by accident in a bank commercial. The song was composed in the early 1970s for the Italian film *Il Barone Rosso* (1974) to depict a funny character. In David's words, the song 'sort of introduces the idea that you're in for something pretty idiotic' (The Paley Center for Media 2009). The song 'Frolic' and the 'Curb' meme are still circulating in the third decade of the 2000s, paired with popular cringeworthy clips to give events a humorous character. As the 'Chams' meme incorporates the 'Curb' meme, the result is a Frankensteinesque ultra-short film which dislocates the original song from its traditional, polished setting.

After the meme was popularised, content creator Mustapha Swinga produced, starred in, and shared online a horror micro-short film inspired by the meme. The title of the YouTube video is 'قصة حقيقية، حاول ان يتخلص منها بكل الطرق لكن هي تحبه' (True story, he tried to get rid of her in every way, but she loves him) (Mustapha Swinga 2019). The film tells the story of a man who is visited at night by a mosquito, *shniula* in Darija, a feminine word. Although the main character tries to kill this female monster invading his home, he repeatedly fails and ends up not sleeping that night. When Swinga finally kills the mosquito using a pink rubber flip-flop, he is able to fall asleep. Seconds later, Swinga is awoken by several alarms ringing disjointedly as the 'Chams' song plays. As the sun rises, the protagonist screams with horror at the start of a new day that he must endure without having had any sleep, and the film ends. This film shows a familiar everyday occurrence resonating with many around the world. The techniques used to kill the mosquito speak, however, to a Moroccan audience: brightly coloured rubber flip-flops, as well as using an onion to repel the disturbing insect. The nightmare of the monster that attacks the star of the show and the tension that is built as he tries to kill the monster constructs a funny yet terrifying scene inspired by an everyday occurrence.

As detailed in Chapter 3, Swinga has a penchant for horror, and this micro-short film adds to his other videos posted on YouTube channels narrating Moroccan folktales with jinns and ghouls. This film, however, blends horror with humour, and also the familiar with the un-homely (see Chapter 6).

The 'Chams' meme's popularity has also led to the creation of still image-macro memes ending with the phrase or hashtag # شمس العشية (#Chams al Achya). In these multimodal digital artefacts composed of pictures and text, the song 'Chams al Achya' plays only in the audience's head. A meme stating 'When you see your ex celebrating her 1st anniversary with her boyfriend, but you only broke up with her three months ago' (فش كاتشوف هاديك لي كنتي معاها كاتحتافل هي وصاحبها بعامها الأول معاه، وانت يالاه 3 شهور تفارقتي معاها) ends with the boy in the meme saying '*ya chams al achya*' (Figure 10). As we read these words, those who know the meme hear, in their heads, Souiri's voice together with an entire Andalusi ensemble. The audience not only feels the emotions of Eid but is also transported to the grotesque world where the 'Chams' meme lives. For this reason, even if there are versions of this meme that are still and silent, the song gives the meme a multimodal dimension where music, image, and text work together to create a collective sonic sphere of resonance.

Figure 10 The 'Chams' meme. Author unknown.

The virality of the meme soon led users to collect 'Chams' memes on a Facebook page called 'شمس العشية ساركازم' (Chams Al Achya Sarcasm), created in May 2019 and amassing nearly 80,000 followers (August 2021). The page acts as a repository for different versions of the meme, fostering a form of 'meme-orialisation', a term coined by my colleague Martin Lundqvist during a conversation about memes and memory, of the 'Chams' meme. Lundqvist considers meme-orialisation as a way of thinking about future research on digital media, memory, and memorialisation. Scholarship on memorialisation has moved from looking at formal, state-sanctioned practices (Edkins 2003) to everyday lives (Ibreck 2010; Lundqvist 2019) and digital media (Ernst and Parikka 2013; Garde-Hansen *et al*. 2009; Merrill *et al*. 2020). In broadening their scope, scholars have observed everyday life as it intermingles with formal memorialisation practices and, in this process, these practices acquire new and sometimes unintended meanings. This emerging literature suggests that online and everyday forms of meme-orialisation may bestow agency on ordinary people, enabling them to choose what, when, and how they memorialise that which they want to remember. A song that has, for years, constituted a sonic performance of the nation is now transformed and preserved as a digital item on the internet. The result of a mediatic transformation (from a traditional live performance, radio, and television broadcast to being embedded into a digital creative artefact) entails a change in aesthetics chosen by ordinary netizens, bringing this song and the music genre into a radically new light that not only meme-orialises but dis-meme-bers memories of the nation.

Gothic Memes

The fact that 'Chams al Achya' is embedded within a meme and is intended to induce laughter signals that resonance occurs not only through sound and the song, but also in the resulting shift in its accompanying visuals and its particular aesthetics. These changing visual aesthetics occur in the transition from the 'Chams al Achya' song to the 'Chams' meme. In the case of the 'Chams' meme, grotesque digital aesthetics reflect a particular form of resonance tied to unprivileged forms of everyday life that challenge the elegant sounds of Andalusi music and its formal settings. Here, the 'Chams' meme is framed by a distorted, amateurish, and multimodal artefact that has a unique ability to unite Moroccans across the datasphere through the grotesque. The 'Chams' meme drastically changes the aesthetics of 'Chams al Achya' by creating new and dramatically different music videos for the song. Arguably, as was the case with the King, the song's new milieu manages to cut the original images to pieces through memetic cultural jamming. In the process, the memes reconstruct new grotesque symbols that *gothify* postcolonial sonic rituals linked to nation building.

Inspired by British 19th-century gothic novels willing to challenge elements from the European Enlightenment, the postcolonial gothic shares themes and features common to gothic stories such as the grotesque, violence, monstrousness, and chaotic madness. However, postcolonial gothic is different to what Patrick Brantlinger (1990) calls 'imperial Gothic' because postcolonial gothic has the critical purpose of revisiting these 19th-century novels 'to expose and dramatize the "relations of domination" within them' (Gelder 2014, p. 192). Postcolonial gothic literature, therefore, examines the colonial past to understand how its effects continue to shape and inhabit the postcolonial present (Gelder 2014, p. 195). The concern of imperial Gothic with the home and the un-homely was related to questions of colonialism and the British Empire that challenged the borders of the colonies and home (Brantlinger 1990, 2010).

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha defines the un-homely (as a translation of the *unheimlich* as discussed in Chapter 6) as those domestic spaces invaded by history. The un-homely is the space where 'the borders between home and world become confused, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting' (1994, p. 9). From Bhabha's words Cristiana Strava concludes, 'the un-homely is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience … marked by the intrusion of the world into the home, and the inversion of the physical space of the home from a reassuringly intimate place of shelter and rest into a realm that is marked by contingency and displacement' (2017, p. 337). The *unheimlich* therefore is essential to the postcolonial gothic because 'it is triggered by the revelation that at the heart of what we call home is not comfortable domesticity, but an estranging, foreign place' (Azzam 2007, p. 15). Because the postcolonial gothic is particularly concerned with issues of family and home, both personally and as a nation, it provides a valuable perspective on ridiculing national symbols as memetic motifs.

In postcolonial gothic literature, the politics of the *unheimlich* allows for stories of political failure to emerge. Haytham Bahoora argues that the presence of gothic features in Arabic literature speaks to 'the persistent haunting of the present by the past' (2015, p. 193). Gothic's inclination for 'repetition, doubling, and the *unheimlich* return of the repressed' (Azzam 2007, p. 5) inspires stories that not only speak back to the coloniser, but also narrate 'the failure of the postcolonial national political project' (Bahoora 2015, p. 192). For this reason, while the carnivalesque speaks to the opportunities to suspend differences between power and the people, the postcolonial gothic reads grotesque memes as the political failure to keep promises for a better future. Adding to the Bakhtinian perspective of rule-breaking, the purpose of the postcolonial gothic is to bring to the forefront hidden narratives within humour and horror that speak about digital opportunities for problematising the foundations of the postcolonial nation.

The 'Chams' meme and the Chams Al Achya Sarcasm Facebook page may be read through the lens of postcolonial gothic in both content and form. The

absurd character of the meme is reflected in the profile picture of the Facebook page, which depicts a sun with the face of a crossed-eyed man. Humour is underscored by the violence of the events shown in the videos. Violence, chaos, fear, and madness are all part of the memes and other digital artefacts inspired by this meme. Aggressive assaults on bodies subjugated to reckless behaviours and the horror of a monster invading your home are climaxed by the out-of-context 'Chams al Achya' song and finished with the 'Frolic' meme. The mixture between a solemn setting and the added value bestowed by the amateurish look of meme culture facilitates the creation of a grotesque sequence, provoking laughter and horror as it is repeated again and again. Because we know the meme, we can anticipate the violent outcome of the scene. The 'Chams al Achya' song signposts the meme's catastrophic ending, and the 'Curb' meme closes the ultra-short film, ensuring a humorous note.

In order for the 'Chams' meme to be effective, it requires an established affective relationship that is shared and understood among Moroccans. It would not be funny with an unknown song or, for that matter, with a song lacking the weight of nation building or remembrance such as the one in question. Therefore, listening to 'Chams al Achya' as the background of Eid celebrations is key to the effectiveness of the meme. Ritualistically, playing 'Chams al Achya' year after year in the days of Eid laid the groundwork for this song to affectively resonate in the country's memories and traditions. This reference to a communal experience of the nation is what Benedict Anderson (2006) refers to as 'unisonance'. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines unisonance as 'the echoed physical reality of an imagined community of the nation-state' (2006, p. 58). For Anderson, sonic events such as spoken poetry, songs, and, specifically, an amplified national anthem that reaches large swathes of people at once offer an 'experience of simultaneity', binding people together and reinforcing bonds between people and countries. Under the prism of unisonance, playing 'Chams al Achya' each year on national television during Eid celebrations is a conscious political effort to bolster nation building and nationalistic sentiments. These emotions are embodied in a synaesthetic experience where smells, tastes, sounds, and emotions of festive times stand rooted in the national imaginary through years of repetition.[8] One user writes in the YouTube 'Chams al Achya' comment section 'ريحة الدجاج واللحم بالبرقوق ونهار العيد' (the smell of chicken and meat with apricot and the day of the Eid), exhibiting a multisensorial bond and the repetition and reminder of celebrating the nation. As Meredith McGuire (2008, p. 99) claims, visual images, sounds, and smells are able to heighten our connections to our communities. These practices of remembering,

[8] I would like to express my gratitude to Stephen Wilford for pointing out synaesthesia as a theoretical approach to some of the comments of online participants to the song during the workshop 'Musical Afterlives of al-Andalus: Identities and Encounters beyond History' which took place in September 2021.

McGuire argues, involve our minds and thoughts as much as our bodies and emotions.

The meme, much like the monster that is destined to perpetually haunt us (Cohen 1996), is condemned to return, as '[r]epetition and variation – novel iterations of established premises – are essential to collective memetic participation' (Milner 2016, p. 125). As discussed in Chapter 2, this characteristic of memes is not casual but embedded in the digital infrastructures that birthed meme culture as we know it today. By being repeated, transformed, and shared, memes connect Moroccan netizens, establishing spheres of resonance through which participants are able to relate and speak to one another, even when geographically dispersed. However, through the prism of the postcolonial gothic, repetition acts as a ghost of the past that never stops haunting us. This perspective suggests a common knowledge of the sonic foundations for this meme and its role in affectively resonating with performances of the nation. While the song resonates with certain moments, spaces, and types of audiences, the 'Chams' meme has prompted new ways of establishing a connection with the song and with other online participants.

Anderson affirms, however, that unisonance occurs in listeners whether auditors are in favour of the political project or not. While this may be so in the case of 'Chams al Achya', the 'Chams' meme acts against Anderson's passive and deterministic portrayal of sounds in nation building. Though audiences may find it difficult to escape from a well-curated scenario that compels them to turn on their television sets on the day of Eid, the 'Chams' meme sheds light on how users have the agency to dismember and deform the sonic experience of national unisonance. While we cannot fully assert that every memer and participant sharing memes is fully conscious of the particular political project behind Andalusi music and 'Chams al Achya' in Morocco, without a critical understanding of the role this music plays in the Moroccan national imaginary, the meme would not work. The meme has spread as a 'funny' and grotesque meme precisely because the political, social, and cultural meanings of Andalusi music are well known and understood. The song humorously dissects a serious and solemn music genre and performance, and the meme sets the song free from the straightjacket of mainstream narratives that determine how the nation should sound and look.

This process does not indicate that nationalist sentiments among digital participants have been eradicated. On the contrary, nationalist sentiments are indispensable to this insider joke uniting the Moroccan digital community in mocking a tradition that is both desired (through the smells, tastes, and sounds of Eid) and ridiculed (through the amateurish violent meme). A similar phenomenon was observed in the case of the black cloak worn by the monarch while attending an event in France. The 'Chams' meme and memes featuring the King inhabit both the desire for national bonding and the determination to dismember

it through the aesthetic process of uglifying the emotion with which the song resonates. In re-meme-bering and dis-meme-bering the nation, memes show a gruesome present instead of memories of a glorious past.

The engagement with the grotesque and the everyday familiarity may be further understood through the *unheimlich*. In the postcolonial context, home is a complex concept that serves as an allegory for the 'home country'. Yet this concept is also a site where feelings of belonging are conflated with the foreign, un-homely, and a threatening nature (Azzam 2007, p. 4). In destabilising notions of 'native' and 'settler', colonised and coloniser, power and ordinary people, the postcolonial gothic offers the chance to negotiate how displacement and belonging coexist. In the 'Chams' song and meme, as well as in Swinga's micro-film or the Chams Al Achya Sarcasm Facebook page, a sense of belonging and one of foreignness cohabitate. While the song brings up memories of the nation, the meme compels one to take a critical look at this form of re-meme-bering. While the song assumes familiarity, belonging, and unity, the meme's deformity reminds the audience of the grotesque reality they know only too well, where such unity, especially when it comes to class, does not exist. Instead of an ideal utopian image of the nation, a gothic perspective of Al-Andalus sheds light on a resonant feeling of failure and symbolic violence in everyday life in Morocco.

The novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Saadawi 2017) tells the story of the construction of a monster using body parts gathered from people killed in different bombings to narrate the ongoing violence on Iraqi soil. The collection of bits and pieces of human remains constructed into a monster is read by Haytham Bahoora as Iraq's national dismemberment (see more in Chapter 3). In Morocco, turning 'Chams al Achya' into a grotesque monstrous meme reveals a postcolonial national project which has fallen into the cracks of cynicism and contempt, at least for some online users. The glory of the golden era where top-down nationalistic sentiments are imbued is here dis-meme-bered and transformed into a grotesque sequence of images and sounds or images and text amateurishly stuck together. In the meme, the idealistic national allegory fails because it expects to overcome political, racial, and class differences (Azzam 2007, p. 33). As nostalgia for the nation is held onto through cultural rituals (the 'Chams' song), the failure of the national project is felt as a stabbing sword (the 'Chams' meme). At the same time, the meme, in its ability to preserve and perpetuate the tradition of the song and Al-Andalus in the national(ist) imaginary by association, prevents new generations from breaking free from the ghosts of the past. In this sense, even with its grotesque aesthetics, the meme signifies the triumph of nationalists' sentiments in uniting the country's past and future.

The 'Chams' meme and the King converge in a soundless meme as a form of political commentary and protest on events that had divided ordinary people and elites. A still image shows the King delivering his annual speech while the caption,

reproduced in Arabic alongside a picture of the King, bears the words pronounced on 20 August 2019:

الملك محمد السادس:

الحصول على الباكالوريا، وولوج الجامعة، ليس امتيازا، ولا يشكل سوى مرحلة في التعليم. وإنما الأهم هو' الحصول على تكوين، يفتح آفاق الاندماج المهني، والاستقرار الاجتماعي

اشمس العشيا

King Mohammed VI:

Passing the baccalaureate exam and going to university is not a privilege; it is only a phase in the education process. It is even more important to receive training that opens up prospects for professional integration and social stability

Chams al Achya

At the end of these words, there is a laughing smiley. As we recall from the introduction of Chapter 4, these words were pronounced by King Mohammed VI as part of his annual speech during the anniversary of the Revolution of the King and the People. The speech caused a stir among ordinary people, who felt that it disparaged their efforts to earn a university degree. By the time this meme, ending with the words 'Chams al Achya', was posted, digital participants knew the exact structure of the meme and how those last words would sound. The connection between the 'Chams' meme and the online outrage these words provoked denotes how the song has become a form of political commentary. Behind the joke and the grotesque is a large group of young people for whom the meme resonates through an endemic culture of contempt and feelings of despair suffered by many in Morocco as part of their unprivileged everyday life.

A song that, until recently, denoted upper-class solemnity and special moments related to traditional culture has now been transformed into a digital meme that unites ordinary people in disbelief of the national project. The reconstruction of 'Chams al Achya' in the world of memes leads to the inevitable disfiguration not only of the song itself, but also of the image of Al-Andalus and Andalusi music in Morocco's national(ist) imaginary, much like the memes featuring the monarch. Through a Bakhtinian interpretation of the grotesque, this meme suspends power dynamics. Making fun of people, especially those in power, in the form of memes and GIFs works wonders within authoritarian political contexts because, on the one hand, it deflects the seriousness of possible criticism towards the boundaries of correctness, and on the other hand, it sends powerful messages under the disguise of entertainment and humour. Through the perspective of the digital grotesque, this meme connects similar and repetitive sonic experiences, spoken aloud or in our heads, that come back to haunt the foundations of the postcolonial nation: God, the Nation, the King.

Memes and the Nation

In 2020, 'Chams al Achya' was revived once again on Instagram when the world entered a global pandemic, a real-life gothic experience. This time, the meme was re-recorded with new lyrics that addressed the need to wear a mask to avoid contracting Covid-19. The Chams Facebook page followed suit, covering the profile picture face of the sun with a mask and adding the hashtag 'stay home' (ريح فدارك) (Figure 11). Now, the aim was not just to provoke laughter but also to resonate with the shared experience of a global disaster. This shift suggests a turning point in interpreting this meme as a part of a gothic moment in time, where the nation needed to come together to combat a global threat. Viewing memes through the lens of the postcolonial gothic opens up the possibility for ghosts of the past to come back, perhaps serving a different purpose. A decolonial gothic perspective, however, suggests not only a return to question the past, but also an attack on the past that still haunts us.

The 'Chams' meme, at least for a younger generation, has immortalised a song that no longer only represents nationalists' dreams of a long and unbroken

Figure 11 Chams Al Achya Sarcasm Facebook page profile picture during the Covid-19 pandemic.

past. Yet digital repositories remind us of the power of netizens to dis-member iconic national symbols. Beyond the power of laughter, when the 'Chams' meme meets the King, questions of the accountability of power and criticism of national projects for development and democratisation come to the surface. In challenging political messages, abusing physical oddities, and performing political anti-correctness through the juxtaposition of unfinished, uncoloured, and barely outlined images and texts, one may argue these memes and meme pages are meant to provoke laughter as much as horror. Yet, contrary to critical humour studies, memes' potential to disrupt and transgress the borders of acceptability and normality through horror remains unexplored. It is at the intersection between memetic horror and humour embedded in the grotesque that participants are able to reach remote domains of criticism, as is the case with one of the founding elements of postcolonial Morocco, the monarchy. In a postcolonial setting, horror and humour unmask an effort to dismantle the undisputed capital of the postcolonial national project.

In the digital realm, humour and horror allow participants to disfigure and dismember foundational narratives of the nation. An increase in grotesque memes featuring the monarchy and the sounds of nation building shows a desacralisation of these national symbols. Mocking the monarchy, as much as hymns of collective traditional festivities, contributes to reconfiguring the home as a familiar yet unhomely space. Instead, these memes present a malleable image of the nation where its symbols can be torn into pieces and rearranged at will, profiting from memes' grotesque aesthetics. This may result in a temporary disruption of hierarchies and power, as Bakhtin would suggest, but it also sets a foundation from which to question the success of the postcolonial nation. Examining humour, together with theories of postcolonial gothic, brings the *unheimlich* into these examples of digital grotesque culture. Memes of the King evidence the desire to mock what is forbidden. Employing digital culture to rewrite the memory of Al-Andalus as the golden era of Moroccan history exhibits a desire to defy postcolonial national narratives. However, as the next two chapters contend, 'meme-ories' of the postcolonial nation that bring down the walls of hierarchies may work to glamourise and depoliticise a tumultuous past. Even when grotesque and foreign, the King and Al-Andalus continue to be part of Morocco's national identity as revenant monsters that refuse to die.

Part IV

Desiring the Grotesque

8

Monstrous Speech

A meme titled 'What the Hell Is This?' (Figure 12) portrays Noah in his ark asking a group of animals to explain the reason for the presence of a monstrous creature. Shared by the Instagram account North Africans United (@north_africans_united), the monster is made up of different animal parts representing Darija. While Darija is not officially recognised, it is a language, or rather, a number of languages that vary significantly across the region, spoken by most in the Maghreb (Darija or Moroccan in Morocco, Darja or Dziria in Algeria, and Derja or Tounsi in Tunisia). The other animals in the meme are paired up with languages that are claimed to have influenced Darija: an eagle (French), an elephant (Arabic), a penguin (Tamazight), an octopus (Spanish), a goat (Farsi), and a crab (Punic). Contrary to the misconception that Darija is simply a dialect of Arabic, the humorous meme points out the many languages that have contributed to building this language. The meme, however, is more than a mere deconstruction of the Maghreb's sociolinguistics. The original still image, which comes from the animated cartoon *Family Guy*,[1] shows a hybrid animal with an elephant's face and a penguin's body. Darija's structure of up to six animal body parts reinforces its status as a difficult to define, monstrous language.

Indeed, North Africa's linguistic cartography is a complex one as a diverse number of languages and variants cohabitate in the region: from the widely spoken Darija,[2] to Amazigh languages,[3] to French, Spanish (mostly limited to Northern Morocco and parts of Western Algeria), Classic Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and more recently English.[4] On a daily basis, an inhabitant of the region may perform prayers in Classic Arabic,[5] listen to the news on

[1] The image belongs to *Family Guy*, Season 4, Episode 25, called 'You May Now Kiss the … Uh … Guy Who Receives', which aired 30 April 2006.
[2] In 2014, the Haut Commissariat au Plan (Higher Planning Commission) stated that over 90 per cent of the population in Morocco spoke Darija (Haut Commissariat au Plan 2014).
[3] Tamazight refers to the languages spoken among the diverse Amazigh cultures (Elkouche 2013, p. 5).
[4] Note that these are the most frequently spoken historically by North Africans; however, the number of languages that coexist is much higher, including Wolof and other languages spoken by migrants.
[5] And Hebrew as well, during prayers among the small North African Jewish community.

Figure 12 'What the Hell Is This?' meme. Shared by @north_africans_united Instagram page.

Al Jazeera or a university lecture in MSA, work using French (especially for the middle and upper classes in urban centres) or Spanish (in Tangiers and Tetouan) to communicate, speak Tamazight or another Amazigh language and/or Darija at home, and chat online in English. Daily life sees all these languages jostle against each other in ways that depend on where one lives (urban or rural area), economic status, work, media, and so forth.

Despite its prevalence, Darija remains an unofficial and unsystematised language throughout the Maghreb. As in many Arabic-speaking countries, there is a wide gap between the official language – Classic Arabic or the contemporary, somewhat simplified version MSA – and the daily language, referred to as *al-ʿammiyya* (العامية) in Egypt and most of the Middle East. In Morocco, Article 5 of the 2011 Constitution was reformed to add Tamazight as an official language of the country together with Arabic,[6] but it does not mention Darija. Campaigns to officialise Darija have been popular. However, those supporting Darija becoming

[6] Article 5 of the Constitution also mentions the preservation of Hassani, its speakers, and its practical cultural expressions, as part of the Moroccan cultural identity. Since 2003, Tamazight has been a mandatory school subject and Amazigh languages are nowadays written and taught in schools (Errihani 2013, p. 57).

an official language carry with them a political agenda that brings leftists and Amazigh nationalists face to face with Islamists. While the former argue the need to recognise and bestow importance on Darija, the latter contend that Classic Arabic needs to be the official language due to its links with the Quran and Islam. Within the Arabic-speaking world, different North African Darijas have traditionally been marked as inauthentic as opposed to *'ammiyya* because of its 'unintelligibility' to other Arabic speakers and hence its lack of 'purity' (Hachimi 2013, p. 271). These debates evidence the complexity of the subject matter: while Darija may be considered an unimportant, unrefined, and impure language within and beyond the Maghreb, it is popular enough to threaten the status quo.

The monstrous nature of local languages associated with the Arabic script is accentuated in its hybrid written form in the digital sphere. When SMS texts and mobile phones started penetrating arabophone societies without Arabic keyboards, an alphanumeric code combining numbers and Latin letters was used to transliterate these languages. Although transliteration systems for Arabic exist, these are complicated and difficult to use consistently due to their high number of special symbols. The alphanumeric system capitalises on simple keyboards available on every mobile phone, making it accessible to most. The use of this system varies among Arabic speakers as it can adapt to local sounds and uses of language. While in Egypt the use of the hamza written with the number 2 is widespread, in Morocco the main changes of this system include the Arabic letters the ح (*Haa'*) with a 7, the ع (*'ayn*) with a 3, and ق (*qaaf*) with a 9 (see Table 1). In Morocco, young artists use alphanumeric characters to write their names, for example the rappers LZ3er, L7a9ed, and 7liwa (pronounced Lzer, Lhaqed, and Hliwa respectively). This alphanumeric, latinised written form has been adopted by the advertising industry in many ads directed at the country's youth (or embodying the young). This code was widely used in Arabic-speaking countries, at least until smartphones with Arabic keyboards became more widespread during the second half of the 2010s. This alphanumeric, latinised code now coexists with Arabic letters, and both are used to write texts, comments, and memes. The non-official alphanumeric written texts of an equally unsystematised language have resulted in a rather odd-looking linguistic digital landscape that is difficult to decode even for artificial intelligence technologies, until present times at least.

Adding to this linguistic cartography, internet penetration has animated the use of profanities across Arabic computer-mediated communication (see Abdul Latif 2017). Protected by pseudonyms, fake names, or anonymity, vulgar language roams freely throughout the datasphere. This is important because the use of vulgar language in traditional media has been legally prosecutable, and cursing remains socially forbidden and reprimanded in conservative environments, especially when uttered in public. The use of vulgarities online is among the celebrated repercussions of social media in asserting Darija's significance as part of North

African identity (Hachimi 2013). However, we still need to understand how social media pages that post memes and their comment sections provide opportunities, in Bakhtin's words, to use 'indecent words and expressions' (1984, p. 16) to ease the verbal etiquette and discipline and therefore give free range to vulgar speech. Darija's undermined position, especially in its most vulgar form, adds another layer of meaning to this book's examination of meme culture and the digital grotesque.

This chapter analyses Moroccan sociolinguistics in the digital sphere, shedding light on the ways in which different linguistic perceptions contribute to constructing and glamourising the digital grotesque. The goal of this chapter is to navigate different online debates about Moroccan sociolinguistics through the lens of meme culture. Together with analysing the implications of memes' use of different languages, it pays particular attention to the political role that vulgar Darija can play online. In doing this, the chapter analyses memes where the monarchy appears to be swearing in order to examine the memes' grotesque aesthetics in reshaping political leadership. By analysing leaders speaking vulgar Darija in digital culture, the chapter contends that the grotesque not only serves as criticism of a failed national project, as argued in Chapter 7, but can also be glamourised and desired. While too much of the grotesque might threaten leaders' authority, as argued in Chapter 5, the grotesque allows leaders to appear approachable, relatable, and associated with the young and hip. A glamourised digital grotesque, as the chapter concludes, also compels an encounter between meme and myth, filling the voids in leadership by reviving fictionalised images of leaders with the ability, in their memetic form, to lead the nation into the future.

Language in the Post-Postcolony

In 2021, the Moroccan datasphere spoke out against the use of French in Morocco. A campaign employing the hashtag #نعم للانجليزية بدل الفرنسية بالمغرب (Yes to English instead of French in Morocco) was widely shared to protest assumptions of Moroccans' fondness for French. Many on social media shared an image that read in Arabic حملة لا للفرنسية (Campaign 'Not to French') followed by 'No to French Language, Yes to English Language' in both Arabic and English. The logic addressed the pointless attachment to French in Morocco as its use has been declining worldwide and it has never been widely used by most Moroccans. According to this campaign, favouring English as a foreign language would be more beneficial for Moroccans. The campaign champions the ending of the colonial past as much as it does the neocolonial present, specifically highlighting the role of French-language social and linguistic capital in perpetuating the links

between Morocco and its coloniser.[7] Significantly, this was the first time that the English language entered linguistic political debates in the country.

Historically, linguistic power struggles primarily revolved around the recognition of Amazigh languages and the continuous rivalry between Classic Arabic and Darija. While Tamazight gained the status of a co-official language in 2011, groups within the secular civil society associated with the French-speaking elites, atheists, and Amazigh movements have continued to advocate in favour of Darija, facing the opposition of nationalists and Islamists as mentioned in the introduction. The latter claim that campaigns in favour of Darija by French-speaking groups are designed to marginalise the use of Arabic and thus the prominence of the language of the Quran (Miller 2012, p. 171). However, members of the nationalist elites, such as Allal El Fassi, founder of the nationalist Istiqlal Party, have been criticised for promoting Arabic as the language of the nation while educating their children in elite French schools (Boutieri 2012, p. 449). In this context, while the use of French has remained significant among the middle and upper classes, and Classic Arabic has triumphed as the official language thanks to its religious and political relevance (the King is the commander of the faithful), Darija has yet to succeed in its battle for official recognition beyond its association with political ideologies.

The dichotomy between the valuable French and the worthless Darija is enacted in the YouTube animated series *Bouzebal* (for more context about this show, see Chapter 4). In one episode, called 'Chohra' (Fame) (Mohammed Nassib 2014), the character of Bouzebal, whose name derives from the word for rubbish in Arabic, realises that he has become famous on social media when he receives a call to feature in an advertisement. When Bouzebal attends a meeting with the company's managers, he finds that the head of the company is a Moroccan woman who addresses him in French. Bouzebal's friend Mcharmla, acting here as his manager, replies to the French-speaking woman with the only French she learned in school: '*Madame, je veux allez au toilette*' (I'd like to go to the toilet). Acknowledging the difficulties in communicating in French, the company's president switches to Darija, but always intermingling French words as the Moroccan urban bourgeoisie frequently do. The company president claims that she does not like the name Bouzebal and requests that it be changed instead to the absurd-sounding 'Bouzbouz'. She asks Bouzebal why his name is interesting, as she insistently repeats '*C'est quoi l'intérêt*', without allowing Bouzebal to answer the question. This encounter showcases the power dynamics of French, particularly when poor and rich meet. The code switching between French and Darija emerges as a display of class which only the boss of the company can master. However,

[7] It is notable is that these debates hardly acknowledge the linguistic situation in the north of the country, where Spanish and not French is spoken as a second or third language (Hachimi 2001, p. 29).

in repeatedly asking in French what is so interesting about being named trash (*bouzebal*) she reveals the disconnection between a French-educated upper-class woman and the young social media users who love Bouzebal, both in real life as an animated cartoon and in this episode as a successful personality thanks to the animated cartoon. In this respect, the episode highlights that in the era of social media, young unprivileged youth do not need to speak French to become relevant and influential and can symbolically and economically profit from the grotesque status to which they have been relegated. The episode ultimately highlights that the supposed privileged position of space to voice radical socio-political engagement is flawed.

As a legacy of the colonial era, French is still used in some of the country's administration, as well as in some university disciplines, urban centres, companies, and media industries despite not being an officially recognised language. French is often the main language of programmes on the national TV channel 2M, which caters towards Moroccan residents abroad; some radio stations; in newspapers such as *Libération*, *La Vie Éco*, and *L'Economiste*; in magazines including *TelQuel*, *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, *Maroc Hebdo*, and *Actuel*; and in literary production. In *Francophone Voices of the 'New' Morocco in Film and Print: (Re) Presenting a Society in Transition* (2009), Valérie K. Orlando defends the singularity of Moroccan cultural productions in French. She argues that the French language provides Moroccan writers with the tools to be engaged writers: 'being *engagé* for the Maghrebian author is almost synonymous with using French language' (2009, p. 21). While Orlando (2009, p. xiii) contemplates the fact that few people are able to read French in a country with widespread illiteracy, she perpetuates the idea that French is a language identified with rebel authors from French literary history and that it is a language that means freedom in all its manifestations, quoting Dominique Combe's study *Poetiques Francophones* (1995). Orlando (2009, p. xiii) notes that French is inevitably connected to an elite that attends schools associated with *la Mission française*, such as the Lycée Lyautey in Casablanca. However, power relations between French and the other languages in Morocco are mostly overlooked. These schools are related to wealth simply because only the wealthy can gain access to them (Canna 2012, p. 138). In spite of acknowledging the limits of French in Morocco, Orlando insists that francophone Moroccan writers are spokespersons for the Moroccan masses: '[I]t is through French that some of the most pressing questions about Moroccan society, culture and politics are discussed' (2009, p. xv).

Contrary to the belief that French uniquely provides for engaged socio-political commentary, Said Graiouid (2008, p. 147) has argued that Moroccan modernist writers have employed MSA as their language of choice in journalistic writing and the short story to reflect on social issues such as poverty or labour union rebellions. The reformist school had already been inclined towards

traditional Arabic genres such as the *qasida* poem (Graiouid 2000, p. 153).[8] The use of MSA in Moroccan literature gained importance with the beginning of the country's nationalist struggle at the end of the 1930s and in the following decades, which brought the vindication of a Moroccan literary cannon in MSA (Fernández Parrilla 2009, p. 86). However, MSA is reserved for formal encounters and media and is rarely used in contemporary youth culture, and when it does appear, it is usually employed as a language marker for humorous or sarcastic effect, as in the case of the rapper and vlogger Nores.[9] Orlando's position exemplifies a common bias towards French cultural production that overlooks sentiments against French evidenced on social media, in *Bouzebal*'s 'Chohra' episode, or in the campaign against French. MSA is, however, absent from these online debates because it is a language that has a limited presence in everyday youth interactions.

In contrast to the nationalist movement Arabisation campaigns, new forms of online nationalism have underscored their preference for Darija and their dislike of the French language. Some of the accounts sharing memes and hashtags of the campaign against French displayed Moroccan flags or symbols of the ultra-nationalist Moorish Movement (for more on this, see Chapter 7 and later in this chapter). The lack of French among these pages is interesting. Although it no longer exists, between April 2019 and April 2020 Moroccan Nationalist Memes shared 1,639 memes, either anonymously or attributed to a user. The primary language used on this page was Darija, using the Arabic script, with a strategic use of foreign languages. Their 'about' page describes their ethos in English as follows: 'Here to trigger Lefties / Commies, defend our homeland against Separatists and protect our personal freedoms from Socialism.' French is reserved for mocking leftists and feminists, who are seen as mouthpieces for francophone notions of female liberation (see Chapter 6). One example shows two men dressed in pink t-shirts, with stickers of Che Guevara, the hammer and sickle symbol, and the 20th of February movement, and wearing pacifiers around their necks. One says in French: '*A l'heure où s'ouvre la réflexion sur notre modèle de développement un journaliste et activiste est arrêté pour un tweet*' (As a reflection on our development model begins, a journalist and activist is arrested for a tweet). The other man answers, also in French: '*Oui, c'est triste. J'ai mal pour mon pays*' (Yes, it's sad. I feel bad for my country). The Moroccan version of the 'Yes Chad' meme, depicting a light-skin bearded man wearing a red hairband with the Moroccan flag and a red coat with the Marinid flag, a symbol for this page of the Moroccan right, responds to the men in Arabic 'پففففف' (Pfffff). The two men are discussing journalist and activist Omar Radi's arrest (see Chapters 4 and 5), a conversation mocked by the Moroccan Yes Chad as a stereotype of the French liberal engaged activist.

[8] The *qasida* is a long mono-rhyme poem that originated in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula.
[9] For example, in songs such as '*F9albi a7san*' (Nores 2012) or 'Gangster Arabi' (Nores 2010).

Another meme shared by this page shows a picture of a large family dressed in traditional European garments including bowties and sleeveless sweaters (Figure 13). Each family member, from two twin babies to preteens and parents, represents an Arabic dialect: the father is Classic Arabic, the mother is MSA, the twins are Levantine Arabic and Egyptian Arabic respectively, and one of the teenagers is Arabian Peninsula Arabic. Standing beside his father with a black leather biker jacket and boots, jeans, and a bandana on his forehead holding back his long, straight, blonde hair is another teenager; as expected, this teenager represents Darija. In the broader context briefly addressed in the introduction of this chapter, this meme portrays Darija as an outlier, unconventional, and the black sheep of the Arabic-speaking countries. Under the gaze of the new digital Moroccan right ultra-nationalists, the meme suggests that Darija, and therefore Morocco, is a rebel that does not follow any rules imposed beyond the country. Morocco is indeed the odd one out in its specificities, a fact that this page views with pride instead of contempt. The significance of this meme lies in the fact that a nationalist meme page expresses a desire to embody the grotesque because it is only the grotesque that stands out as noteworthy. This rebellious attitude, mirroring mainstream online campaigns against French, suggests that Darija and English are not exclusively languages of communication of the youth, but that they also carry political connotations for the Moroccan right.

Figure 13 'Darija vs Arabic' meme. Shared by the Facebook page Moroccan Nationalist Memes.

Politics and Dirty Words

Darija is often regarded as an informal vernacular oral language connected to street language and argot (Hachimi 2013, pp. 27–8). It is the local language that 'meets its speakers' vital linguistic needs' (Shoul 2013, p. 60). However, Darija encompasses more than merely spoken slang or the language of the streets. It is necessary to differentiate between literary Darija (Allen 2011, p. 317), also referred to as *dialecto elaborado* (enhanced dialect) (Fernández Parrilla 2009, p. 154), and what I have referred to as *darija dyal zan9a*, or street Darija (Moreno-Almeida 2017, p. 10). Literary Darija refers to the variant used in traditional oral literature such as the *malhun* (ملحون) or *zajal* mentioned in Chapter 7, and in classical Moroccan music traditions such as Aïta and Andalusi. This literary variant has also been used by groups such as Nass El Ghiwane, who, during the 1970s, produced songs that argued for social justice and revived traditional Moroccan stories. Literary Darija differs greatly from the vernacular language that many Moroccans regard with disdain (Moustaoui Srhir 2007, p. 134), which includes neologisms from English slang, an accent related to unprivileged urban youth, and swear words and other forms of vulgar language. Moreover, Darija still holds powerful dynamics between different accents which vary from northern to southern regions and from cities to rural areas (Errihani 2016) as well as other differences including gender, age, and social status. With the rise of the internet and social media, Darija has been used extensively to send messages and in online forums. Online, conversations in Darija, both in an alphanumeric latinised Arabic and in Arabic characters, on social media such as Facebook, memes, or lyrics found at genius.com with a section on Moroccan Rap (Genius n.d.), are examples of the growing presence of Darija as a written language online.

Prior to the widespread adoption of social media, the use of vulgar language in traditional media was banned by the 2003 Press Code. Sections 5, 6, and 7 dealt with the prohibition and punishment of publications that offend public morality, which includes swearing, while Article 60 penalised anyone who publicly performed songs or speeches that were contrary to morality and public morals.[10] It is not surprising that this article no longer exists in the new Press Code of 2016 as the internet has complicated the control of media outlets. The new Press Code focuses instead on insults and defamation, particularly those directed at the King and the royal family. Article 83 defines an insult (*l'injure*) as '*toute expression outrageante, terme de mépris portant atteinte à la dignité ou invective qui ne renferme l'imputation d'aucun fait*' (any outrageous expression, term of contempt undermining dignity or invective which does not contain the imputation of any

[10] Article 60: *Sera puni d'un emprisonnement maximum d'un mois et d'une amende de 1.200 à 6.000 dirhams ou de l'une de ses deux peines seulement quiconque aura fait entendre publiquement, de mauvaise foi, des chants ou discours contraires à la moralité et aux mœurs publiques ou incite à la débauche ou aura publié une annonce ou correspondance de ce genre, quels qu'en soient les termes.*

fact). Regardless of the changing code, vulgar language and swear words contravene the country's traditional mores: 'There is a prevailing moral objection to the use of dirt or dirty words in Moroccan society. "Don't shit on me", for instance, is a statement one is not permitted to use in conservative families. It denotes a serious breach of the society's moral code, which borrows so much from the teachings of Islam' (El Maarouf 2016, p. 240). Over the years, TV channels and radio stations have demanded that artists submit 'clean' versions of their songs in order to comply with the laws of the Press Code.

The notion that swearing and cursing in the public sphere is offensive is not unique to Morocco. When discussing the rap scene in Tanzania, Alex Perullo (2005, p. 96) suggests that rappers, fans, and radio announcers discourage cursing in both Kiswahili and English, as swearing in public is unacceptable. The Turkish rap scene, on the contrary, employs swear words in both Turkish and English, though they are not tolerated for marketing purposes since they are prohibited by the Turkish Ministry of Culture (Solomon 2006, pp. 5–6). Whereas rappers who refrain from using swear words are commercially viable, those who incorporate swear words in their lyrics find their music excluded from commercial release and must resort to alternative means of distributing their music, such as websites or 'informal' record companies (Solomon 2006, pp. 5–6). In Turkey, as in Morocco, this ban acts as a mark of distinction between the underground and the commercial scenes, bestowing authenticity and credibility on those who employ swear words in their lyrics.

Attitudes among the youth towards street Darija and swear words began to change in the mid-2000s. At that time, rap, rock, and fusion groups singing in Darija were regularly invited to perform in public open-air concerts and were featured on new music radio stations such as Hit Radio (established in 2006), as well as on national television channels targeting young viewers. Not unproblematically constructed as the Nayda movement (see Moreno-Almeida 2017), the French-educated middle and upper classes welcomed these new artists and their revalorisation of Darija as it supported their political agenda against Classic Arabic. At that time, traditional sectors of society believed that these music genres threatened Moroccan traditions and accused them of being a form of the United States' cultural imperialism. By 2010, in view of the impossibility of containing youth culture, the Islamist party modified its discourse against these music genres and subcultures. The Party of Justice and Development (PJD) championed what it referred to as 'clean art' (الفن النظيف, *al-fann annaZiif*). The PJD's policy of 'clean art' sought to oppose the cultural decadence embodied by the imported art promoted by secularists (Graiouid and Belghazi 2013, p. 263). This political and cultural project included banning festivals where men and women were mixed in the audience as well as any form of art that used profanity and vulgar language.

Some rappers have criticised the hypocrisy of policing vulgar language, especially because it primarily targets Darija and not insults in foreign languages. In an interview, rapper Don Bigg argued against those who criticise his use of swear words in songs:

> I consider that is hypocritical that some get on their high horses to denounce my supposedly vulgar words. I wonder why they never said anything about French and American films that we have always watched on TV, listening to words like *putain*, *merde*, *enculés*, fuck and so on. I have never understood why the word slut does not have the same effect as 9a7ba, which is simply the translation into Darija. (cited in Caubet 2005, p. 239)

In these words, the rapper rejects a representation of reality free from vulgarity because it is dishonest to accept the use of swear words in other languages, while swearing in Darija remains socially unacceptable for Moroccan audiences.

Others saw the push towards clean art as an opportunity to gain a wider audience. In a conversation I had with rapper Muslim in 2013, he believed this initiative provided an opportunity to appeal to a wider audience. When I asked him why he had stopped swearing in his songs, he said:

> *Houa chouf, f louwel kouna kanrappiw, mohim marra marra 3adi, katkoun ba9i sghir, chi 7aja katkharaj chi kelma chi 7aja vulgaire, fhamti, walakin men ba3d katwelli katchouf katl9a kaysem3ouk ghi wa7ed generation, katmchi ma katouchichi chi nass akhrine fhamti, Rap dyalk kaywelli kitsma3 ghi f cask wla, ma kitsma3ch, ma ki9darch yakhdo ysem3o f ddar, ya3ni had l9dia hadi kanchoufha ana machi f sali7 dyali, ana khassni ysma3ni koulchi, bach ysma3ni koulchi maghadi ankhser walo ana, hadik lkemla kent ghadi n9olha, w ghadi ysem3oni 15 wla mohim 10 d nass, lokhrine ma ghadi ysem3ouhach, ana ghadi nbeddelha w ghadi ysem3ouni 20 wla 30 lkbir w sghir w f dar w finma kan, ghadi nbeddel ghi kelma we7da matalan, kount ghadi n9ol kelma ghadi nbeddelha b chi 7aja, lmouhim*
>
> Look, before, when we were young [1990s–2000s], we used to rap and from time to time we used to throw in a few vulgar words. But then, when you see, you realise that your music is only heard by one generation, you don't touch other people, your rap is only listened to in headphones, one can't listen to it in the house, that means that this does not play to my advantage. I need to be heard by everybody, and for that, I won't lose much. If 15 or 10 people will listen to me because I say that word, I will take it off so 20 or 30 people will listen, old and young, in the house and wherever else. It only takes me to change a word, for example. (Interview with Muslim, Tangiers, 2013)

In his response, the rapper, who claimed to have supported the PJD in 2011, did not mention the fact that street Darija and its use of swear words and vulgar language is, to a great extent, accepted among young people. In its vulgarity, street Darija serves to delineate a social group for young people. Rappers' use of vulgar language in their lyrics allows them to connect with a particular social group and their social reality. In other words, as Miller suggests, 'many young artists claim

to look for a "real" or "everyday" language that reflects the harsh reality of their lives and want to break away from a "sanitized" Darija' (2012, p. 179). While much cursing may be a response to anger or frustration (Allan and Burridge 2006, p. 78), it can also function as a form of social identification among youth (Abdel-Jawad 2000, p. 221). Even if vulgar language is mainly associated to masculinity, cursing among young women is more habitual in the public sphere, as proved by the increasing use of vulgar gestures and language in women's rap music (see more in Moreno-Almeida 2023). While Muslim's avoidance of swear words works to grant him a wider audience, it effectively betrays the sphere of resonance created by 'dirty' art that speaks to young people. Swear words aid in building a social group that replicates the ways in which much of the population speak in their daily lives. Campaigning for street Darija bestows value on an accent and a vocabulary that are mostly absent from traditional media and that are looked down on by the middle and upper classes.

Returning to the episode of *Bouzebal* discussed in this chapter, we can also consider the different accents in Darija. While all the characters use Darija in the episode, there is a clear difference between the vocabulary and accent of Bouzebal and his friends on the one hand,[11] and those of the head of the company and the journalists who interview him later in the episode about his acquired fame on the other. These differing and contrasting accents clearly denote the different social classes to which they belong. By the end of the episode, Bouzebal loses control of his social media accounts (they are terminated by his younger brother as revenge for not lending him his laptop). With the loss of followers and, therefore, of his 'voice' as an influencer to masses of unprivileged youth, companies and journalists stop calling him, thereby ending his employment opportunities. No longer relevant on social media, Bouzebal is revealed to be a mere product of consumption for the middle and upper classes. His odd physical appearance, as discussed in Chapter 4, together with his linguistic features, hinder his aspirations to escape his socio-economic situation and make a living as a famous personality. Shared in August 2014 and with well over 8 million views (February 2023), Bouzebal's grotesque ways, at least in this episode, proved to be a source of desire for traditional media accustomed to its sanitised participants.

With a changing Press Code in 2016 and the difficulty in controlling digital participation, debates around swear words (whether in Arabic or other languages) have faded away, admitting defeat to the satisfaction of some netizens. Orally in their YouTube videos or Instagram Stories, as well as written in the comment sections that might be offensive to some, it is evident that insults, profanities, and vulgar language are prevalent in the Moroccan datasphere, similar to other linguistic digital ecosystems. Yet not all insults are created equal. The choice of swear words employed

[11] In the episode, Bouzebal is in control of a group of *mcharmilin* (see Chapters 4 and 5). This gang appears and disappears as genies of Aladdin's lamp at Bouzebal's command.

offers an interesting perspective on whom some meme pages are addressing and for whom they create content.

As stated previously, the Facebook ultra-nationalist meme page Moroccan Nationalist Memes mostly writes in Darija and occasionally in English. However, while they employ English swear words unproblematically, their insults in Arabic, directed mostly against leftists and activists, are in general quite conservative. Among the words they use are *ri ʿaa ʿa* (رعاع) (rabble), *awbaash* (أوباش) (riffraff), *l7mrdeg* (لحمردگ) (fool), and *bougarn* (بوگرن) (horn-headed person). They employ specific words to curse those who say that Morocco is a backward country while glorifying the superiority of the Global North, *l7ass lberrani* (لحاس البراني) (foreign licker) or *khawa khawa* (خاوا خاوا) (literally brothers brothers), denoting those who celebrate the comradeship between Morocco and Algeria and are perceived as betraying nationalist sentiments. Despite these being terms aimed at insulting others, they are not particularly common in everyday language and certainly are not perceived as being as vulgar as other terms such as *m9awwed*. The term *m9awwed*, which can translate as 'dope', 'great', 'cool', 'pimped', or 'fucked up', is frequently used by Moroccan youth to describe either something they regard with favour or, on the contrary, something they dislike. By creating an ecosystem of derogatory language that explicitly avoids vulgar language, those running the meme page and their target audience are not exclusively young people. This case suggests that insults and derogatory references do not automatically equate with young people, but that perceptions of vulgarity act as barriers to acceptability. In this sense, while this page reproduces the language of the alt-right and employs soft insults in its memes, it remains far from the irreverent, anti-politically correct style of their English far-right counterparts. The non-vulgar language constructs its memes as normie, boring, and lacking meme culture's craving for strong emotional reactions.

A forceful memetic reaction occurred after the election of the new Algerian president in 2019, exemplifying the connection between politics and vulgar language in public. When Abdelmajid Tebboune won the presidential elections in Algeria in 2019, the Moroccan memesphere exploded with humorous memes. The joke derived from the new president's surname, Tebboune (تبون), being pronounced the same in Darija as a vulgar word in Moroccan Darija to name female sexual organs, *tabboun* (طبون).[12] In the context of the historical enmity between Morocco and Algeria, the new president's name provided ample fodder for the Moroccan memesphere to mock their neighbouring country. A version of the 'Woman Yelling at a Cat' meme reflecting on this event shows the cat as Morocco saying 'Abdelmajid' in Arabic and the woman as Algeria screaming back '**bun*' (Figure 14). Most memes have focused on the opportunities that such a word

[12] This is not the case in Algeria nor in Tunisia where the word means bread (خبز الطبونة *khubz tabouna*).

Figure 14 'Woman Yelling at a Cat' meme. Author unknown.

presents to mock the president by emasculating him. One meme uses his face and adds '*mok*' (your mother) to recreate a common insult. Others add women's underwear to the president's face.

The news of his election not only sounded humorous but also presented a challenge in formal settings such as national news broadcasting where the hosts had to navigate the implications of uttering a 'dirty' word on national television channels. One meme reflects on this predicament, featuring three female news anchors from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, respectively. The sound on screen for the Algerian and Tunisian news broadcasts appears high, while the Moroccan one is muted, showing that the word cannot be pronounced in the country. News hosts pronounced his name with evident discomfort on the day of his election as president, to the delight of many. The first comment on the news anchors meme laughingly points out that in Al Aoula, the first Moroccan public television channel, the anchor pronounced the Algerian president's name as 'Taiboun', adding an 'i' after the 'a' to avoid pronouncing the vulgar word.

The election of Abdelmajid Tebboune also presented a unique challenge: a case could arise where the King would need to publicly pronounce the name of the president of Algeria. The Moroccan meme page Laugh B Darija imagined such a scenario by reproducing the picture of an article by the satirical Algerian newspaper *El Manchar* titled 'Mohammed VI demande à Tebboune s'il peut pas l'appeler juste par son prénom' (Mohammed VI asks Tebboune if he can just call him by his first name). Another meme shows a still image of a televised speech by Mohammed VI where the King is touching his forehead and looking preoccupied, trying to figure out how to pronounce the infamous surname. The caption reads 'و إننا لندعوا الرئيس الجزائري عبد المجيد…' (We sympathise with the Algerian President Abdelmajid …). As with the previous memes, in the comment section of this meme users mock the changes in

pronunciation, this time exaggerating and introducing longer vowels to say 'تاباوان' (*tabawan*). Memes in which the King has difficulty articulating the Algerian president's name are particularly funny because forcing the monarch to swear in public and in a formal setting constitutes the ultimate transgression from sacred to undesirable.

Memetic Leadership

As we recall from previous chapters, the King has often been featured in memes especially, but not exclusively, since 2016. In some of these memes, the King is imagined as employing youthful language including swear words, for example the one portraying the Moroccan rap battle discussed in Chapter 3. One meme, shared via Instagram Stories of the account Moroccan Rap Trolls, shows King Mohammed VI with his brother Prince Moulay Rachid standing in front of a computer discussing the online rap feud between rappers Don Bigg and Dizzy DROS, referred to in the meme as the fat one and the Black guy, respectively:

Mohammed VI:	'رشيد العزي لاح الكلاش'
	Rachid! the Black guy just dropped a diss track
Moulay Rachid:	'دخل دخل نتمزكو باينة تقب الغليض'
	Click, click so we listen, for sure he destroyed the fat one
Mohammed VI:	'مبيفي معايا واقلة هاد زبي'
	Is this dickhead maybe beefing me?
Moulay Rachid:	'صدق تاقبك كتر من الغليض'
	He actually destroyed you more than the fat one, *hhng*

In this meme, the King has been amateurishly inserted into a body that is standing beside Moulay Rachid. Both characters are looking at a computer screen eagerly listening to the Dizzy DROS diss track 'Moutanabbi' (2019b). In the meme, the King employs the neologism '*mbifi*', literally translated as 'he beefed me'. The informal English 'beefing someone' serves to construct a new verb in Darija. The King also refers to the rappers with the names audiences have given to them as well as insults. Don Bigg is referred to as 'the fat one' (*lghalid*) and rapper Dizzy DROS as 'this dick' (*had zabbi*). It is worth emphasising that the use of this language would be unthinkable in traditional media and certainly not uttered by the King. It is only in memes and in digital media that the monarch is free to speak in such a manner.

In memes where the monarch is depicted as talking, language plays an important role in constructing his memetic persona. Vulgar language and having

a conversation about a rap battle imagines the monarch as being personally involved in youth culture. The extreme anti-political correctness of these memes is what makes them amusing and horrifying; it also serves to make the royal family appear more approachable. Together with memes where the King is shown in casual attire and with an ungroomed appearance, street Darija allows the King and his brother to become 'one of us'. Street Darija in writing already ensures any meme is infused with humour. But its utterance by the King, as an inviolable (in the 2011 Constitution) and sacred (explicit in previous constitutions) figure, blurs the lines between the clean and sacred and the dirty and profane.

The Moroccan monarchy has a history of maintaining its legitimacy as rulers of the country through the performance of what Mohamed Daadaoui (2011) calls rituals of power. Like the Jordanian royal family, Moroccan monarchs claim a direct line of descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Prophetic lineage confers the trait of being a *sharif*. In Morocco, the kingdom is called the Sharifian Monarchy, with Mohammed VI being the 34th direct descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and therefore a *sharif*. It is believed that all sharifian rulers inherit the divine blessing or the *baraka*, which protects them from evil. Not only is the Moroccan monarch blessed and a *sharif*, but he is also the religious leader of the country. As the commander of the faithful, all Friday prayers at mosques around the country are directed towards the King. These rituals of power are examples of how the monarchy's legitimacy has been constructed through repetitive acts mostly exhibiting the royal family's distinctive divinity. The efficacy of these rituals has not always been bulletproof (Hammoudi 1997, p. 25; Sater 2010, p. 44). Contemporary digital artefacts suggest important shifts in the words of these rituals of power as meme culture provides an opportunity for netizens to reimagine the leader. While the digital grotesque might serve to mock leaders, as discussed in previous chapters, it might also turn out to be an effective form of maintaining power. Let us unpack this idea.

Veena Das (2017) suggests that the appeal of contemporary far-right populist leaders in India or in the United States can be theorised through Foucault's understanding of the grotesque. For Foucault, the grotesque acts as a mechanism of power where 'by virtue of their status a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having' (2003, p. 11). Accordingly, far-right leaders rise by asserting that they will challenge the establishment, which sits comfortably in privilege. These leaders promise the people that when they rule, they will make their countries safe and great (again). In their discourses about dismantling the political fabric that is blamed for the critical times in which we are living, Das argues, these far-right leaders accumulate power without having to prove they have the skills required to fulfil the task: 'It is interesting that political leaders are not expected to be virtuous or have personality traits that would endow them with the capacity to do what they promise – yet,

these outcomes are expected to flow from the very fact that they can exercise power' (2017). From this perspective, leaders do not need to be able to fulfil their promises, but they do need to be seen as fighting with and for the people, or rather opposing the political elites that have allegedly ruined the country. This perspective of the grotesque suggests that rituals of power in Morocco serve as a form of guaranteeing power without demonstrating the actual skills needed to govern. Power is ensured through inheritance and repeated performances.

A similar idea has been articulated as part of arguing for the triumph of meme culture and far-right leaders. Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters (2018) suggest that the era of digital politics winning campaigns has been more about crafting a powerful narrative (make us great again) than presenting correct or important data. Through the lens of the grotesque, a memetic King who swears and employs trendy words may gain more symbolic capital from his vulgar-talking, amateurishly Photoshopped memetic persona than from outdated rituals of power. Counterintuitively, resonance, not sanctity, with the digital grotesque allows the King to gain symbolic capital, at least among youthful netizens, to appear transgressive enough to fight the same sacred institution he represents. The digital grotesque functions in a way as a new ritual of power. After all, the rituals of power are a way of creating a narrative of power. The digital grotesque allows for a new narrative, the grotesque, mirroring the successful political campaigns of the likes of Donald Trump. These rituals, old and new, remove the requirement to prove one's own capabilities to rule. If previously the rituals of power granted the King his legitimacy through sacredness, in the age of memes the grotesque presents him as a leader able to combat the establishment. A memetic King who speaks like a young man is funny; this portrayal also bestows on the monarch the youthful image the state had intended since the beginning of his rule.

In the context of digital politics, Paolo Gerbaudo, in his book *The Digital Party* (2019), describes the emergence of what he terms the 'hyperleader'. Against those who argue for the participatory nature of the digital and its power to dissolve leadership within social media networks (namely based on Jenkins 2009), Gerbaudo contends that digitised leadership is on the rise. According to Gerbaudo, the continuous necessity of leadership, together with digital celebrity culture on social media, has opened up new avenues for leaders. Leaders such as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, Pablo Iglesias and Matteo Salvini, regardless of their political ideology, have emerged as charismatic figures who represent their respective parties, compensating for the lack of a trustworthy organisation. A memetic King can rise as a hyperleader because, as in many other places around the world, in Morocco youth have little faith in the political system (Zerhouni 2019), and the deep state has been determined to supress any type of criticism.

As a fictionalised hyperleader, the King responds to rap battles, not only to defend his own ego and to prove he is fearless, but also to protect his nation

against perceived attacks. Throughout this book, we have explored examples of the King's active engagement (Chapters 3 and 5), such as the meme of the monarch responding to the song '3acha Cha3b' (Long Live the People), which also served as a retort to Algerian rappers. The memes discussed in this chapter show how a memetic King shamelessly speaks a 'dirty' language of the unprivileged. In the digital sphere and in the late 2010s, however, this language is not reprovable but instead imagines a leader mastering the narrative through form (memes) and content (Photoshopped images and youthful argot). Arguably, grotesque representations may work as valuable tools to render the monarch likeable and desirable to young people who have no faith in the state or the deep state. As a grotesque meme, the King comfortably governs regardless of whether he has the necessary skills to rule over an entire nation.

Differences in memetic representations between the current and former monarch suggest that there are limits to the digital grotesque. Distinct memetic personas reveal that there is a border to be crossed (and feared) when it comes to grotesque politics and digitalised leadership. From a different perspective, one might argue that the grotesque as a mechanism of power is not always materialised in the same way. Memes of the late King Hassan II show that he is not necessarily re-meme-bered through the grotesque, especially within ultra-nationalist meme pages. Memes featuring Hassan II have significantly increased in number since the Moorish Movement and historical meme pages boomed on Facebook in 2019. Notably, the Facebook meme page Moroccan Nationalist Memes shared more than 30 memes featuring Hassan II, while it only devoted six image-macros to Mohammed VI during a one-year period. King Hassan II has been chosen as the emblem of the new digital Moroccan right, as evidenced by the use of his image as the profile picture of the Moroccan Nationalist Memes Facebook page. This picture shows King Hassan II with the words 'Make Morocco Great Again', a play on Donald Trump's 2016 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA). Instead of an amateurish meme, this picture is aesthetically similar to other iconic artistic creations such as the famous Barack Obama 'Hope' poster created by Shepard Fairey to support Obama's first presidential campaign in 2008 and later, in 2016, pictures depicting Donald Trump wearing the red MAGA hat.

In contrast to its memes targeting leftists and all those depicted as enemies of the nation, visual content about the monarchy is not demeaning on this meme page. In fact, the page features a series of memes designed not to cause laughter, but to showcase the monarchy and the military, including events such as the Sand War (1963) against Algeria or the Green March (1975). These memes often add famous phrases pronounced by King Hassan II. For instance, one meme reads in English: 'If they attack the march, we will eat them.' This phrase is connected to the events that took place during the Green March, when 30,000 Moroccans successfully marched into the Spanish colony of the Sahara armed with Qurans

and pictures of Hassan II. These words, written in English in the meme but pronounced originally in Arabic, serve to amplify the King's legacy, especially to younger audiences. The use of English (and not French) suggests a will to advertise Morocco's historical power beyond the linguistic borders of Arabic speakers and the French colonial legacy. Furthermore, the picture of the King in this meme exemplifies how the page adds filters such as glitched effects to images of Hassan II and the military to underscore the nostalgic feel of a past era of power while reinforcing the phrase Make Morocco Great Again.

The unique representation of Hassan II is not limited to one meme page. The page 'الحركة المورية المغربية' (The Moorish Moroccan Movement) exhibits, as its profile picture, a black and white image of the late King. Another page, Moroccan Historical Memes (originally in English), is devoted to the country's history and features the monarchy in its own style. Instead of providing a politicised perspective on the monarchy as is the case with Moroccan Nationalist Memes, or mocking the monarchy like The Moroccan Throne (both page names also originally in English, see Chapter 5), this page infuses each Moroccan monarch with different fictional personas. With most of its memes featuring past monarchs, the page has an interest in discussing colonial and postcolonial tensions embodied in past Moroccan rulers such as Sultan Abdelaziz (1894–1908), Mohammed V (1955–61), and Hassan II (1961–99) as well as notorious Moroccan, French, and Spanish figures such as Abdelkrim al- Khattabi, Hubert Lyautey, and Manuel Fernández Silvestre, respectively. Not all the rulers are portrayed equally in these memes. Sultan Abdelaziz is repeatedly reprimanded for betraying Ceuta and Melilla. According to the page, Abdelaziz exchanged the two cities for a bicycle. Despite having an undefined political agenda, Hassan II is portrayed as a ruthless ruler. One meme shows his picture with red sparkling eyes reacting to his opponents, a sign of power and anger as analysed in Chapter 4.

One meme stands out for its portrayal of Hassan II speaking to his father, Mohammed V, about who has accumulated more power. The conversation starts with Mohammed V addressing Hassan II as follows: 'Hello *zbi*, I mean son.' It is important to note that the conversation is primarily in English but is highlighted by only using Darija to utter the aforementioned vulgar word '*zbi*' (my dick). The conversation ends with Hassan II as the clear winner after he cites that he was the architect of the Green March. In this instance, vulgarity is meant to exhibit familiarity between father and son, as much as to connect language (English and 'clean' for Hassan II, mixed and 'dirty' for Mohammed V) and ruling power (territorial conquest, with his presence represented only in pictures carried by his subjects).

These portrayals of the late King overlook the suffering of many during Hassan II's reign. Starting in the 1970s, after Hassan II suffered two *coup d'état* attempts, and lasting until the mid-1990s, this period known as the Years of Lead was characterised by extreme repression including torture, a lack of freedom of

expression, and a long list of human rights violations. In his memetic persona, the King's legacy of terror is channelled thought his military accomplishments (particularly against Algeria and Frente Polisario) and his taking affirmative action towards territorial reunification of the country (notably the Sahara region). Hassan II's exceptional strength as a leader of the country (surviving coups and winning wars) contrasts with the familiarity with which memers articulate Mohammed VI on the same page, Moroccan Historical Memes. One meme, which reinforces previously mentioned rumours regarding the present monarch's sexuality, suggests that despite online affordances that allow participants to mock the monarchy, not every monarch is portrayed monstrously. As Yasmin Ibrahim suggests in the introduction to her book,

> If time immortalizes cultural icons, the digital world imposes its own moral sensibilities onto them, releasing the icon into a mass spectacular of image archives where they can be remade, curated and re-appropriated to be imbued with multitudes of meanings, drawing on their collective resonance with masses. (2021, p. 2)

Meme and Myth

Two kings compete online: the king who is so ordinary that he can be dis-meme-bered into speaking like an unprivileged young man, exemplified by the character Bouzebal, and the king whose monstrous actions are re-meme-bered two decades after his death as those of a 'pure' leader in spite of the people's suffering. The grotesque allows for narratives that work for each leader. King Mohammed VI works among rap pages, while his father King Hassan II works best to enhance nationalist sentiments. Memetic representations of the late King Hassan II suggest that the grotesque, both in its presence as vulgar language or Photoshopped images (see Chapter 7) and sometimes in its absence, also acts to reshape dead rulers into memetic myths.

Grotesque appearance, language, and sexuality all construct the current monarch's transgressive rule. Trashy looks and vulgar language disguise the King as an ordinary young man but bestow upon him the glamour that being vulgar has gained within digital culture. As meme culture has had an unprecedented scope and scale in which to promote the grotesque as a source of power, language has been essential in complementing images that validate the existence of the monster. As we demystify these categories that terrify us, we also dis-meme-ber a King whose power was meant, since the start of his reign, to attract young people. Now that he has clearly done so by becoming part of young people's rap feuds through his memetic persona, it might work for these rap meme pages to justify his leadership. However, for ultra-nationalist pages engaging with a moderate level of vulgarity, such a persona might provide the King with an excessive dose of the grotesque.

On the opposite side, the memetic representation of the late King Hassan II more often than not showcases the power of the grotesque in an alternate manner. His formal appearance, clean language, and unchallenged hetero-sexuality highlight memetic expressions of the late King's grotesque power. His minimally Photoshopped physical appearance, coupled with his linguistic demeanour, of delivering historically meaningful quotes in English, grant Hassan II the status of myth though his selectively re-meme-bered moments of glory. Remembered as a skilful orator, Hassan II, as a meme on ultra-nationalist meme pages, speaks in English (versus Arabic or French) and embodies the digital politics of the second half of the 2010s. While Mohammed VI is glamourised through the vulgar embedded in Darija, the late King Hassan II is glamourised, in English, through rewriting his monstrous leadership. Both leaders are thus dis-meme-bered: one as a vulgar yet cool leader, and the other as a mythical yet monstrous character. Especially when nostalgic effects are mixed into memes, a glamourous grotesque emerges as a way of looking back into the haunting past. This will be the starting point of the next chapter of this book.

Postscript

In 1994, Hassan II famously addressed the nation on the occasion of the Fête du Trône (Throne Day) to recognise, for the first time, Morocco's complex linguistic cartography:

> أقول الخلط واجب ومستحب وضروري بين العربية ولهجاتنا. اللهم، أكون أسماء طفلا مغربيا يخلط بين العربية الدارجة أو الفصحى وبين تريفيت أو تمازيغت أو تشلحيت، أفضل بالنسبة لي وأشرف بالنسبة لي، وأقول أكثر مناعة بالنسبة للمستقبل من أن أسمع الطفل والطفلة ووالديه كذلك يخاطب بعضهم بعضا بالخلط بين العربية والفرنسية أو الخلط بين العربية والإسبانية. ونحن نفكر في التعليم وبرامج التعليم أن ندخل تعليم اللهجات علما منا أن تلك اللهجات قد شاركت اللغة الأم، لغة الضاد، لغة كتاب الله سبحانه وتعالى لغة القرآن الكريم، قد شاركتها في فعل تاريخنا وأمجادنا[13]
>
> I say that the mixing between Arabic and our dialects is obligatory, desirable and necessary. Hearing a Moroccan child mixing Arabic Darija with Fusha, or between Tarifit, Tamazight, or Tachalihit is preferable and more honourable to me, and I say, more immune for the future, than hearing a boy or a girl and their parents as well speak to each other by mixing Arabic with French or mixing Arabic with Spanish. We are thinking about education and its programmes to introduce the learning of dialects, knowing that these dialects have contributed to the mother tongue, the '*DDaD* Language', the language of the Book of God Almighty, the language of the Holy Quran, in shaping our history and our glories.

[13] See video of this excerpt on YouTube in MA News (2018).

In this televised speech, delivered in Classic Arabic and now living in the digital sphere as a YouTube video, the King constructs two kinds of linguistic 'impurities': good (authentic/Indigenous) versus 'bad' (inauthentic/European colonial) – one that will 'immunise' Morocco and another that will pollute it. The coexistence of Classic Arabic (here referred to as *FusHa*), Darija (here referred to as *Arabic Darija*), and Amazigh languages (here named *lahajaatina*, our dialects) is desired instead of the intermingling of Arabic and French or Arabic and Spanish. In its historical context, the speech embodies the efforts to absorb a strong Amazigh movement fighting for official recognition of identity and languages. Changes, however, only materialised during Mohammed VI's initial years of rule with the inauguration of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in 2002 and the inclusion of Tamazight as an official language in the 2011 Constitution. In the light of the digital grotesque and memetic hyperleaders, this speech can be viewed as an attempt to glamourise a hybrid, unofficial, and unnormalised Moroccan linguistic ecosystem. The insistence on local 'dialects' seeks to beautify a local grotesque against the backdrop of a colonial legacy with a strong hold on its linguistic power. It is this pride in the local grotesque that will be expanded upon in Chapter 9.

9

Ghosts of a 'Cool' Past

The Maghreb of the 1980s and 1990s has been a source of inspiration for a cohort of young Instagram content creators, singers, and visual artists, particularly since the mid-2010s. This group has taken a particular interest in these decades in casting a light on unprivileged everyday life and its urban spaces. I refer to this creative group as the *Beldi Cool*. The Beldi Cool favours a raw, unrefined aesthetic and features local, inexpensive products as well as products that, without necessarily being labelled as 'Moroccan' – such as plastic Coca-Cola crates – are part of past imaginaries for many people. Chaabi (popular) and raï music from this era has encouraged musicians from the Beldi Cool to revisit the 2010s and its musical genres associated with the unprivileged masses. Content creators and Instagram models utilise run-down urban spaces and ordinary traditional homes as backdrops. Mixing old and new, grotesque multimedia aesthetics explore sounds and themes that continue to haunt ordinary people despite promises of development. Contrary to the latest fashion available at the big shopping malls built during the 2000s, content creators, photographers, models, and social media influencers belonging to the Beldi Cool rescue old garments from popular markets (*jutiya* in Darija) that cater to the local population and not to tourists. The 'vintage' fashion they showcase stands in stark contrast to the rapidly changing trends of contemporary fast fashion. The result of exhibiting as trendy seemingly outdated items of clothing, together with images of unprivileged neighbourhoods and homes, has created a style that appropriates the local grotesque to perform a nostalgic infused present.

There is no doubt that the digital sphere has expressed a taste for all things retro, or what Katharina Niemeyer (2016) calls digital nostalgia. Niemeyer unpacks digital nostalgia through interconnected meanings that denote nostalgia for the digital; nostalgia expressed via or within the digital; or both. In a postdigital world, digital nostalgia suggests the longing for access to technology we no longer use or for a society with less technology. It also serves to reimagine the past through digital media, offering the feeling of comfort through the familiar, embodied in old

games and retro devices. Globally, digital nostalgia has thrived since the 2010s. The online subculture vaporwave has been particularly engaged with exploring nostalgia within digital aesthetics. Vaporwave encompasses different artistic expressions, primarily electronic music and visual culture. Its name, a pun on the term 'vapourware', refers to software that has been advertised but never goes into production because it is only a concept or requires redesigning. The term manifests the vaporwave's preferences for digital trash, products that have been marginalised and forgotten with the passing of time: '[V]aporwave exhibits an extraordinarily acute awareness of the historicity of the Internet as an unfolding medium, manifest in the way that old and obsolete Internet platforms, architectures, graphics and cultural practices make ironic returns in new guises' (Born and Haworth 2017, p. 79). Vaporwave aesthetics, such as video cassette glitches, polaroid-style pictures, or vintage equipment, are embedded in some of the Beldi Cool aesthetics bringing the past, the digital, and art forms together. In a world where technology is driving our future, the past continues to haunt us. This revamped aesthetic has helped to reimagine lost futures by rescuing alternative pasts, as we explore in this chapter.

Media and communication technologies as a space for 'nostalgising', Niemeyer asserts, can also contribute to the rise of extremist movements that employ certain moments and people from the past to claim historical legitimacy though feelings of loss and belonging. This chapter explores the various interpretations and politics of digital nostalgia by discussing the Beldi Cool alongside new memetic trends that capitalise on digital nostalgising effects to promote ultra-nationalist sentiments online, as introduced in Chapter 8. The different meanings of digital nostalgia emerge within cultural artefacts with filters that recreate the effects of analogue cameras, cassette video glitches, or black and white images, as well as exhibiting and creating new meanings for pre-digital-era objects through the digital. By exploring how the digital has embraced nostalgia, this chapter connects different ways of navigating the entrapment of the haunting past and lost futures in and through digital media. The aim is to contextualise far-right trends of re-meme-bering discussed in previous chapters along with other contemporary dominant nostalgic aesthetics. The objective is not to depoliticise bigoted online content, but to frame it within coexisting digital artistic sensibilities that share the use of nostalgia in the digital. This chapter explores how these two trends reimagine national identity: one from the lenses of the radically local grotesque, and the other from recreating memories of times that no living individual can remember. I argue that both look at the past to find comfort in known experiences when confronting the uncertain future. The former engages with the past to challenge dominant narratives of development, while the latter does so to capitalise on restorative forms of nostalgia. The difference is that while the Beldi Cool embrace the local grotesque, ultra-nationalist memes prefer a sanitised version of the 'local'.

Glamming Up the Local Grotesque

Beldi (بلدي) is an adjective whose literal meaning is 'my one hometown, village, or country'. The *bled* in Darija (from Classic Arabic *bilaad* (بلادي) meaning hometown, country) often refers to rural areas from which many have migrated to urban areas or other countries. In France, the word *bled* is now part of the French language used by migrants or diaspora to refer to their family's country of origin. In North Africa, *beldi*, with the change in supporting semivowel and the added first-person pronoun 'my', carries a different set of meanings. Traditionally, *beldi* is a term that designates the origin of material culture including food, furniture, or clothing. Beldi means local Moroccan and its antonym is *rumi*, from the Arabic 'from Rome' (رومي), meaning Byzantine, Christian, from the Global North, and, by extension, foreign. The distinction between *beldi* and *rumi* is applied to denote cultural differences (Rachik 2016). Generally, *beldi* refers to locally sourced, non-processed, handmade, and authentic products, and *rumi* refers to industrial, processed, imported, machine-produced, and inauthentic products. *Beldi* food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, are those available in popular local markets, often ugly and deformed in appearance but with an intense taste. *Rumi*, on the contrary, are the 'normal', standardised products (all the same shape and size); for instance, apples that are symmetrical and beautiful looking might be *rumi*, as they may have been industrially produced in a foreign country (Graf 2016, p. 85). In Morocco, what is *rumi* is looked upon with suspicion as being industrially manipulated and unhealthy, and often more expensive and tasteless, even if perfect looking.

In Darija, eating ugly fresh food is embodied in the saying '*khanz wbnin*' meaning 'stinky but tasty'. This preference for local products among local inhabitants was common in colonial Africa, to the astonishment of 19th-century European traders (Newell 2016). The aesthetic of this discourse (stinky but tasty, cheap, and authentic) in Moroccan food practices reflects the belief that even if beauty, at least externally, resides in the Christian Global North, the local, ugly as it may be, is not only worthy of desire but preferable. Referring back to Chapter 2, the inclination towards beauty is embedded in the contemporary Arabic term for aesthetics. *Jamaaliyya* (الجمالية) denotes the 'science of beauty' (علم الجمال,*'ilm al-jamaal*), which follows European perceptions of aesthetics as the appreciation of beauty. This existing conceptualisation of aesthetics as beauty is reflected in the article on 'aesthetics' in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Budd 1998). While the article includes a section on beauty, there is no equivalent section for ugliness. Regardless of European influences, as mentioned in Chapter 2, and despite the fact that an interest in aesthetics and beauty is certainly not unique to the European experience, beauty also has a special significance in Islam. This dominance of beauty, at least on paper, contrasts with existing desires for the local and

ugly (Moroccan) versus the foreign (Christian Global North) and is beautifully embedded in the dichotomy *beldi* versus *rumi*.

This preference for the ugly local is articulated by Koichi Iwabuchi (2004) as 'cultural odour'. Because odour carries negative connotations, having a foul smell renders a product within national markers as undesirable for the global market. Inspired by this affinity for the local 'odour', even if stinky, artist Hassan Hajjaj has demonstrated how *beldi* can become the centre of a successful creative world. Based in both London and Marrakech, since the early 1980s this internationally renowned artist has designed interior spaces, photographed famous pop stars, and designed clothes inspired by everyday Moroccan life and ordinary objects. Far from conforming to orientalist stereotypes of what objects are perceived as Moroccan, Hajjaj's artistic universe imagines everyday objects such as sacks of flour used to make bread, female djellabas with luxury fashion prints, or red plastic Coca-Cola crates written on in Arabic as ornamental pieces of art as much as useful pieces of material culture. Influenced by 1950s pop art in the United States, Hajjaj's work infuses local and global products with a nostalgic aura of the Moroccan *bled*. The result is a world where women wear their ordinary djellabas with prints that emulate Louis Vuitton and Gucci logos, couches made of Coca-Cola crates decorate sitting rooms, and layers of colourful patterns frame his characteristics photographs of famous artists. Far from capitalising on beautiful Moroccan handcraft traditions such as *zellige* tiles or luxurious caftans, worn for special events and more costly than djellabas, Hajjaj masterfully appropriates, reinvents, and elevates local mass-produced products that are part of the landscape of every neighbourhoods around the country, challenging perceptions of *beldi*.

Throughout the *Kesh Angels* (The Angels of Marrakech) photo series, the *La Caravane* exhibition, or the film *Karima: A Day in the Life of a Henna Girl* (2015), Hajjaj's style shows little concern for local products manufactured for tourists' consumption such as Amazigh rugs, argan oil, and other commodities. His creative ecosystem responds to a desire to bestow authenticity and pride on everyday objects found in any impoverished neighbourhood where tourists are nowhere to be seen, even if these are not 'originally' *beldi*. This nostalgic turn to the Moroccan everyday, through the 1950s pop art aesthetic recognisable to most Moroccans, is the artist's technique to bring the foreignness of luxury into the unprivileged everyday *beldi*. In a metaphorical sense, while Iwabuchi claims Japanese popular culture tends to strive to be 'culturally odorless' to achieve global marketability, Hajjaj's universe thrives on the unique essence of the local stink (stinky but tasty) and the idea that foul, or stinky, things can be delightful and marketable.

Most of Hajjaj's artistic world blends traditional Moroccan elements (garments or objects) with internationally recognisable prints or 'Western' garments with Moroccan-inspired prints. This fusion is evident in his creations, such as his

djellabas as well as his traditional blazers made from fabrics printed with Moroccan football club flags. One of these garments, a blazer made from the Wydad Football Club flag, was worn by the US singer Billie Eilish for the cover of *Vogue* magazine (Figure 15), which was widely shared on social media. The print of the flag is mostly only recognisable to Moroccans and hardly known by foreigners. With this garment on a pop star and the photograph on the cover of the most iconic fashion magazine, both the flag and the picture acquire agency as a 'thing-power' (Bennett 2010). Mediated through Hajjaj's artistic vision, these powerful objects transform fabric into recognition, football symbols into high fashion, and local passions into global objects of desire. Witnessing their flag in such an elevated, globally recognised context, Wydad's football fans are infused with celebrity, a departure from the way in which football ultras are often demonised as uncivilised thugs (see Alami 2020). Hajjaj's aim of uplifting the local, unprivileged aspects of Moroccan culture to their rightful place as markers of Moroccan identity is evident in his clothing brand, known as Andy Wahlou. A reference to the leading figurehead of pop art, Andy Warhol, the name also plays with the words in Moroccan Darija 'عندي والو' (*3andi waalou*), meaning 'I don't have anything'. The combination of Warhol's pop

Figure 15 Billie Eilish, framed photography by ©Hassan Hajjaj, 2019/1440. Part of the *My Rockstars* series. Courtesy of Billie Eilish, *Vogue*, and The Artist.

art and the nothingness of the everyday unprivileged crosses paths in Hajjaj's brand to create a nostalgic grotesque that thrives in the 'in-between'.

Navigating the liminal line that separates what is constructed as Moroccan (*beldi*) and as foreign (*rumi*), Hajjaj bestows a new value on things that relies on the hybridity of those objects that are foreign and *beldi* at the same time. Born in Larache (Morocco), but a Londoner since his early teens, speaking both English and Darija, and living between Morocco and the United Kingdom, Hajjaj's art is a response to foreign stereotypes about Morocco: 'It's about taking this orientalism vibe and saying, "O.K. let's take ownership of it. Me being Moroccan, you being a Moroccan subject, let's take that kind of thing and do it in our way" ' (Mitter 2019). Despite his intention to challenge marketed images of Morocco, particularly, as he puts it, 'caftans, hashish, camels', glamourised djellabas may raise questions of cultural appropriation in the manner of self-orientalism as has been the case with some Moroccan designers.

In discussing different generations of Moroccan fashion designers, M. Angela Jansen (2013) questions whether it is justified to accuse Moroccan designers of appropriating their own cultural heritage. While orientalism refers to the mysterious exoticism of the Other, self-orientalism (Iwabuchi 1994) exploits the orientalist gaze to turn oneself into the Other. From this perspective, the Orient actively uses the orientalist gaze to create, maintain, and strengthen its own national cultural identity (Iwabuchi 1994). This is particularly evident among the second generation of designers in the 1990s who focused on designing traditional caftans because, as Jansen claims, '*beldi* sells' (2013, p. 12). Cultural specificities allowed this generation of designers to differentiate themselves from foreign designers and market themselves as uniquely Moroccan. In other words, employing Moroccan culture and capitalising on their Moroccan identity turned out to be an exceptionally effective strategy to stand out in the global fashion market. However, according to Jansen, it is nonetheless fair to claim that there are few authentically *beldi* items in Moroccan fashion as most of the fabrics are imported, some decorative techniques in traditional clothes are quite recent, and the cuts of contemporary designers are mostly foreign.

It is evident that Hajjaj's artistry capitalises on Moroccanness in a similar way to these designers. However, Hajjaj selectively harvests from his cultural heritage, specifically focusing on elements that have been relegated to the everyday, ordinary, and unprivileged. In this way, Hajjaj transforms what is not internationally recognised as desirably Moroccan to campaign against stereotypes of what a Moroccan designer should be designing (caftans, for example). This transformation strives for cultural markers originating from the bottom up, as in the case of the Wydad Football Club blazer or djellabas. Instead of designing upper-class attire such as caftans, everyday clothing, both Moroccan (djellabas) and non-Moroccan (blazers, t-shirts, and hoodies), encapsulates his artistic vision that questions what *beldi* really means. It is within the interplay of what is *obviously*

non-Moroccan (prints of well-known French or Italian luxury trademarks and blazers) and what is *evidently* Moroccan (djellabas and football flags) that Hajjaj's work is able to destabilise Moroccanness and *beldi* simultaneously as he achieves artistic, and arguably commercial, success.

Hajjaj's 'in-betweenness' (Bhabha 1994) as both outsider and insider fosters fears that he may appropriate and threaten dominant perspectives of what Moroccanness means, both within Morocco and beyond. By declaring a Coca-Cola crate made from red plastic and written in Arabic to be as Moroccan as a djellaba reimagines the former as a cool object that competes with local products marketed for their beauty (*zellij* or rugs). It is only through Hajjaj that this humble object, a symbol of capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalisation and often repurposed by the unprivileged in Morocco as a piece of furniture, is now turned into trendy art and interior design desired by international audiences. By bestowing symbolic value on the *beldi* grotesque – djellabas instead of caftans, ultras' flags instead of traditional embroidery, Arabic instead of English – Hajjaj's universe plays with orientalised perceptions of the Other as something new, exiting, exotic, and sellable (or 'Eating the Other' as formulated by bell hooks (1992)) but also capitalises on the fetishisation of ugliness by marginalised groups as a form of protest (Adorno 1997, p. 48; Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018, p. 13). While Hajjaj may simultaneously draw upon his Moroccanness as a source of distinction and as a marketing strategy, the focus on the grotesque, as opposed to traditional myths or markers of Moroccan culture, results in a creative artefact that not only challenges what is and what is not Moroccan, but also mocks and dismantles this conundrum altogether.

Hajjaj's creative world has influenced a younger generation of Moroccan artists, photographers, models, and content creators. In the mid-2010s, they began to take pride in the local grotesque, showcasing it through their Instagram accounts and YouTube channels. This growing pride in the Moroccan ordinary, in contrast to what is designated and marketed as Moroccan, has taken on a nostalgic dimension with an interest in rescuing the local life and culture of the 1980s and 1990s in North Africa. Shared online, this content, as the following section explores, reflects a yearning for the urban, chaotic, and often dirty-looking everyday lives of the past. In their pictures and music videos, these artists keep 'appropriating' and questioning their own cultural heritage to transform the local grotesque into an aesthetic movement that finds comfort in the somewhat unglamourous recent past.

Haunting Music

C H E B الشاب and Issam are two prominent artists who have shaped the nostalgic trend in music, skilfully blending 1980s and 1990s North African music with contemporary electronic music and rap, respectively. In his YouTube account,

C H E B describes his music as neochaabi or post-chaabi, *cha3abi* (شعبي) translating in Arabic to popular or of the people. Chaabi music refers to different varieties of folk music within North Africa and the Middle East that include distinct local sounds, instruments, and styles. C H E B's artistic name is tied to the title of Cheb, meaning a young man, and opposed to sheikh (شيخ), meaning an elder or master, given to chaabi singers with a particular reference to Algerian-born raï music superstars such as Cheb Khaled, Cheb Mami, Cheb Hasni, or Cheb Bilal. Raï music, which originated during the 1920s in the port city of Oran (Algeria), became an international success in the 1980s, extending its influence across the Maghreb and France. Like other chaabi music genres, raï was once considered tasteless, shocking, and associated with a lack of morals by the local population, particularly because it is sung by both men and women. Yet chaabi has been, and still is, the preferred music to be played at weddings and other festivities. Due to its commercial success, it is frequently broadcast on television music shows and at major music festivals, while it is also prominently featured at run-down, non-luxurious, morally questionable nightclubs across the Maghreb.

Unlike other local music genres associated with the upper classes, such as Andalusi (see Chapter 7), raï music has long explored taboo topics such as alcohol, drugs, and romantic relationships; with time, raï music also addressed political issues and social struggles. Raï, and chaabi in general, have been and still are connected with underground music in the Maghreb; they resonate with the unprivileged classes where entertainment and dance are mixed with forbidden beverages and other prohibited substances and activities deemed unacceptable from a conservative standpoint.

Inspired by raï, Moroccan chaabi, and traditional Arab music, C H E B bestows his own imprint on his neochaabi music by adding elements of retro digital nostalgia. One example is the cover image for his song 'Future' (2021a), which features a blurred and glitched palm tree against a bright pink and red sky with the sun in the background. In the accompanying music video, the lyrics of the song frame this picture, adopting the same strong colour scheme as the image. In contrast to the beauty of Arabic calligraphy, which is characterised by its consistent proportions, the lyrics in the video appear to be handwritten, uneven, and disordered. The artist's inspiration in digital nostalgia seeks to bring chaabi into the postdigital age, which is characterised 'by trauma and regression in late capitalism … [trying to] grapple with nostalgia, consumerism, and the uncanny in a digital age' (Tanner 2016, p. 6). C H E B's investment in Arabic nostalgia emerges in the moving images of songs such as 'Cocotte' (2019a) or 'Tutti' (2020). Both videos show black and white images including Moroccan *shikhat* (from *sheikh* and therefore opposing *cheb*; see Chapter 6) and belly dancers, framed within glitched effects that follow the rhythm of the music. Lyrically, C H E B's style diverts from traditional chaabi or raï by rarely following a narrative pattern, even though both

share a thematic interest in addressing social issues. Obscure rhymes and difficult-to-decipher messages combine with retro images, resulting in a unique aesthetic where chaabi music is reimagined as a nostalgic digital music genre. Here, vintage glitches and effects combine with the rich North African sonic heritage to create a unique contemporary multimedia creative artefact. While the delivery of his song may resemble that of chaabi singers, his voice and laid-back style come across as superficial, chaotic, and even absurd. The elements of sound, images, and text work together to speak about contemporary feelings of worthlessness and lost futures.

Songs such as 'Trash' (2019b), which has gathered over 20 million views (June 2022), as well as 'Vampire' (2019c) and Taous' (2021b), use saturated colours set against dark, dilapidated scenes portraying everyday life. Musically, 'Taous' and 'Vampire' are songs in which C H E B's voice is primarily accompanied by a guitar, with limited synthetic sounds. With the subtitle 'We want the night not to end' (بغينا الليل مايساليش), glitched effects and saturated images are used sparingly in 'Vampire'. Vintage effects only appear in one shot in which an old television displays a vampire surrounded by four women dressed in 1970s disco-inspired golden sequined dresses and high black boots, dancing against a psychedelic background pattern. An image of poisonous red mushrooms follows this shot, suggesting the influence of drugs. Contrasting with the retro digital aesthetics, the remainder of the music video turns into a horror gothic narration of urban nightlife and its dwellers as viewed by a person under the influence of drugs. The first scene shows three ordinary men smoking shisha and playing cards while drinking a red potion that looks like blood purchased from a pharmacy. The camera then becomes the intoxicated gaze with which the viewers roam streets and bars at night. The song is described in the YouTube caption as a song about class. In this regard, the lyrics claim that *we*, the unprivileged, would rather live in the night where dreams may occur rather than during the day where *we* have to face reality. In one line C H E B sings, 'As we will never grow feathers, let us dream a bit with advertisements' (حيت عمرنا غانربو الريش، نحلموا شوية مع الإشهارات,) asserting that their dreams are only possible while watching television and through its ads, not in their actual lives. In the song 'Future', C H E B embodies the past, asking whether the future will be better. The artist positions the song in the past, addressing future friends with the line 'my friends, whom I still don't know, whose parents have not yet been born' (صحابي للي ماكانعرفهمش الباقي ماتزادو واليديهم). Throughout the song, C H E B asks whether social conditions have improved in the future as life in *his* (the song's) present is polarised between having privilege and being unprivileged. C H E B claims, 'if you lived with us, you would have been worthless' (كون عشتو معانا تكونو هبش). Sung in 2021, the song 'Future', coupled with its engaging digital nostalgic aesthetics, implies that little has changed in the country despite claims of freedom and development (embodied in technological penetration) brought by the new King Mohammed VI in 1999.

Celebrating chaabi and raï, rapper Issam particularly engages with the *beldi* in his song 'Beldi Trap' (2018). Whether dressed in a 1990s windbreaker tracksuit or in Morocco's football team t-shirt and singing from inside a run-down bathtub or from a rooftop in an unprivileged neighbourhood, the song and music video skilfully blend a shabby aesthetic with pride in the nostalgic *beldi*. Through these homely settings, which sharply contrast with the expensive ornaments associated with rap in the United States, Issam creates what he has coined as *beldi* trap. Standing opposite to vaporwave, trap music is a subgenre of rap that originated in Atlanta in the 1980s and gained prominence in the 2010s. Issam's *beldi* trap, however, differs greatly from its American counterpart. As the chorus of the song goes: '*Men Derb Sultan, Issam fennan fuck lMirikan Men derb trap lbeldi jebna l3ezz f Motobécane*' (From Derb Sultan, Issam is an artist, fuck the American, From the neighbourhood of trap beldi, we bring the best in a motorcycle). Sung from Derb Sultan, a neighbourhood in Casablanca, the lyrics emphasise his pride in the ultra-local (the neighbourhood versus the city or the country). It is in this ultra-local context that Issam is able to engage with the grotesque familiar that comforts him and his listeners. By taking centre stage with old toilets, sites full of rubbish, or rooftops adorned with hanging laundry lines, Issam mocks the luxury and globalisation of trap music, bringing it back to the everyday local grotesque. The pride he exhibits is not necessarily in his homeland, but in his neighbourhood; this is evident in colour-corrected images that imbue them with a warm, nostalgic effect and in sampling music from raï celebrities such as Cheb Hosni.

Lacking C H E B's preoccupation with vaporwave, Issam prefers to visually depict the decrepit *unheimlich*. The song 'Wra Tabi3a' (Beyond Nature, 2021), already discussed in Chapter 3, shows the artist stepping into the world of monsters. The aim is to integrate the foreign presence at the core of one's own home. From the perspective of digital nostalgia, the house portrayed in this music video includes an old, pre-digital-era television displaying a recent football match between Libya and Tunisia that looks dated when viewed through that television set. Playing with time, the *beldi* in this music video forces the observer to ascertain whether the old technology accompanies the inspiration for raï music to symbolise a particular era or whether the lack of new technology is due to a lack of means to pay for the latest smart television set. Time is an important element in the work of both Issam and C H E B, as it intertwines the past and future while highlighting unprivileged homes and wasted lives that seem to have remained unaffected in a positive manner by the passing of time. In their songs, the so-called development, including the penetration of technology and internet accessibility, has not significantly improved the lives of the poor who live in the same homes and neighbourhoods as those once inhabited by their parents. The retro style is meant not only to look with pride to the ordinary local past, said to have been worse (an idea challenged by C H E B), but also to transmit the sense that

things have not necessarily improved as much as dominant narratives of development claim, as Issam's videos suggest. It is in this sense of timelessness, trapped in an unending era of uncertain futures, that the Beldi Cool finds comfort.

Back to the Future

The horror of lost futures has been analysed through the perspective of hauntology. In his book *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida articulates the ghostly persistence of Marx even after the death of communism as hauntology. As a wordplay with a similar sound to ontology in French, Derrida defines hauntology as the ghost that is there and is not at the same time. In theorising hauntology, Derrida considered that 'every period has its ghosts, its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media' (1994, p. 193). Hauntology in music has helped provide a framework for understanding mash-ups and remixing, including sampling and crate-digging, which mix the digital with the analogue, past and present. The digital has favoured this kind of musical production because it is considered a particularly hauntological media as it offers a 'sort of endless digital Now, a state of atemporality enabled by our increasingly efficient communal prosthetic memory' (Reynolds 2011, p. 397). According to Simon Reynolds, hauntology is 'all about memory's power (to linger, pop up unbidden, prey on your mind) and memory's fragility (destined to become distorted, to fade, then finally disappear)' (Reynolds 2011, p. 335) because in a digital networked culture, the future has become an old paradigm (Bruce Sterling quoted in Reynolds 2011, p. 397).

The concept of a linear progression of time that leads to change is, in fact, relatively new. Societies in the past have thought about time as a cyclical and eternal renewal of events and not about social change (Melucci 1996, p. 49). Renewal and rebirth both imply a cycle that is not always easy to return to. Nonetheless, the awareness of the cycle grants us the possibility of return when we feel lost. Cyclical time is therefore a survival strategy of reassurance. It is a point of reference. While rebirth and renewal intrinsically suggest a change and an improvement, cyclical time, or atemporality, may bring the certainty of disappointment as one may believe that one is constantly at the starting point. In the act of remembering the cycle, one may choose to privilege the memory of won or lost past battles. In this sense, both Issam and C H E B privilege the memories of a certain past while also championing a difficult-to-define linear time in their blending of the old and *beldi* with the new and digital, combining elements that continue to haunt us (lack of social advances in impoverished neighbourhoods, raï music, drugs, etc.). In its ability to maintain an atemporal uncertainty, the digital arguably allows us to express what Reynolds (2011, p. 397), employing a term coined by William Gibson, refers to as today's youth's 'future fatigue'.

Citing Franco Berardi, Mark Fisher refers to hauntology as 'after the future', alluding to the feeling that has haunted us throughout the 21st century, which 'is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate' (2012, p. 16). In this context, hauntology has been appropriated to denote aesthetics that magnify the crisis of historicity, updating Frederic Jameson's and Linda Hutcheon's theories of nostalgia and history in postmodern art (Tanner 2016, p. 30) or Francis Fukuyama's concept of the 'end of history' (2012), referring to the triumph of global capitalism. This sense of doom is present in analysing the politics of the linear time associated with the Arab Spring (2010–11) and its subsequent Winter (2013–16). While analysts have depicted the Arab Winter as an era of war and deception, emerging artistic genres such as the Beldi Cool reveal a different sentiment, encapsulated in the feeling of despair, as understood by Rob Bell, that tomorrow will be like today (see McKesson, 2018). It is this idea of lost futures that permeates both C H E B's and Issam's creative artefacts where time and timelessness are depicted as an *unheimlich* past condemned to be repeated over and over again. By choosing the *beldi* past, however, both artists offer a way out of this despair.

Simon Reynolds argues in his book *Retromania* that hauntology forces us to go back and look for alternative narratives:

> Playfully parodying heritage culture, hauntology explores two ways to, if not resist, then perhaps bypass the 'no future' represented by mash-ups and retro. The first strategy involves the rewriting of history. If the future has gone AWOL on us, those with radical instincts are necessarily forced to go back. Trying to uncover alternate pasts secreted inside the official narrative, remapping history to find paths-not-taken and peculiar but fertile backwaters adjacent to pop's official narrative, they turn the past into a foreign country. The other strategy is to honour and resurrect 'the future inside the past'. (2011, p. 361)

Neochaabi and *beldi* trap show a way forward by bringing back a past that ruling elites prefer to keep hidden. Marshall McLuhan famously articulated that we look into the present and future through the lenses of the past in his famous sentence, 'We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future' (McLuhan and Fiore 2001 [1967], p. 75). With this perspective in mind, it can only be through our past experiences that we imagine the future in the present. Technological advances, therefore, cannot be understood to their full potential because we are looking at them through the lenses of what we know, rooted in the past. Furthermore, what we see in the rear-view mirror is familiar. For this reason, McLuhan claims, we look into the past in order to face new situations because it is comforting. In the digital era, gazing into the rear-view mirror is a necessary precondition for finding a way to move forward (Huhtamo 2016, p. 99) because:

> Ordinary human instinct causes people to recoil from these new environments and to rely on the rear-view mirror as a kind of repeat or *ricorso* of the preceding environment, thus insuring total disorientation at all times. It is not that there is anything

> wrong with the old environment, but it simply will not serve as navigational guide to the new one. (McLuhan and Parker 1968, p. xxiii)

Nostalgia can be theorised in similar affective and temporal terms. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svletana Boym (2001, p. 19) argues that nostalgia yearns to be a time machine allowing us to revisit time and travel again and again to our favourite destinations. Nostalgia is experienced outside normative notions of time conceived as past, present, and future. Rather, it operates in a sideways fashion, as Boym claims. It is a utopian dimension that is directed towards neither the future nor the past (Boym 2001, p. 16). This perspective of nostalgia aligns with McLuhan's rear-view mirror, where it is comforting to look to the past in order to face the present moment. It is 'a site of yearning' (Bonnett 2010, pp. 29–30). It is for this reason that it is not surprising that the digital sphere surfaced as a medium in which to exercise nostalgia at a time pundits were quick to narrate the Arab Winter. Instead, multimodal artefacts inspired by the 1980s–90s provide a sense of comfort as much as a home to return to in uncertain times, even if this house is haunted by monsters. In line with Boym's (2001) claim that a revival of nostalgia is often connected to revolution, Miriyam Aouragh (2017) emphasises the role of digital media in remembering past times of revolution. For Aouragh, archiving through digital media has a significant impact on remembering the past (2017, p. 252). Morocco in particular, Aouragh argues, shows a disposition towards what she calls 'a public-retro nostalgia' related to colonial-era photography and past international literati such as Paul Bowles. Digital media in the form of web archives, Aouragh argues (2017, p. 254), allow us to bring back 'not completely forgotten' pasts. For the Beldi Cool, however, nostalgia is found in the dirt, the old, the decayed, and the monsters that inhabit these un-homely spaces. It is here where we can imagine an alternative story to those narrated by those in power who praised the 'new' Morocco at the turn of the century with a new and young King or those who cheered on protesters during the Arab Spring.

A reflection on the everyday grotesque suggests that in spite of what has happened in our linear time, we are trapped in a cyclical pattern that continually returns us to the starting point. Regardless of whether it was the monstrous past of Hassan II, the promises for a 'new Morocco' promoted with the turn of the century and the new King Mohammed VI, or the Arab Spring, what remains are old houses, football matches, and chaabi music. It is from this idea of *beldi* that both Issam and C H E B find an exit from the recurring traps of the past. Despite promises of progress, with changing monarchs or revolutionary moments, neochaabi and *beldi* trap search for a fictional, ultra-local grotesque that feels familiar in order to bypass a time that is neither of utter disillusionment nor of naïve optimism. A desire for imperfection, glitches, ugliness, sloppiness, dirt, as well as pastiche and parody, is embodied in the glorification of past, local, and radically grotesque aesthetics. In this case, this Moroccan 'retromania' strives to progress from its past by drawing from the memories of the marginalised and

grotesque rather than the prevailing narratives of the elite, constructing an artistry that is still authentically Moroccan. After all, in critical times nostalgia has claimed to put things in order, serving as a stabilising mechanism (de Vries and Hoffmann 2018). This is precisely what C H E B means when he sings, 'Let the balances be unbalanced, maybe we will find stability' (خليو العبارات يميلو، ياكما نصيبو شي ليكيليبر) in his song 'Trash'. The Beldi Cool is therefore not necessarily about remembering critical events such as torture or uprisings, but about focusing the rear-view mirror on the ordinary, unprivileged, haunting past.

It is in its nostalgic effect – whether inspired by the bright colours of pop art as is the case in C H E B's artistry or the warm, dusty tones in Issam's music videos – that the Beldi Cool differs from other cultural production. Beyond these examples in music, retro-gaming groups, fashion inspired in local markets, interior designers, visual artists, music video directors, comic artists, fashion designers, photographers, and cultural managers have also contributed to the Beldi Cool. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual culture, has been the favoured social media platform where a number of accounts have emerged to engage with vintage Morocco.

One of the leading Instagram accounts in showcasing Moroccan street clothes markets is Style Beldi, created and curated by model, influencer, photographer, and content creator Karim Chater (@style_beldi, 192,000 followers in June 2022). On his account, photographs show Chater in urban spaces, predominantly in his hometown of Casablanca, and also in rural, urbanised environments throughout Morocco taken during his travels. These pictures deviate from the conventional touristic postcards that portray the country's natural landscapes or impressive architecture from previous eras. Chater's aesthetics are inspired by the rapid urban development that took place in the 1980s–90s due to the increase in migration from the countryside to urban centres, particularly Casablanca. Chater's aesthetics include a moustache and an afro hairstyle, paired with 'Western' attire, especially blazers and shirts, sometimes under woollen jumpers, vests, and/or ties. When Chater is not wearing this attire, he enjoys wearing national football t-shirts with retro jeans. In Chater's content, as well as Hassan Hajjaj's designs and Issam's music videos, football emerges as one of the most important nostalgic narrators of Morocco's history. Popular music and football have an important space in the Beldi Cool precisely because they are both affectively associated to unprivileged classes. As with Issam, Chater shows urban rooftops with laundry hanging on lines to dry, local taxis, local markets, and random streets of downtown Casablanca. Chater's entire Instagram feed has a unique 'style beldi', as he refers to it, that transports the observer to a place where contemporary Morocco meets digital nostalgia. Often partnering with Chater is fashion influencer and model Zineb Koutten (@zineb_koutten, 112,000 followers in June 2022). Koutten's Instagram feed favours bright colours, often shying away from the nostalgic feel

of warm tones. Still, her choice of attire, often vintage blazers and printed scarfs to which Koutten sometimes adds hats, provides followers with her own interpretation of *beldi* style. Koutten is equally inspired by everyday Morocco, yet with a softer touch on the retro.

Another noteworthy Instagram account is the 1980s futuristic retro inspired @morocco_back_to_the_future (3,341 followers in June 2022). This account engages in posting '*Maroc D'hier Aujourd'hui*', (Yesterday's Morocco Today). Emulating the *Back to the Future* (1985) science fiction film franchise style in its profile picture, it merges Moroccan culture into the concept of vintage futurism. The account mostly shares before and after pictures of old Morocco, showing the original black and white images together with the coloured version. The result is an oversaturated colouring in the clothing of most pictures, while pastels are reserved for landscapes and backgrounds. Other accounts that also trace the Moroccan nostalgic past are Morocco Vintage (@morocco_vintage_, 66,000 followers, February 2023) and Dikraphone (@dikraphone, 1,496 followers, February 2023). These Instagram accounts are devoted to keeping Morocco's past alive through ordinary people's photographs and music and album covers, respectively.

The popularity of digital nostalgia in Morocco, and particularly the Beldi Cool artists, has resulted in at least one advertising campaign mixing nostalgia with trendy online personalities. Karim Chater, rapper Issam, and the influencer Zineb Koutten, together with other young creators, participated in a 2020 ad campaign called 'Maghrebi Original' (Moroccan Original). The product of this campaign was Raibi Jamila,[1] a fermented dairy product created in Morocco in the 1960s. The campaign establishes the product as inherently Moroccan, drawing on how these artists and influencers belong to a 'self-made' generation, as the copy of the advertisement claims. Other trademarks have exploited this product's association with ordinary Moroccans' childhoods to market other brands of raibi as 'a real childhood memory'.[2] The retro aesthetics of the Beldi Cool bestows on Raibi Jamila a sense of trendy old character as a way of erasing recent memories, where the company that sells this product, Central Danone, was one of the targets of the economic boycott that took place in 2018 (see Chapter 5 and Le Boursier Médias24 2019). Even if Raibi Jamila is now an industrial, mass-produced, and French-owned product, the advertising campaign relies on nostalgic memories of Raibi Jamila as authentically Moroccan because it was locally invented and affordable. The Beldi Cool's unique ability to glamourise lack of privilege makes the audience travel into a past that feels like home, a sentiment capitalised upon by the Raibi Jamila ad campaign. The commodification of Moroccan nostalgia is further perpetuated online through the Instagram

[1] Watch advertisement at Maghribi Original By Jamila (2020).
[2] See, for example, Luxlait's version of raibi at Luxlait (n.d.)

account Jamila Original (@jamila_original, 23,500 followers, February 2023),[3] which has continued to share artwork inspired by this Moroccan retro artistic vision while addressing current events such as the success of the Moroccan football team during the FIFA World Cup of 2022.

Monsters of Nostalgia

An alternative approach to addressing the notion of lost futures, intertwined with nostalgia, has emerged from ultra-nationalist online groups. This online subculture has preferred to look for top-down mainstream political narratives to instigate a revival of Moroccan national identity through the nostalgic past. As discussed in previous chapters of this book, ultra-nationalist meme pages and accounts have followed the aesthetics and language of the anglophone alt-right. In contrast to the alt-right, however, as detailed in Chapter 8, these pages have cleverly played with meme culture, retro glitches, and pop-art aesthetics to resurrect dead leaders, turning them into mythical figures. Adding to memes of Hassan II wearing a red cap the slogan 'Making Morocco Great Again', ultra-nationalist sentiments have delved into the Middle Ages to resurrect a symbol that, in the Moroccan memesphere, now signifies Moorish greatness.

Social media has popularised a flag that historically belonged to one of the dynasties that governed the region from the 13th to the 15th century CE, the Marinids (1248–1465 CE). Historically, the Marinids, a Zenata Amazigh North African tribe, overthrew the rulers of Al-Andalus on Moroccan territory and established their capital in Fez. It is noteworthy that the Almohads, also an Amazigh tribe, had previously held power. The Marinid flag consists of an eight-pointed yellow star made by two interlaced squares over a red background. Morocco's official national flag, adopted in 1915 during the French Rule (1912–56), features a green pentagram at the centre over a plain red field. While the latter may be perceived as a product of French colonialism, the former has gained popularity on the internet as a showcase of Moroccan ultra-nationalism. Although red and green are present as another banal iconographical token of everyday nationalism, representing football teams, commercial logos, or in music videos, it is the Marinid flag that has conquered digital media to represent an alternative story of the Moroccan past led by right-wing ultra-nationalists. It is worth noting that some believe the mythical jinn Black Sultan is in fact the Marinid Sultan Abu al-Hasan al-Marini (see Chapter 3), connecting the Moroccan right to one of the most notoriously evil jinns.

The presence of the Marinid flag is ubiquitous on openly right-wing and ultra-nationalist social media pages and profiles. In the comment section of a post,

[3] New videos have also been uploaded to Raibi Jamila's YouTube account (@JamilaOfficiel).

the Facebook meme page Moroccan Nationalist Memes addressed its use of the Marinid flag when one participant asked whether the Marinid flag might indicate a rejection of the currently ruling Alawite dynasty. Administrators of this page answered that although they use both flags, the official flag represents Morocco as a nation state, but the Marinid flag is the flag of the Moroccan right-wing, a symbol of Moroccan patriotism and its great historical past. The use of a different flag as a symbol of the right and arguably far-right movements aims to change dominant histories where Al-Andalus is studied as the golden era of the country. As argued in Chapter 7, Morocco and Algeria capitalise on being the inheritors and bearers of the legacy of Al-Andalus. According to this narrative, the Almoravids (1060–1147 CE) and Almohads (1147–1248 CE) were Amazigh tribes that emerged from Morocco, providing evidence of the fact that Morocco was the actual ruler of Al-Andalus. The adoption of the Marinid flag, however, tells a different story. Although since the 1930s Moroccan nationalists have highlighted the important role played by these three dynasties in the history of Al-Andalus (Calderwood 2023), it is the Marinids who have come to represent the 'purely' Moroccan for these ultra-nationalist pages.

This change in narrative responds to a wish to tell the story in terms of colonial oppression and liberation. The connection with anti-colonial struggles is granted by the fact that versions of the Marinid flag were used by the Moroccan resistance in the 20th century against the French and Spanish colonial armies. For the right-wing ultra-nationalists, the Marinid victory over the Almohads counts as the first instance of Moroccan national independence by a regime that showcases Moroccan strength. In contract to the prevailing narrative of Moroccan history, in appropriating the Marinid flag the Moroccan right claims this as a critical event in defining Morocco as an independent and strong nation on its own without needing the symbolic legitimacy of Al-Andalus. Consequently, Al-Andalus is terminated as the golden era, as discussed with the 'Chams al Achya' meme in Chapter 7, and is newly refurbished in this case for the birth of a Moorish Empire.

Different interpretations of the Marinid flag suggest, however, that once one digs deeper, the singular narrative and unity constructed around it can be dismantled just as easily as it was constructed. The Amazigh identity appears in the Marinid flag as the online battlefield to define new ultra-nationalistic sentiments. Some meme pages and groups present the Marinid flag with Amazigh symbolism as central to the Moroccan nation. The page Moorish History includes the Marinid flag as part of its logo, but it also incorporates the Amazigh symbol. It uses the Tifinagh alphabet, instead of Arabic or Latin script, to write 'Moorish'. This page in particular honours Amazigh identity using Tifinagh and Arabic in its macro-memes in celebration of a multi-ethnic and multilingual Morocco. Its logo has a militarist component featuring two soldiers; however, the fact that one of them has a feminine figure suggests a different perspective from far-right

ultra-nationalist and anti-feminist instances discussed in Chapter 6. Other meme pages have expressed their preference to erase other competing nationalisms in Morocco. One meme shows a man vacuuming the Amazigh symbol from the Marinid flag. It reads in Arabic 'before cleaning' (قبل التنظيف) and 'after cleaning' (بعد التنظيف), adding a sick face emoji to the first scene and an OK emoji (also identified as white supremacist emoji) in the second scene. The written caption posted with this meme clarifies that the Moroccan Nationalist Meme page does not oppose the Amazigh culture and languages as such but opposes Amazigh patriotic aspirations. In a second meme, the profile pictures of several meme pages associated with the Moorish Movement are used to stage a knockout punch to a boxer personifying three different pictures with the Marinid flag, including one with the Amazigh symbol. This meme portrays the Moorish Movement as a group with a singular national agenda and an active bigotry against groups that voice and threaten their own nationalist narratives. Pages such as Moorish History and Moroccan Nationalist Memes reflect that the Marinid flag is still contesting alternative forms of national identity: one that favours exclusionary and limited ethno- and ultra-nationalist ideologies and another that is more inclusive in terms of ethnicity and gender. In both cases, the Marinid flag represents a way of appealing to an uncritical form of restorative nostalgia in the creation of their own distinct national narratives.

For Boym, nostalgia is 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy' (2001, p. 16). The danger, she claims, is that we tend to confuse this imaginary home or homeland and the actual one (2001, p. 20). What Boym calls unreflected or restorative nostalgia is the kind that breeds monsters because we are ready to die or kill for the sake of created phantom homelands (Boym 2001, p. 19). In our aim to overcome a moment of despair, nostalgia may lead to imagining a homeland that never existed, but that we are able to create through symbols such as the Marinid flag meme. Restorative nostalgia sees itself as the truth and protector of tradition and therefore conceives the national memory as one single plot. The connection between nostalgia, the homeland, and monsters is one as old as European theories on nostalgia.

Negotiating Nostalgic 'Odours'

Nostalgia was first described by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer at the end of the 17th century as a disease of feeling sad from the desire to return to one's native land. As Boym (2001, p. 31) points out, its first symptoms included the ability to hear voices or see ghosts. It is in its contemporary conception that nostalgia is said to induce terror as an attempt to relive the past, turning fear and past into a horror

film (2001, p. 82). Notably, the monster Godzilla has served as a vehicle for Japan to speak about the trauma and the nuclear attacks of the Second World War (2001, p. 92). However, as Iwabuchi (2004) argues, Japanese popular culture has purposefully been exported as 'culturally neutral' commodities to facilitate its global resonance. The Beldi Cool does the direct opposite. Through a stinky, but tasty, cultural odour, it preserves the memory of past monsters, the same monsters that ultra-nationalists pay no attention to. Covered in bright or dusty warm colours, the Beldi Cool is not willing to let recent memories of hardship and promises of development die. In contrast, the Marinid flag meme hides this monstrous odour behind faint memories of militarists' past successes that no one alive has experienced. In this sense, while both are examples of how the digital is a space for 'nostalgising', one looks back at a past that embodies the familiarity and foreignness of one's own home, while the other invents a past that no one experienced in their own skin. As such, the Beldi Cool looks directly to the grotesque past, present, and future, but the ultra-nationalist profits from the opportunities to fictionalise the past in digital narratives to completely ignore present sentiments.

Monsters and nostalgia have been argued to be triggered by political and historical upheavals, threats of loss of control (Boym 2001, p. 17), and accelerated rhythms of life (Kirk 2008, p. 8). Particularly in moments of despair and lost futures, turning back to our ghosts provides a sense of belonging and comfort. Some may choose to possess the digital to uplift unprivileged classes (Beldi Cool), while others reimagine a bygone era to capitalise on the fact that no one alive can remember such a past (ultra-nationalists). These different perspectives materialise in the chosen flags: the Wydad Football flag versus the Marinid. The Beldi Cool forces the audience to remember past times while considering the perceived lack of development and the vintage as a source of pride in their roots, yet it also reflects stagnation. Bright colours and local objects intermingle with dark scenes of the everyday featuring spaces that are dangerous and disgusting, such as urban centres and old homes, which reflect how little social struggles and class differences have evolved. In their grotesque character, however, ultra-nationalist memes taint the present with nostalgic effects capitalising on symbols that are barely alive in the collective national memory.

While the Beldi Cool revives a past still in the recent memory of many, ultra-nationalists have chosen to bring back an old flag barely remembered before now, rebranding it as a frequently repeated meme by those who prefer to confront the future through the goggles of shallow patriotism. While the Marinid flag meme engages with digital nostalgia to bring forth idealised memories of military force, the Beldi Cool, in embodying the cyclical nature of time, is able to find solace and an escape route in discomfort. Thus, while nostalgia may breed monsters, these monsters may not uniquely engage with the creation of a phantom homeland, as is the case with the Marinid flag. Ultimately, both the ultra-local grotesque and a

forgotten past may open spheres of resonance. One brings up childhood memories through cheap yoghurt, run-down neighbourhoods, and chaabi music. The other one provides assurances that the future can be great (again). In both cases, glamourising the past is a route to unlocking the present moment of despair as much as fears that 'the future will be monstrous' (Moretti 1983, p. 84).[4] In both cases, a nostalgic turn is aimed to be a response, as suggested by Helmut Rosa (2019) when discussing resonance, in the midst of a monstrous world. It is in this way that Boym claims nostalgia is 'a global epidemic … an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (2001, p. 17).

The difference remains between the cultural monsters chosen to engage with nostalgia and the future. While the Beldi Cool has employed intriguing new forms of expression connecting with electronic music, rap, multi-layered visual images, and texts, digital ultra-nationalists favour using meme culture to express their nostalgia. Both engage with the opportunities offered by the digital grotesque (in form, rapidly made amateurish memes, and content, social media's limited gatekeepers), but only one has engaged with the underlying foul odour known to the masses. The ultra-nationalists, however, have engaged with the digital odours bestowed by the digital grotesque. The Beldi Cool might be interpreted as a form of glamourising and commodifying dirt, potentially diluting its political message. As bell hooks argues when discussing the effectiveness of rap music, 'their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified' (1992, p. 63). When commodified, hooks concludes, their connection with oppositional culture, as well as its message, is ignored. Yet, besides its commercial edge, there is a significant value in bestowing glamour on the unprivileged past. Ultimately, while desire for a nostalgic past is present in the eminently Moroccan Marinid flag, it is in glamourising past odours that the Beldi Cool finds a creative escape route to denounce the uncertainties of a future marked by unrealised potential.

[4] Talking about Frankenstein and Dracula, Franco Moretti (1983) claims that 'the monster expresses the anxiety that the future will be monstrous' (1983, p. 84).

10

Conclusion: The Unbearable Afterlives of Memes

Towards Scholarly Disobedience

In October 2022, I participated in a roundtable launching a new year of the Going Global research seminar series organised by the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London. Discussing the challenging notion of 'global' in the context of digital humanities, academics at the roundtable shared a common frustration that while the 'global' connects many of us, it might be the latest term of othering any research not centred on the anglophone datasphere or Global North. Therefore, global digital humanities would be positioned in opposition to or at the margins of simply digital humanities. Under the banner of 'global', our work on digital music, visual media, or online wars, while interesting, does not confer the ability of leading and defining the fields of digital humanities, digital culture, or media studies. At best, our work is considered a case study and our theories, concepts, and frameworks adequate for that case, region, language, or culture. Our work often requires an addition that research in the anglophone digital humanities does not: digital music *in*, visual media *in*, or online wars *in* (insert any country, language, ethnicity, etc. of the Global South). Adding regional, cultural, or linguistic specificity positions our work within the realm of 'area studies', curtailing our audiences and scholarship to those exclusively interested in that particular area of the world.

The consequence of this dynamic is that radical theories that work for the 'global' are expected to be engendered within anglophone, or at least Global North, case studies. These projects do not require an annex in their title and are, therefore, assumed to produce universal theoretical propositions. Such assumptions emerged when pitching this book to several editors of important media studies series. Despite the variety of book series specialising in media and horror, edited volumes on media and monsters, and exciting books on death and technology, many editors (though not all, as evidenced by this book being published) did not understand the aim of theorising digital aesthetics and memes from or

through the Moroccan memesphere. Even when I omitted the added local specificity, the question concerned whether this was a book about 'Arab' memes or digital monsters and horror? According to this viewpoint, a book surely could not be about memes AND monsters AND horror AND from a non-Anglocentric datasphere. Even then, one editor claimed this book was not interesting enough because it was *only* about 'Arab memes'. This book, however, never had the temerity of claiming to analyse memes relating to a population of over 420 million. It does not even claim to be a systematic and exhaustive study on the Maghrebi or even the Moroccan memesphere. Mostly, however, this book never sought to explore 'Arab memes', or rather, memes in Arabic, which, as discussed in Chapter 8, is hardly a simple category. This book was never a book about 'memes in Arabic' nor a book *only* about digital horror fiction in Arabic because the aim had never been to make a case study of memes or horror in one language. The book's aim all along has been to suggest alternative lenses with which to read memes (*sans* a cultural specificity). The unexpected purpose, nevertheless, has finally been to theorise from the margins to which 'global' digital media scholars, for lack of a better word, have been relegated. Therefore, the book offers a radical perspective on memes, horror, and digital cultures, resisting the constraints imposed by academic disciplines and editors.

Among the book's purposes, as advanced in Chapter 2, was to devise the possibilities of a digital cultural studies. Following Claire Taylor's (2019) advocacy for a 'critical digital culture studies', this book works as a tool to radically intervene in the fields of digital humanities and digital media. In carrying out a critical digital cultural studies analysis, the book performs a radical contextualisation of memes. In other words, it suggests memes should not only be located within a socio-political context but also be included as part of a broader cultural dimension without falling into the cultural specificity trap. Especially when it comes to memes, and for that matter other cultural production beyond the anglophone datasphere, socio-politics often serves to provide the main context, as it does in this book. However, together with this context, digital cultural studies highlight the importance of content and aesthetics in digital media production. As part of this analysis, this book takes time to reflect on the importance of understanding the ways in which cultural productions speak to each other. Consequently, this book links memes to music videos, whether rap or neochaabi, celebrity culture, political confrontation, historical debates, urban dwellers, animated cartoons, Instagram influencers, leaders and rulers, and contemporary designers. Investigating transmedial conversations is essential, as demonstrated by the field of fandom studies, to deepen our understanding of the socio-political commentary embedded within cultural artefacts. This examination extends to the selection of aesthetics, as well as the changing narratives and power dynamics. This book

unravels the multi-layered webs of meaning to illuminate the complexity of cultural exchanges in the digital sphere.

Memes in an unofficial language such as Darija have been shown to resonate with globally recognised memes such as the 'Woman Yelling at a Cat' meme, the 'Yes Chad' meme, or the 'What the Hell Is This?' meme, all examined in this book. These memes stand within the monstrous state of not being fully 'Moroccan' or fully 'global'. To be understood, the audience must grasp the memes themselves in addition to the context in which they appear. Even in other instances throughout the book where memes could be considered as fully Moroccan, such as when the King responds to rappers, these digital items speak to ultra-local specificities. For instance, the aforementioned meme only resonates with those who follow the Moroccan rap scene; it cannot claim to be entirely 'Moroccan' as such. This book fully embodies the monstrous state of in-betweenness, stepping in and out of categories that are problematic and difficult to define. In doing so, the book builds the digital grotesque as a conceptual approach that neither shies away from local, national, or regional specificities nor limits its analysis to fit into already established theoretical and conceptual approaches.

In its monstrous state, the book might challenge expectations of its subject matter: fitting 'Moroccan' memes into established disciplines and categories (a book about memes in X, a book about horror in Y) or a fully decolonial project that disposes of previous Eurocentric theoretical approaches to memes, monsters, and the grotesque. The book embraces 'failure' in being neither/nor. In this refusal to be confined to being a book about 'Arab' memes or a complete rejection of postcolonial methodologies, this book uncovers a new radical approach to studying digital cultural artefacts within the growing field of digital cultural studies. It resists the pressure to conform to dominant disciplinary conventions or publisher defined, often prejudiced, taxonomies. Yet it does not entirely divorce itself from engaging with decolonial thinkers (after all, the book still finds postcolonial theorists useful).

The book takes inspiration from Walter Mignolo's (2011) call for aesthetic disobedience to perform a scholarly, or rather disciplinary, disobedience. In its disobedience, the book does not ask permission on how to theorise about memes, monsters, and the digital grotesque. It does so by employing available tools as well as suggesting new ones that provide added meanings to memes within and beyond the anglosphere. Moreover, this book's academic disobedience enables it to weave together various cultural artefacts bound by themes, media, and grotesque digital structures that, unconventional as they may appear, uncover important stories, narratives, and aesthetics often squeezed out by the tight constraints of traditional disciplinary and publishing norms.

Alternative Alternative Mediations

Analysing memes in a language that, while unofficial, holds de facto dominance for most Moroccans offers a radical look into mediated power dynamics in the country. Citing the numerous names that have been given to media serving the interest of citizens and connecting institutions with organisations – alternative media, small media, or civil society media, to name a few – Wendy Willems (2015) contends that there is a need for a broader understanding in which different forms of media show ways in which to resist different manifestations of power. As Chris Atton suggests,

> To consider alternative media is to recognise the relationship between dominant, professionalised media practices and otherwise marginal, amateur practices … . Participatory, amateur media production contests the concentration of institutional and professional media power and challenges the media monopoly on producing symbolic forms. (2015b, p. 6)

In this sense, alternative media, or as Willems proposes alternative mediation, includes rumours and jokes as much as interpersonal forms of communication. Examining alternative mediation in a non-official language, particularly when expressed online in alphanumeric characters that appear abnormal and vulgar, performs a double form of alterity. Memes in Darija are arguably an alternative even within the realm of alternative media because memes do not necessarily have an institutional backup, mirroring the unofficial nature of the Darija language itself. Alternative alternative mediation, therefore, suggests media that stands at the margins of power (be this the state, governing laws, or what is socially acceptable) through alternative media (form) and/or alternative language (content).

An alternative alternative form of mediation does not, however, necessarily equate to these artefacts being liberatory. As shown in this book, memes are embedded within illiberal internet subcultures and can serve to introduce and create new ultra-nationalist far-right narratives. Escaping from traditional media gatekeepers and official laws of public decorum, memes and other forms of online cultural artefacts are liberatory in as much as they break free from imposed narratives on liberal democracy as a normative idea for media practices in Africa, as Willems (2015, p. 91) argues. The Arab Spring was successful in attracting attention because it aligned with orientalist discourses of an oppressed North Africa and the Middle East ruled by tyrants and anti-democratic regimes. Little was said about the role of countries in the Global North in perpetuating those rulers' power or issues of surveillance capitalism among big US corporations (Zuboff 2019), and even less about cultural production that was not overtly and clearly speaking about opposition to governance. While music or animated cartoons may have suffered rejection from industry gatekeepers, memes do not

need the consent of these gatekeepers. Despite the millions of views gathered on YouTube, influential Facebook groups, and Instagram profiles with thousands of followers, memers, as well as renowned artists or even ultra-nationalist meme groups, are alternative alternative forms of mediation because they do not use dominant forms of mediation and do not speak the 'correct' language.

The stories narrated in this book step in and out of these political narratives. They address issues of oppression while also delving into feelings of despair and lost futures, as well as sentiments of nostalgia and creativity. To ensure that these crucial everyday stories, which are neither purely political nor social, are not silenced, the book reveals alternative alternative narratives expressed through digital culture in a non-English and unofficial language. Moreover, horror provides a framework where alternative alternative mediations fit beyond the subject matter and aesthetics imposed by the elites, local and international institutions, and media outlets, such as the fantasy of democracy or 'development'. Digital horror in Darija emerges as an alternative alternative form of mediation that not only defies expectations of which narratives get picked up in international media but also presents an alternative to the already alternative (who and what is interesting enough to be written about, published, and read) imposed by the Global North and local elites on ordinary people. In its double alterity, the book connects undesirable research with disparaged cultural artefacts, both surmounting, in unison, the obstacles of mainstream media, biased narratives of 'resistance', and academic gatekeepers.

Digital Horror beyond the Metaphor

The obvious presence of horror in North Africa and the Middle East, as this book details, strives to push the boundaries of horror. While significant work has addressed the need to read into the role of digital media and technology in horror, we need to consider horror produced in the digital sphere and on social media. Special attention is required in 'area studies', where the language of horror has been utilised as a metaphor, yet horror fiction remains to be conceptualised. In the case of the Arab Spring, the language of horror and the metaphor of monsters have allowed for new and exciting scholarship (see the work of El Maarouf and Belghazi 2019; Malmström 2021) to move beyond oversimplistic notions of successful or unsuccessful revolutions (Arab Spring versus Arab Winter). Tarek El-Ariss's (2019) work on Arab digital media also offers a comparable example. Building on these foundations, this book takes a step forward in engaging with horror and monsters not only as a metaphor of an affective state, but also as a genre that engages artists and audiences in the digital sphere. This book suggests that horror language is not only in the minds of scholars finding alternative narratives to uncover what

mainstream media or scholarship might not be keen on knowing. Horror equally serves artists in the region to creatively express their affective, political, economic, and social everyday lives, giving voice to unspeakable experiences and bodily events, whether this 'horror' tells the story of individuals or a nation, whether it is gendered or classed, or even glamourised and nostalgised into trendy aesthetics. The book strives to illuminate horror not merely as a metaphor but also as a creative practice that reflects as much on terrifying experiences as on artists, memers, and ordinary people's creative interests. It therefore contends that in order to read horror in the postcolony we must meaningfully engage with creative artefacts that speak to and about horror fiction tropes.

As a result of engaging with the creative context in which horror fiction is produced, digital horror and its monsters emerge as lonely beasts facing the dangers of the night as much as defying the challenges of being alone. By taking horror seriously as part of netizens' and artists' interests, it can be found as part of recording a YouTube video from the intimacy of one's own home or recounting one's daily life as presented in Chapter 6. The monster warns and reveals, but it is also lonely in its search for resonance. While beasts might roam alone in the wilderness, the idea of digital monsters suggests that this solitude might not be what the monster desires. In our isolation, with our heads stuck in our devices, we are, however, connected to a world that we share with others, whether these are an Other or simply other people with whom we share one or multiple spheres of resonance.

Memes have been condemned to monstrosity since their very inception. After all, attempts to theorise internet memes have recurrently referred to them as a virus. As digital grotesque cultural artefacts, memes are informed by a deliberate attempt to appear amateurish and careless, as marginal, and as threatening boundaries of normality. In the visual process of becoming memes, the amateurishly assembled, often bigoted, choice of deformed bodies, odd page names, and grotesque language that adorn memes and meme pages resembles the construction of a Frankensteinian monster. From dismembered parts made from other more established cultural bodies (music, literature, cinema, comics), the stitches and screws that construct a meme are purposefully visible as a form of embracing the monstrous. These signs of a monstrous being are what reveal the monster to everyone, eliciting reactions of ridicule, fear, and disgust. When technology can eliminate these monstrous marks but chooses instead to keep a blatant patchwork aesthetics, memes become intentionally grotesque and horrifying digital items. In addition to these visual characteristics, memes tend to exhibit a preference for prejudiced messages or oppositional politics. This transforms memes into digital media monsters, inherently intertwined with digital horror. Provoking reactions in the form of fear and desire, engagement and hate, building spheres of belonging as well as walls of exclusion, a grotesque end product emerges as the key factor in

determining memetic aesthetics. Meme culture is not about determining whether anyone *can* make memes; it is in the fact that in order for memes to be memes, they *must* show their screws and stiches. It is in these visible marks of dismemberment and amateurish creation of a monster that memes engage in a form of disobedience that is not only aesthetic, but also cultural.

Digital Dis-meme-berment

Through notions of the postcolonial gothic, the book connects these intimate and lonely instances with broader national narratives. Turning postcolonial flagship symbols of the postcolonial national project, such as the King and national unity, into grotesque memes meant to be mocked shows a jinn-like monster with enough agency to dis-meme-ber at will. Jinns, widely present in everyday lives as much as in oral stories and contemporary culture at large, allow us to question well-defined borders between human and monster, master and slave. As we have explored, jinns can inhabit the digital in different forms, but they also help us theorise digital cultural artefacts and their hidden, and not so hidden, transcripts. In particular, jinns represent an agency and a means by which to investigate digital forms of colonialism and to decolonise the digital. In their agency, jinns show that the monster can free itself from its own monstrosity. As the presence of jinns in films beyond the Arabic-speaking world suggests, jinns resonate with a global audience, particularly those familiar with Islam. Jinns tell folktales of past heroines and sultans, as well as stories of technological and moral panics. They help us understand anonymous activist accounts as being possessed by jinns, local mafias hidden in neighbourhoods, and even the empowerment of women, freeing them from dominant Eurocentric notions of what women's empowerment looks like. Jinns enable the analysis of digital monsters to transcend two crucial boundaries: the geopolitical line, examining monsters from a non-anglophone Eurocentric viewpoint, and the digital standpoint, heavily influenced by films and visual culture but also adhering to the unique rules and norms of digital culture.

Through the lenses of the digital grotesque, symbols of national unity expose and at the same time perpetuate the threat that is dis-meme-bering the postcolonial national project. As this book argues, in this act, hidden transcripts that tackle topics legally forbidden are revealed, exposing the failure of the postcolonial national project. The notion of dis-meme-berment, with memes that reveal and warn about a collapsing communal bond, involves horror as much as it does humour. Within Facebook meme pages and other digital cultural artefacts meant to provoke laughter lies a sense of superficiality also present in the grotesque. While memetic humour is well documented, the horror aspect is perhaps less evident and becomes visible when articulated through the digital grotesque.

When read within the boundaries of horror and humour, disgust and laughter conceal murderous attempts on an entire community, whether these be women revealing their everyday lives on YouTube channels or ultra-nationalist memes shunning leftist activists. Serious subjects such as violence, death, or even patriotic feelings, when expressed through grotesque and humorous memes, are especially poignant and impactful because they are presented as lowbrow media. The digital grotesque is interested in the messages behind this seemingly humorous yet grotesque 'unimportant' media, recognising it as a vital component of political satire. These digital monsters reveal the underlying processes of abuse, suffering, and pain. Humour embedded in the grotesque reveals this pain in plain sight. As this book argues, it is in the collision of laughter and horror that memes most effectively embody the digital grotesque.

This book also asserts that horror is ingrained in the cultural fabric of digital media, both in form (infrastructures, genres) and in content. Structurally, the animated cartoons and music videos discussed in this book are grotesque in their use of the ugly and the DIY components of digital media as parts of their message. In this case, the medium (digital) is indeed the message (horror), to cite McLuhan's (2001 [1967]) famous phrase. Content-wise, as this book shows, horror and gothic motifs such as haunted houses, abandoned urban spaces, violence, and monstrous creatures have notoriously featured in exclusively online content, rap and neochaabi YouTube videos, animated cartoons, and meme mash-ups. The perspective of the digital grotesque is essential in uniting cultural production that traditionally resides within separate categories and disciplines (music, literature, digital culture, politics, and media). Horror, in this context, is present in the digital as much as it is a way of theorising social, affective, aesthetic, and political matters in the digital sphere. The book does not contend that horror is the sole lens through which to analyse digital media; rather, it is one that is effective in making sense of the irruption of beautifying technology and digital media's contempt for anything but perfection. Theories connected to horror, such as postcolonial gothic or hauntology, allow for the connection of grotesque digital culture to an affective moment of despair that persistently recurs. In our case, this materialises in promises of 'development' and progress that often feel unfulfilled. Digital cultural artefacts defy linear time and, instead, present the memes, and the past, as haunting entities that never die.

Digital Deaths, Rebirths, and Afterlives

In the inaugural article for the *Social Media + Society* journal, Sonia Livingstone (2015) refutes the belief that we should refrain from analysing X or Y social media platforms because of their perceived obsolescence. Instead, Livingstone argues that

the preference has been to focus on 'underlying problems and processes', emphasising the 'social' rather than the 'media'. Ryan Milner (2016) has also expressed concerns about studying memes because they rapidly become obsolete. The reality is that while the digital may exhibit accelerated decay, cultural artefacts constantly face the risk of becoming obsolete sooner or later. In my research on Moroccan rap, I was aware that the majority of the songs I examined might not be played on the radio, trend on YouTube, or even be remembered by the time my study was completed and published. This book focuses on platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and cultural artefacts such as memes, music videos, and animated cartoons, that will probably experience a similar destiny. Yet, instead of considering *démodé* and ephemeral to be a problem, this book embraces death, rebirths, and afterlives as intrinsic to cultural artefacts and particularly significant to digital cultures.

As we have observed throughout the book, while memes may progress quickly from being trendy to becoming normies, boring, and dying, they may just as easily be revived in the same or different narratives. In their afterlives, memes can act as a form of historical archive of digital cultural production. This is what Martin Lundqvist calls 'meme-orialisation' and what I have articulated in this book as processes of re-meme-bering. Platforms such as Facebook as imageboard infrastructures have been forced to think about the traces we leave behind, the afterlives of online lives, and the potential of repeated resuscitation. Digital media and the internet therefore raise questions about the ways we should be remembered and memorialised (Ernst and Parikka 2013; Garde-Hansen *et al.* 2009; Merrill *et al.* 2020), the right to be forgotten (Mayer-Schönberger 2009), and the interplay of death and technology (O'Gorman 2015; van Ryn *et al.* 2017). In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera claims that '[t]he struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (1981, p. 3). However, in the realm of digital media, how do we deal with processes of remembering and forgetting when the internet's memory is said to be prosthetic (Reynolds 2011, p. 397; Roy 2015)? How do we conceptualise the cycles of death and rebirth, of never-ending remembering-forgetting-remembering, in a media that, at times, we cannot yet fully control? Indeed, this book does not attempt to provide answers to the questions surrounding the obsolescence of digital media. Instead, it embraces obsolescence and death as inevitable while celebrating the possibilities of mediatic resurrection. Even though digital artefacts might die, they are never completely dead as long as they remain archived online and as long as the online realm continues to exist, whether it is on someone's computer, a platform, or even in an e-book. We know how information may be 'lost' when platforms or social media profiles are closed, but we also understand how simple it is to download or snapshot digital culture. Our books on memes or, for that matter, other forms of cultural production, therefore, also act as repositories of the digital, existing as digital artefacts themselves as much as material pieces of culture.

Moreover, death in digital media provides a space in which to reclaim the value of obsolescence and engage in a theoretical exploration of the obsolete. The obsolete, as we have observed, has inspired digital cultures, such as vaporwave and the Beldi Cool, to reach for the past, longing for lost futures within contemporary digital settings. While memes and even meme culture may become obsolete by the time this book is published, the fact that memes played a role in narrating, sponsoring, and changing significant events in the 2010s should not be erased. Instead of focusing on the expiration dates of memes or platforms, this book details the ability of digital cultural artefacts to construct an intricate archive of stories told in multimodal forms. In this sense, the book responds to calls to abandon questions of impact and turns, instead, to questions of content (Papacharissi 2015, p. 8) so as not to lose sight of the 'media' within the term social media (Livingstone 2015). The memes analysed throughout this book serve to acknowledge important political moments in the contemporary history of Morocco as much as to understand the role of social media in capturing the everyday life of the unprivileged Other. Mobile media practices in particular, but arguably digital media in general, has 'taught us a lot about the fabric of contemporary life, and they increasingly provide us with ways to understand how death and the afterlife are negotiated, ritualized, and reimagined, especially within the everyday' (Cumiskey and Hjorth 2017, p. 3).

Acknowledging the afterlives of memes is important because they often chronicle events that may not be deemed important from a mainstream national and global media perspective. As such, memes serve as repositories of uneventful and unimportant events. The importance of the 'unimportant' is articulated by Jan Blommaert and Piia Varis's claim that 'people often produce "unimportant" language, when seen from the viewpoint of denotational and informational content, but still attach tremendous importance to such *unimportant* [my emphasis] forms of communication' (2015, p. 5). As we have observed, memes serve to archive events that are significant to the people, regardless of whether traditional media considers the event as important enough to be reported. As the book suggests, these archives are a key component of culture, as mainstream media often picks up accounts and trends that emerge from these alternative media while simultaneously supressing uncomfortable stories. Despite mainstream media's interest in reporting on and archiving the 'unimportant', memes make worth from the worthless. This, as we know, is a double-edged weapon. Memes archive memories of resistance as much as they rewrite the past for bigoted purposes. This can serve to evidence failed promises of change or to re-meme-ber past events that no one alive ever experienced. As Yasmin Ibrahim claims, '[i]n the digital age, truth and authenticity become renewed concerns along with discourses of fakes and fraudulent enterprises which threaten not only the purity of the real but also the effacement of the authentic' (2021, p. 17).

Processes of re-meme-bering highlight the value of archiving memories through visual depictions of the body (Chapter 4). Meredith McGuire claims that despite the tendency in the Global North to locate the operation of memory uniquely in our brain and thoughts, there is enough biological and anthropological evidence to state that 'memory resides in the whole body' (2008, p. 99). By analysing the ways in which bodies are depicted and animated when artists and participants are left to their own devices, this book links the suicidal attempt to self-identify as a grotesque monster to a form of empowerment. As we have observed, grotesque traits in many of the bodies appearing in memes, as well as animated cartoons, show an interest in social commentary that speaks to experiences of social death. Deformed faces and ugly foods, unproper bodies squeezed into claustrophobic spaces designed for the poor, or local markets selling outdated clothes leave behind digital traces of zombiedom. From the perspective of the digital grotesque, it is within these digital traces that the lives of the unprivileged migrate from deathtraps established from positions of power into archiving memories of the never-ending fight for a better life.

Profiting from the deathtraps, animated cartoons such as *Bouzebal*, as much as artists and influencers from the Beldi Cool, show that the grotesque has the potential to perform the aesthetic disobedience discussed by Mignolo (2011). In transforming these memories of zombiedom, the digital grotesque displays trends that work to showcase the grotesque as much as to transform it into desirable aesthetics. While the grotesque may perpetuate power dynamics, it can also provide comfort to those looking to break free from feelings of despair and lost futures. In this sense, the celebration of the unattractive and the ugly aspects of local culture embedded in the Beldi Cool underpins the devaluation of the local by colonial rulers. That is, the Beldi Cool shows the continuity of appreciation of local 'odours' that made white European travellers uncomfortable in colonial encounters. *Bouzebal* and the Beldi Cool, together with the numerous memes discussed in this book, perform an aesthetic disobedience against a state desperate to artificially implant in the minds of ordinary people the ideas of progress, democracy, and development, as well as global expectations of Moroccanness. Instead of discarding obsolescence in the digital, notions of death and the grotesque encourage a much-needed tool for aesthetic disobedience that questions power dynamics and regimes of domination embedded in rapidly made, amateurish, and anti-politically correct digital culture.

Memetic Futures

Memetic 'deaths' encourage us to think about memetic silences or absences. Throughout the analysis of the Moroccan memesphere, there has been one notorious silence: criticism of religion. Even in their worst behaviour (making

fun of non-hegemonic groups such as women, LGBTQ+, or ordinary people), Moroccan trolls have rarely crossed the third red line with their memes: criticism of Islam. Memes showing funny scenes related to religion are nevertheless not uncommon. This is the case with one version of the 'Chams' meme showing an Imam changing a word, and therefore the meaning, of a prayer. However, the main Facebook meme pages analysed in this research show no interest in dis-membering religious questions in any form or manner. A distinct and careful curation of the digital grotesque reveals that the postcolonial project, God, the Nation, and the King do not in fact carry the same weight, at least for most memers and meme page participants.

Questions emerge from memetic silences, in this case concerning the limits of humour, the limits of horror, and the limits of trolling in general. During the first weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe, the number of memes making fun of the new situation took the internet by storm. Morocco was no exception. When the number of infected and dead started to rise, the memetic sphere became silent, for a while at least. Nationalist meme pages, instead, posted pictures of empty public spaces or queues of masked citizens patiently waiting their turn to enter a grocery store, a bank, or a pharmacy. Yet this was not the case of meme culture dying, as memetic silence in the Moroccan memesphere did not last long. With the world in lockdown, memetic silence responded to an entire ecosystem in shock, reproducing online the empty streets, closed shops, and post-apocalyptic urban spaces whose silence was only interrupted by the sounds of sirens. Maria Malmström reflects on the silence in Cairo (2019) during curfews ordered by the interim government in the summer of 2013 as well as the unwanted silences in Egyptian prisons as a consequence of activists' persecution (2021); she points out the stark contrast between quietude in the streets and the cacophony of helicopters, sirens, and shouting voices that echoed after the uprisings of January 2011 (Malmström 2019, p. 66). Memetic silence as a form of momentary death prompts questions on how to analyse silence in the digital sphere.

The year 2020 forcefully changed our relationship with digital culture in ways that are beyond the scope of this conclusion, for example the digitalisation of culture in the form of live online music performances or the dreaded Zoom meetings for work or online training. So why did memes momentarily stop as the world turned to the digital as a primary source of contact in the midst of a global pandemic? How can memes be the archives of this pandemic when they went silent after the reality of the disease hit us like an electric shock? Can silence be a form of archive? This book is therefore neither the end point to the analysis of memes nor a starting point. Despite fears of memes becoming obsolete, a fear embedded within influential editors of highly impactful publications, memes have proved their resilience. New research from young scholars has continuously emerged on this topic as of 2023. To this, I add the newly established Meme Studies Research

Network (Memestudiesrn 2020) initiated in 2020 by Galip, bringing together over 400 members, including postgraduate researchers, on memes.

Following cyclical perceptions of time, this book underscores the necessity of persistently pushing the boundaries of what is considered normal, despite the inclinations of media gatekeepers. As it is rare that the anglophone, mainstream, non-global (or non-Other) asks whether theories apply beyond its limited, even if dominant, area of influence, this book takes the following stance: mainstream media, as well as some academic markets, need to consider the unsellable, uninteresting, and unimportant. In moving forward, *Memes, Monsters, and the Digital Grotesque* demands a revaluation of research cycles, especially in media and communication studies, that extends beyond established trends in the field. In the case of memes, this research needs to be rebooted to reignite crucial, yet silenced, discussions that have not ended with initial explorations from the anglophone datasphere on the subject matter. In striving for a monstrous disobedience, my hope is that what is to come dis-meme-bers disciplines and markets that dominate and dictate our research in digital culture, to expand our knowledge on memes, monsters, and the digital grotesque.

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