

Wael Shawky
(Alexandria, 1971)

In his videos, drawings, installations and plays, Wael Shawky explores in depth the various ways in which national identities, historical narratives and religious sentiments may be put together. Drawing on historiographical sources and works of fiction, he often blends the edges between them, questioning the reliability of the facts with a wealth of shared myths.

With the videos of the trilogy *Cabaret Crusades* he gained international attention, presenting the history of the Crusades through a non-Eurocentric perspective. In order to do so, he made use of the book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* by the Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf, among the first to turn around the point of view on events, making use of Islamic medieval sources never previously considered by Western historiography. Far from representing the Arabs as victims of Christian invaders, Shawky outlines a much more complex interplay of violence, thirst for power and transversal alliances that do not allow for a dichotomic separation between the good and the bad. The use of marionettes in lieu of actors in flesh and blood underlines a distance from the events described. The dialogues in classical Arabic, the meticulous sceneries, the traditional songs coupled with electronic music all contribute to immersing the spectator in a magical yet estranging atmosphere reminiscent of the fiction of cabaret as hinted at in the title of the series.

The Horror Show File (2010) opens the trilogy with events from the first Crusade, from the Council of Clermont called by Pope Urban II in 1095 to the Christian conquest of Jerusalem four years later, while *The Path to Cairo* (2012) continues the tale of the occupation in the Holy Lands and the geopolitical imbalances in the region. Purchased for the collection, *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015) is a feature-length film of two hours, covering events from the second, third and fourth Crusades, right up to the Sack of Constantinople by the Franks and the Venetians in 1204. According to a narrative device deployed already in the first chapter, Shawky begins the tale with a flashback which leads us back in time to the terrible Battle of Karbala of 680, in the light of which the final split was created (still ongoing) between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. The marionettes in this third video were produced by Venetian master glassblowers following designs by the artist, and show a lasting contamination of human and animal shapes, as if the protagonists were imaginary beings loaned from medieval bestiaries. The video includes numerous sung scenes and a thick network of iconographical references in the scenery, citing Islamic miniatures along with frescos by Giotto.

Along the same lines as this trilogy, Shawky continues to investigate different points of view in historical narratives. With the theatre performance *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* (2017), he stages the epic French poem *La Chanson de Roland*, telling of the heroic battle against the Saracens in the days of Charles the Great, through the typical style of the songs of pearl divers from the Persian Gulf.

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