

The Brooklyn Rail

Wael Shawky *The Cabaret Crusades*

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Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File*, 2010 (video still). HD video, color, sound, 31:49 min. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

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“When death brings at last the desired forgetfulness, it abolishes life and being together, and sets the seal on the knowledge that ‘being’ is merely a continual ‘has been,’ a thing that lives by denying and destroying and contradicting itself.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*

The widely celebrated Egyptian artist Wael Shawky has finally received the attention he well deserves in America. *The Cabaret Crusades*, the artist’s most ambitious, layered, and successful work to date, is currently on view at MoMA PS1. Set in a surreal and seductive world inhabited by marionettes, the three-hour plus long video trilogy explores the history of the Crusades from the Arab perspective. Shawky skillfully juxtaposes historical narrative with the childish world of puppetry—seriousness with naivety, fear with humor, horror with entertainment—to focus on events crucial to the development of an Arab identity. While prior to the Crusades different groups coexisted more or less peacefully, the trauma of the European invasions shaped today’s familiar dichotomies—East and West,

Christianity and Islam, Shi'ism and Sunni'ism. At first sight a history lesson for children, the project ultimately raises important questions about the historicity of identity and consequently the role of history itself.

Shawky's conceptual inspiration for the project was the Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf's book, *Crusades through Arab Eyes* (1983), a collection of Medieval Arab writers' observations. Focusing on this less prevalent version of history, the artist moves beyond representation to study the influence of history as a social construct with horrific consequences. In his words, Shawky makes a critical attempt "to translate this experience as a society that lives on their ancestor's history."



Wael Shawky. Marionettes from Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala. 2015. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut and Hamburg.

The three videos, *The Horror Show Files* (2010), *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and "*The Secret of Karbala* (2015), cover more than 200 years of history in many cities and include hundreds of characters, played by handcrafted marionettes. A large group of master professionals—from native traditional singers, craftsmen, and puppeteers to a full film crew—staged these accessible projects on enormous sets. The magnificent, handcrafted marionettes are more than enough to reward the viewer emotionally and intellectually. Each video employs different puppets and a new approach, but in all, the puppeteering is dance-like, the camera movement intoxicating, the sound wisely minimal, and the songs enchanting. With each successive video, Shawky becomes more critical and explores more deeply the question of Arab identity, and ultimately the horror and absurdity of history itself.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo*, 2012 (video still). HD video, color, sound, 60:00:53 min. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

The project goes far beyond a simple retelling of the historical narrative. Throughout all three episodes, Shawky skillfully combines a historical script and the imaginative world of marionettes to create what the artist describes as a “surreal and mythical atmosphere that blends drama and cynicism.” The environment blurs the lines between fact and fiction, truth and myth, and national history and bedtime fairy tales. He rapidly introduces characters, cities, and events through text on screen. Rather than educating, these references place the viewer within the frequently told history. The scenes of otherworldly singing, nuanced dancing, and simple human rituals underscore both the absurdity and the weight of the abstracted history. Shawky also frequently creates suspense through skillful deployment of silence; he presents entire war scenes from a child’s point of view, using a slow moving camera in total silence to emphasize how anxieties are truly felt. The approach is daring and complex.

The Horror Show File, the first of the trilogy, is tinged with the anger one might expect of an Arab perspective on the Early Crusades (1096 – 99). Created a decade after yet another Western occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the years culminating in the Arab Spring, this thirty-minute video focuses on the cruelty of the European invasion. 200-year-old restored marionettes from the Lupi collection in Turin eerily enact the aggression and resulting pain. Rather than fetishizing the violence, Shawky focuses on the humanity of the victims, showing celebrations, ceremonies, and other nuanced interactions. In an intoxicating, celebratory scene of mystical music and dancing, the king and queen of Edessa embrace and welcome Baldwin of Boulogne (one of the leaders of the first Crusade). Immediately after, we see imagery of the couple’s decapitated heads. The assassination, which resulted in Baldwin’s rule over Edessa, highlights the injustice of the historical event.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo*, 2012 (video still). HD video, color, sound, 60:00:53 min. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

In *The Path to Cairo* Shawky critically assesses the complexities of Arab history during the First and Second Crusades (1099 – 1145) with brutal honesty. Here he created his own animal-like marionettes from clay to play in this beautiful mystical musical. The action is set in an even more surreal environment, designed in Eastern two-dimensional perspective and decorated by Islamic miniatures. This lesser-known story is at times impossible to follow, the characters, cities, and events unfamiliar and plentiful. But even without recognizing all the characters, the hour-long video never ceases to enchant and unfailingly conveys an uncanny tale of greed, resentment, betrayal, and bloodshed. The native communities' attempts to survive the occupation result in their continuous weakening. *The Path to Cairo* is filled with scenes of kings killing one another, brothers plotting each others' murders, and a bride—symbolizing a city—repeatedly being married to its ever-changing king. The crusaders destroy all that is in their way. Shawky does not present Arabs as victims but as active players responsible for their fate. The video is both a mesmerizing forecast of the complexities that later unfolded in the region and a call for recognition of the horrific wrongdoings within the suppressed groups.



Wael Shawky. Marionette from *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala*. 2015. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut and Hamburg.

And so Shawky arrives at his most impressive work to date, the latest and final part of the trilogy, *The Secret of Karbala*. This two-hour-long video uses incredibly fragile, unique, glass marionettes hand-blown by Venetian master craftsmen to present, historical characters as surreal creatures resembling reptiles and sea monsters. Opening with the complex history of the Shi'ite and Sunni division, *The Secret of Karbala* daringly examines all the elements of the region's complexities. Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims are all assessed with equal measures of sensitivity and criticism. Heroes from Richard the Lion Heart to Saladin all fall from grace. Shawky continues the project beyond the predictable point at which Muslims in Jerusalem regain power, continuing to the greedy, senseless events of the Fourth Crusade and finishing the tale with the bloody siege of Zara (a Croatian Catholic town that rivaled Venice as a center of trade). Finally, these men, each fighting in the name of their God, are all trapped at sea in a storm; all praying to their own god and retelling the same story of Jonah. Rather than offering the comfort of certainty, this long, disorienting, and intricate history paralyzes the viewer. Nevertheless, the ongoing impact of these tales is undeniable. A history of men killing each other in the name of god has become the excuse for today's bloodshed. Shawky's trilogy refuses to offer any new historical panacea and reminds contemporary man of the perils of taking history for granted.