

OUR FOREIGN AGENDA — THE ORIENTALIST AND THE CURATOR

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O = ORIENTALIST

C = CURATOR

Conversation at Pâtisserie Délices, a posh French-style café near the seafront of Alexandria. The European curator and the Orientalist are visiting Alexandria, looking for an artist for their project in Berlin.

1. INTRODUCTION SCENE

O: So, you are the curator who is going to join me in Alexandria? Great to meet. I have never worked with somebody from the arts before.

C: Great to meet, too. I have never worked with an orientalist either. What do you actually research?

O: Eh, it's about possibility. And creativity. I try to study what fantasy and creativity can accomplish as quotidian engagements in the conditions of neo-liberal subjectivation from a phenomenological approach that interrogates the existential...

C: Excuse me?

O: I mean, the current anthropological discourse on subjectivation and Foucauldian relations of power...

C: I mean, I don't understand a word. This way we will never find an artist!

O: ...But the intersubjective lifeworlds of the...

C: Wait a minute! Nobody is going to understand you! The first lesson: We need a translator.

2. SHITTY TITLE SCENE

C: Why are we still having this shitty title?

O: I think "In Search of Europe" is a good title.

C: In Search of Europe? Don't you think everybody hates Europe at this point?

O: If they do, then they are thinking of Europe. Remember, the main question of our project is how people compare their situation with Europe.

C: I don't understand. What do you mean when you say that people should compare themselves with Europe? Has anybody in Egypt invited us to ask this question?

O: Eh, actually, the German Ministry of Research and Education pays us to ask this question.

C: There you are! That's why the people are suspicious about it. And right they are!

O: But I think it is a good question. It is something I really encounter in Egypt. When people are upset about something in Egypt they ask me: "Do you have something like this in Europe?"

C: Why should Egyptians be interested in Europe at all?

O: That's the question! That's exactly what our research is about.

C: You as orientalist, tell me, why do we Europeans still give Europe such

importance. Why do we think that everybody thinks about us?

O: I don't know if everybody still thinks about us. That's what I want to find out.

C: But now, after the revolution nobody thinks about Europe. They think about Egypt.

O: I hope so. But there is also a lot of European money coming to Egypt.

C: So it's all about money again?

O: Money makes things possible.

C: This is a moral question. Who gives the money and what is the ideology behind it?

O: No, The question is, what are they doing with the money?

3. WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE SCENE

O: Anyway, why do we speak English?

C: Well, I don't speak Arabic.

O: But it's an Arabic speaking country.

C: All your books are in English. You write about this country but you don't write for this country.

O: I would like to write for this country, but the people here have difficulty to understand the academic debates I'm involved in.

C: So who is your audience?

O: Well there is Frank, and there is Sonja, Jessica, Sindre, Hanan, Greg ... Maybe a few more.

C: So you get a huge research budget to write books which twenty people read?

O: Come on, that's not fair. At least thirty!

C: So you don't mind if nobody reads what you have to say?

O: Of course I do. I have a lot to say. That's why I'm participating in an art project.

C: So you think art is less elitist than academia?

O: No, art is even more elitist. But I can tell my ideas to thirty different people. And it's more fun in the arts!

4. WHAT IS THE ART SCENE SCENE

O: Do the people understand contemporary art here?

C: I don't even know if there is an audience for contemporary art here. I haven't seen any museums or exhibitions here. I think they don't even have proper art education here.

O: Have you never been to cultural centres they have here? They are very influential!

C: But that's not real art, that's socialist ideology for the nationalist project.

O: What do you mean, just because you don't like it, it's not real art?

C: What do you know about art, honey? You're the expert in science.

O: Aren't the artists here experts in art more than you are? Who has the right to say what is real art?

C: I have the money, stupid!

5. SELECTION SCENE

C: I'm here to look for good art and not to be loved.

O: So you don't mind if they hate you?

C: Of course I do. I want to be loved as well. I'm schizophrenic. On one side I want to make no compromises regarding to art. But I don't know if I and the artists here share the same standards. Will I be hated for insisting on standards?

O: There are some people in this city who are more international than you are.

C: OK, true. But they don't answer the phone. I work with those who respond to me. One side of me expects European standards. But another side in me wants to give something back.

O: That sounds quite patronising.

C: No, I mean, I want exchange and dialogue. I want to understand what matters to people here, what contemporary art means for them.

O: Maybe you are just trying to go around your bad conscience that you as a curator are shopping for people.

C: Sometimes I think: Why not change the whole approach to the selection process?

O: Does that mean that we have to consider a collective work?

C: Maybe. But then it's less about quality of art, and more about the process.

O: I don't care about the process. I want a good exhibition and good products!

6. THE GOOD CAUSE SCENE

C: But we have an agenda: We do it for the good cause.

O: What do you mean with good cause?

C: I think we have something important to say!

O: What is so important that you have to say?

C: I think it is important for a German audience that they know what people think in Egypt, in Turkey, in Mocambique, in Senegal. I think we can change some misconceptions Europeans have about the world.

O: Then we have to listen. They just had a revolution in this country. There is something we can learn from them.

C: Exactly, I said that before.

O: No you didn't.

C: Then you didn't listen to me.

O: So, what did you say?

C: I want to get feedback. I want to know if our ideas have any relevance to the people here. Otherwise our project doesn't make any sense.

O: So, then let's hear the people.