

From Picasso to Pikachu

Jordi Colomer in conversation with William Jeffett
(catalogue Arabian Stars)

William Jeffett: Why did you choose to shoot Arabian Stars in Yemen?

Jordi Colomer: I wanted to go to Yemen for a long time. The mud skyscrapers in the desert have always fascinated me. In fact, that is one of the scant images I have from a country we don't know anything about, just that at a certain moment President Bush included it in the 'axis of evil', along with North Korea and Iraq.

Pier Paolo Pasolini also made a film about Yemen.

Seeing *The Walls of Sana'a* (1971) definitely made me decide to travel and see what is happening now in Yemen... Pasolini filmed it in one day at the end of the shooting of *The Decameron*. The off-screen narration is Pasolini's own voice, which is directed at UNESCO as a plea to save Yemen's heritage. In the early 1970s, the political elite of Yemen, because they were ashamed, decided to destroy the old image of the country. In the film one sees the destruction of the wall of Sana'a. This coincided with the first arrival of industrial objects that the Chinese brought to the country – for example, the first plastic objects. Today the wall is reconstructed, but outside of it has grown a new city of two million inhabitants, that continues to grow... In other words, plastic is everywhere.

So is Yemen now a modern society?

Yemen seems like a medieval society with post-modern gadgets. Many tribes don't recognise the central power of the state, the majority of the population is hooked on qat¹ and the rôle of woman is exclusively restricted to the house. We didn't see a single factory in that country, but, of course, every Yemeni has a mobile telephone. Even the Bedouin desert tribes change their camels for Japanese cars. All of the basic objects are made in China or India, and most weapons are Russian Kalashnikovs. Weapons are ordinary there... they are the remaining traces from the last civil war between the Communist area (south) and the traditional north. Now, after the reunification of north and south, the way of building has also changed: reinforced concrete was another improvement imported from China that was very successful.

Why did you choose to present the names of popular celebrities in Yemen?

Yemen is a country where there are very few images available to us, but also it is the same in the opposite sense. There is practically no Western music of any type, not even international pop hits. The first day (in Yemen), I mentioned Picasso's name, and noted that this name means nothing. Nevertheless, walking through Sana'a with the Picasso placard, many people corrected us: "this is badly written!, Pikachu is with ch!!!". Yes Pikachu² is popular in Yemen.

You have included some Arabic names. What are the references?

I started asking many different people who are the most famous people or characters - in both fiction and reality - from Yemen, the truly popular ones, and obtained the following list: a singer (Abo Bakr Saalem), two poets

(Albaradoni³ and Al-Zubeiri⁴) and the actual minister for human rights who is a woman (Amat Alim As Susua). But, what I realised is that our idea of fame or a kind of popular mass media culture has a different sense there.

Which names were known in Yemen?

The already mentioned Pikachu, Michael Jackson, Maradona⁵, Zidane⁶, (football⁷ is very popular there), Batman, Bruce Lee, but they had never heard of the others.

Even in the West not even all of the names are universally known.

The list tries to gather together the most popular names from the second half of the twentieth-century until now, although in creating it I was very conscious that some were related to specific contexts and that the selection had a strong subjective component: A subjective 'pop' list. I decided neither to include actors nor actresses, because the list would have been endless. Of course, everyone knows Asterix⁸ in France, but few do in the United States, where nobody knows the (French) football star Zinedine Zidane (Zizou), one of the most popular names in Yemen.

In Arabian Stars you mix both fictional characters and real names. Would you say that the film seeks a blurring of the distinction between the real and the fictional?

When you are taking pictures of something through the filter of the camera, the balance of what is real or fiction is difficult to determine. The first impression in walking through old Sana'a was the complete unreality of the place, like walking through a set; this reality transcends any stereotypes I could construct about the country. It is also important to say that, when we appeared with our camera, immediately lots of people wanted to be filmed, and they reacted in a very naïve way. We didn't try to hide the camera, but openly proposed a game using the placards. The Yemenis are not at all afraid of the cameras. Something about the cameras fascinates them, and they retain an exceptional naturalness in their acting. But their relation with the image is complex: many people, especially women, have never been photographed, and in fact women remain practically excluded from the video. It is very emotional, and somehow perverse when you show a digital screen to somebody who sees an image of themselves for the very first time.

If you go to a country like Yemen as a foreigner and make a film, one immediately thinks of the documentary genre. What part of the film is documentary, or fiction, or performance?

Sometime ago I tried to find the right word to express something between performance and acting, and I have found the word 'situation', which in Spanish includes two words: 'sitio', place, and 'acción', action. Through the simple presence of an object that you give to a person, in this case the placards in Arabian Stars, the action will appear. And, of course, this action will be related to the place where this occurs, with the 'site': the street, the city or the desert and all that takes place there spontaneously... So it is completely different doing the same action in Yemen than in Austria or Japan. I decided to have long actions to allow this landscape and architecture to appear as another character in the film, while all of the spontaneous became involved in

the picture. Of course Arabian Stars questions which part is fiction, which part is performance and which part is documentary.

This video has a cinematographic quality. In what way does cinema and video converge in this piece?

Right now video technology approaches the technical quality of cinema. Now you can record video in a panoramic format and at 24 images per second. Cinema makes use of video and vice versa. When video was invented, cinema and video seemed like two completely different worlds. Now the respective, documental, qualities of immediacy or fiction have been blurred. Arabian Stars was recorded in 'high definition' like the latest Star Wars.

Who are the 'stars' of the video?

Of course, all those either fictional or real characters, which are mentioned in the placards, are the stars referred to in the title. But also the Arabian Stars are all those people from Yemen that perform by carrying those placards with the written names, the 'actors'. It was important to me to list all of their names in the credits.

You mentioned that the only film you had with you in Yemen was Luis Buñuel's Los Olvidados (1950).

My memory of that film was that everything happened in the streets of Mexico City, but I realised watching it in Yemen, that many scenes were very obviously shot in a constructed city made on a set, in an imaginary Mexico. The distinction between documentary and fiction becomes fragile in our memory. I was quite impressed by this sequence where one of the children, who goes to bed very hungry, dreams that his mother is bringing to him in the bed an enormous slab of raw meat.

But things are not so bad in Yemen.

I think in Yemen every child has rice and chicken to eat, so I conclude that the social differences are not as extreme as in Mexico.

There is an almost absurd sense of humour in the situations represented in your videos.

There is an effect of paradox, the irresolvable paradox of being fleeing towards laughter... The most terrible situations often provoke laughter, as often happens in (Samuel) Beckett's works...

How was Salvador Dalí related to the film?

Even if he is not my favourite artist, Dalí's concept of 'soft architecture' seems to me quite revolutionary. In fact the Yemen architecture follows the idea that buildings grow up as natural beings. So each building belongs to a family where many generations can live together, thus organising the space vertically and reaching 7 or 8 levels. The façade of the buildings is generated organically by the interiors, a type of 'body-building'. On the other hand, the horizon line of the desert, the sharply cast shadows, and rocky mountains is somehow related to the surrealist stage. For example, look at Dalí's drawings where the skyscrapers of New York appear as figures from Millet's Angelus in a desert stage that Rem Koolhaas talks about in Delirious New York (1978).

Dalí is also a celebrity who could have been part of the list.

The presentation of the video in the space is like going inside a theatre, with the walls painted green or red and with chairs set up as in an informal theatre. The presentation space is an ephemeral architecture to be temporarily inhabited. So that means a kind of stage design for the viewers to share as a social space, as actors dwelling on a set. but also and at the same time it is like the actors live when on set. The limit between what happens in the screen, what happened when we were shooting, and what happens now in the room is fluid and in a process of transformation. Everything has to work like a series of reflecting mirrors. For example, the colour of the walls has to match with the placards in the desert, which at the same time is a green very often seen in Yemen...

And why do you use a selection of found chairs for the seating?
You should find your own chair in that room.

Tell me about the length of the shots.

The fact that each sequence is quite long, comes from my previous video *un crime* (2004), where a group of people walk holding letters which tell the story of a crime. The narrative advances at the same time that the actors advance through the city. I took this story exactly as it was written, from a french 19th-century newspaper called *Le petit journal*. The duration of each shot is determined by the time needed to read the words; so they were very short, which corresponds to the rhythm of a video clip. In Yemen the time needed was much longer for each sequence. This slow time allows you to think when seeing that 'situation'.

The placards remind me of the Fluxus position and the word 'situation' recalls the movement Situationism. In what ways are these ideas informing this film?

Finally the point is that we did many small 'performances' with anonymous people, without any 'performance' as it is understood in 'contemporary art', but immediately these people approached it as a play and then they enjoyed it. This appears to me to be closer to the original Situationist ideas, and I now realise that, of course, when I say 'situation', it is somehow related to Situationism. In Yemen, I believe, they still retain the double sense of the words 'play' in english, 'jouer' in french or 'spiele' in german without making a distinction between 'performance' and 'game'. But it would be unfair if you don't recognise that it is hard to pretend to be in a completely pure relationship when you have the camera and they don't. The performance happens, but immediately it becomes an image. My point of departure is precisely a reflexion about this type of document, how to give it its own identity.

There is an almost improvisational dimension to this situation as you have presented it in the video.

The sequences in the film appear strictly in chronological order following the itinerary of travel. Since the first day in Yemen, I felt like the right way to be there was to let yourself be carried away by events. And the logic of the film

was imposed by itself. After *Le dortoir* - which was entirely filmed on stage, in which the actors are asleep - I decided to leave the film set and go into the street. More and more I need improvisation. Just with a little idea, allowing everything to happen. It is an attitude just a little bit like Don Quixote, travelling around with a camera.

Why did you put the names in Arabic?

They had to be written in Arabic in order to make it possible so that things happen and that the people can react to the names; it would have been out of place to put them in the latin alphabet. For the film I had to translate them again through subtitles, and that's what makes the 'suspense' possible in the film for a viewer that doesn't read Arabic. So all this came in two directions: those names of occidental stars were phonetically translated into Arabic writing and then from Arabic translated back into our alphabet. Everything takes on another meaning.

1. Leaf with mild narcotic effect.
2. One of the characters in Pokémon (Japanese animé).
3. Abdolla Albaradoni lost his sight at age 6 because of smallpox. He started writing poetry at the age of 13. His poetry embodied the suffering of the Yemeni people, and he was considered one of the best of contemporary Yemeni poets contributing to the enrichment of the Arabic language.
4. Muhammed Mahmud Al-Zubeiri was a resistance fighter and poet. He was initially a militant in the Muslim Brotherhood and brought together, in a pact, the conflicting tribal factions, contributing to the formation of the Republic, and he was a founder of God's Party.
5. Diego Armando Maradona won four Football World Cups with the Argentinian national team.
6. Zinedine Zidane (Zizou) won a Football World Cup in 1998 with the French national team.
7. Soccer.
8. The French comic.