



Tickling Giants Discussion Guide

Director: Sara Taksler

Year: 2016

Time: 113 min

You might know this director from:

Twisted: A Balloonumentary (2007)

FILM SUMMARY

Political satire has long been an effective way of ridiculing the powers that be and ensuring that democratic societies are aware of governmental distortions of the law. Satire can pressure even the stiffest state and provides fresh perspectives, entertaining while informing. After years suffering with a non-representative media, surgeon-turned-TV-host Bassem Youssef began supplying the Egyptian public with what Jon Stewart gave Americans for years—a deep laugh built around political corruption.

A senior producer on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” director Sara Taksler was no stranger to satire. Youssef’s story was fascinating, and the direct parallels between her work and his were undeniable. With *TICKLING GIANTS*, she provides us not only with a comprehensive overview of Egyptian politics from Mubarak to present-day El-Sisi, but takes us on an emotional, trans-continental journey into the personal and public life of one man armed with a sharp intellect, biting wit, and courage to boot.

Success, fame, and over 30 million viewers come to Youssef and his show “Al Bernameg” in record time. As his fans put it: “He’s a doctor that heals us from the political state.” “People now understand democracy because of Bassem.” “He is expressing our thoughts and feelings.” Egyptians were famished for a full-frontal, uncensored take on their lives. Youssef provided them with the only—yes, the only—televised political commentary on what they were saying to one another all day every day. He made them laugh, while calling the Egyptian government to account for itself. “If people can laugh at their differences, maybe they’ll laugh at each other instead of hating each other,” Youssef hopes. *TICKLING GIANTS* is a tale of the incredible power of humor to expose, challenge, and unite, and the tragedy of wielding fear as a means to control others.

FILM THEMES

Words are harmless, especially when crafted into humorous packages. Mere wafts of sound riding the air, a ripple of laughter and poof—gone. Right? Wrong. Bassem Youssef and his satirical show offer solid proof of the power of a joke to cut through the facade of false democracy.

MEDIA FOR...THE PEOPLE?

As any citizen in a true democracy, Bassem Youssef turned to the media to inform him, providing an unbiased reflection of the reality he witnessed on the tumultuous Egyptian streets. Rather than offering a non-partisan reflection of the current political scenario, however, local media was putting forth the ruling party's agenda. "I was angry that the media could be so irresponsible. It should be the voice of the people, not the voice of authority," Youssef explained. In reply he set out to provide a truly democratic form of media, "taking revenge against the many lies."

SATIRE AS THE ELIXIR AND SPARK

Instead of adopting a dry, news-like approach for his show, Youssef grabbed the sword of satire, arming himself with humor. Branded "the Jon Stewart of Egypt," Youssef and "Al Bernameg" raised awareness and reflected the word on the street. It united people, providing them with a soothing elixir from the tyranny they encountered continually. As one fan put it, "We're looking at things negatively all day. It's nice to look at things in a funny way." Satire provides a deep belly laugh of facts, truth, and communal understanding, a light way to delve in and peel back the layers of corruption of those in power.

FEAR

Dictators, oppressive rulers, and anyone trying to control people know that fear is the mightiest of weapons. Regardless of how loved he was by the people, how famous he had become in the Arab world, Youssef was still human, a son, father, and husband. "I worry about being targeted with my family. I worry about the people who are close to me." As impassioned as he was in his work as a political satirist, fear eventually got him in the end. Unable to provide the honest content he wanted out of a justifiable fear of the consequences, Youssef ended "Al Bernameg." Resigned, Youssef stated, "I want to do my job but I can't." The government's fear-mongering triumphed once again.

WHOSE FREEDOM WINS?

Democracy is defined as "a government in which the supreme power is held by the people." El-Sisi stated that Egypt completed a transition to democratic rule. Thus, freedom of press should follow in Egypt, with the people liberated to express their disapproval of governmental decisions. As Youssef puts it, "This show is about holding authority accountable, regardless of who's in charge." Yet when push comes to shove, those who value their own freedoms, position, or power, over freedom of expression will not sacrifice their own slice of liberty for the common good. By retracting their support of "Al Bernameg," did both networks that canceled the show put the freedom and power held by the network and its executives above the freedom of expression?

"A joke has never ridden a motorcycle into a crowd with a baton. A joke has never shot tear gas to a group of people in a park. It's just talk."

Jon Stewart

"Satire was our weapon to dissect through the lies and rhetoric used to control the people."

Bassem Youssef

"Comedy and satire work really well in the moment we're not supposed to laugh."

Andeel, writer and cartoonist

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of Bassem Youssef before watching TICKLING GIANTS? If so, how and when? If not, how would you describe his character in five words, as depicted by the film?
2. Were you a fan of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart”? Do you turn to political satire to inform your views of the current state of politics? In which ways do individuals like Stewart and Youssef inspire us to do more than simply laugh?
3. Do you believe that a sense of humor is an essential character trait? In which ways, if any, can humor be a healing tool in tough times or something to lean on in order to survive a traumatic experience? How do you use humor in your life?
4. Is freedom of press alive and well where you live? What are some signs of a healthy press? What are some sure signs that the media is being controlled or heavily influenced by the government?
5. Bassem Youssef states, “They (the government) used the best weapon known to humans—fear.” Do you agree that fear is the greatest tool in controlling people? Why is fear so powerful? What is your greatest fear, and how does it control your life?
6. Do you believe that Youssef would have been arrested and/or killed if he had continued producing “Al Bernameg” in Egypt? Should he have remained and supplied his people with the content for which they were so hungry? What would you have done if you were in his position?
7. Are there any similarities between working as a heart surgeon and a political satirist? How did both roles serve certain parts of Youssef’s personality, as far as you could tell from TICKLING GIANTS?
8. What were your impressions of the animations used in the film? What did you think of the “tickling giants” metaphor? In which way do you/have you tickled giants in your own life? Who or what are the “giants” in your life?
9. Have you ever been to Egypt? If so, discuss your impressions. If not, how would you feel about traveling there considering the current political climate?
10. In his work as a comedian now living in the U.S., Youssef draws many parallels between President Trump and President El-Sisi. Do you feel that Trump is repressing/controlling the American media in a way similar to El-Sisi in Egypt?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- TICKLING GIANTS had its global premiere at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and went on to be screened at a number of international festivals. It had its initial U.S. release in March 2017.
- Director Sara Taksler has been a senior producer on “The Daily Show” since 2005. Taksler first met Bassem in June 2012, on his first visit to “The Daily Show,” when his program was only on YouTube. Fascinated with his work satirizing politics in a country where free speech was not common law, she asked him if she could make a documentary on him. Bassem agreed. For fear of the authorities, Taksler did not mention her work in Egypt on any form of social media until filming was complete. Taksler did most of the filming on her own, working with local crew. Technicolor came on board after filming and funded the project completion.
- When it was still on YouTube, “[Al Bernameg](#)” was the first channel in the Middle East to reach one million subscribers. South by Southwest, a well-renowned international interactive festival, went on to vote “Al Bernameg” the first and most successful Internet to television conversion story in the Middle East.
- Bassem Youssef had been watching Jon Stewart for 10 years before starting “Al Bernameg.”
- In mid-2017, around [60,000](#) political prisoners sat in Egyptian jails. At the end of Mubarak’s rule, that figure was between 5,000-10,000.
- “The Daily Show” premiered in 1996, first hosted by Craig Kilborn. Jon Stewart took over from 1999 to 2015, during which time he placed a strong focus on politics and U.S. media. Trevor Noah took over the show after Stewart’s departure. Overall, “The Daily Show” is the longest-running program on Comedy Central.
- Egypt spans across northeast Africa and the southwest corner of Asia, making it a trans-continental country. The 2016 [population](#) came in at just under 95 million inhabitants, making it the 16th most populous country in the world. Although Arabic is the official language, many people speak English and French. 90% of the population are Muslim, the other 10% Christian.
- Born in Cairo in 1954, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had very little combat experience throughout his extensive military career, and primarily focused on intelligence. Elected president in May 2014, his position is as of yet unchallenged (mid-2017).
- Youssef fled from Egypt in the latter half of 2014, seeking refuge in the U.S. He was a Resident Fellow at Harvard’s Institute of Politics in early 2015. Later moving to California with his family, he produced “Democracy Handbook with Bassem Youssef,” a comical look at American democracy, for the Fusion network.
- The oldest version of satire can be traced back to [Aristophanes](#), a comic playwright from ancient Greece, who lived around 400 B.C.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Watch** “[Democracy Handbook](#),” an online series in which Bassem Youssef travels across the United States to learn about the North American version of democracy, all in his own comedic fashion.
2. **Join** the CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) network by subscribing to their [e-mail list](#). This international community reports on infringements to freedom of press across the globe.
3. **Contemplate** the call to action posted on the [film’s website](#), which encourages each of us to turn to humor in challenging times. “Are you brave enough to tell a joke?”
4. **Read** “Revolution for Dummies: Laughing through the Arab Spring,” a book by Bassem Youssef in which he recalls his journey from heart surgeon to renowned political satirist.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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