

Archival Activists and the Hybrid Archives of the Arab Left

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THE ARAB ARCHIVE

MEDIATED MEMORIES
AND DIGITAL FLOWS

EDITED BY
DONATELLA DELLA RATTA
KAY DICKINSON
& SUNE HAUGBOLLE

**THEORY
ON
DEMAND**

A SERIES OF READERS
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35

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MEDIATED MEMORIES
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Theory on Demand #35

The Arab Archive

Mediated Memories and Digital Flows

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00. INTRODUCTION

DONATELLA DELLA RATTA, KAY DICKINSON, SUNE HAUGBOLLE

What are the political and ethical economies of the Arab image – the principles of its production, its often-threatened and always fluctuating materiality, its circuits of distribution and re-use? As the revolutions across the Arab world that came to a head in 2011 devolved into civil war and military coup, representation and history acquired a renewed and contested urgency. The capacities of the internet have enabled sharing and archiving in an unprecedented fashion. Yet, at one and the same time, these facilities institute a globally dispersed reinforcement and recalibration of power, turning memory and knowledge into commodified and copyrighted goods. Which images of struggle have been created, bought, sold, repurposed, denounced, and expunged in these milieux? By whom and by what means? These are some of the crucial questions that encircle what our anthology identifies as ‘the Arab archive’. This archive comes into being in formats as diverse as digital repositories looked after by activists, found footage art documentaries, doctoral research projects, and ‘controversial’ or ‘violent’ protest videos that are abruptly removed from YouTube at the click of a mouse by sub-contracted employees thousands of kilometers from where they were uploaded. The Arab Archive examines which forces – local, regional and international, public, commercial and informal – determine the politics, economics, and aesthetics of what materials we can access and what gets erased.

This anthology is also, itself, an archive. As is ever the case, it is an incomplete, expanded, and transmogrified compilation and a record of an event from the past; something that came together in one form and now re-establishes itself in another. In May 2018, the following people met at John Cabot University in Rome to share ideas and to try to address some of the questions proposed above. We thank each of them for their generous input: Basma Alsharif, Miriyam Aouragh, Mohammad Ali Atassi, Enrico De Angelis, Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, Laure Guirguis, Sune Haugbolle, Philip Rizk, Abdel Razzaq Takriti, and Dork Zabunyan. Some have reshaped their presentations into the ensuing chapters; new colleagues have since joined us for this publication.

Like the workshop, this volume purposefully congregates activists, artists, filmmakers, producers, and scholars. Their diversity of approaches stands collectively as commitment to the necessity for multivalence and creativity in revolutionary praxis. Our mutual conviction in accessibility and the commons inspires the partnership with the Institute of Network Cultures. We thank everyone at INC for their support of and hard work on this project, along with their radical stance on open source provision. Our gratitude extends also to Meredith Slifkin for copy editing this manuscript.

01. ARCHIVAL ACTIVISTS AND THE HYBRID ARCHIVES OF THE ARAB LEFT

SUNE HAUGBOLLE

Archival activists retrieve and capture archives, while at the same time producing new collections of evidence. Most archival activists have their eyes firmly fixed on the recent past, but others go further back in time. In this essay, I focus on the hybrid archive of what is often termed the Arab Left, a somewhat obfuscating catch-all (which I nevertheless adopt) for radical, progressive, secular, and revolutionary states, movements, ideas, and people.

Hybrid archives come into existence through the agency of activists and their networking practices. It is a dual process that includes both the retrieval of existing corpuses of texts and images, and the making of new collections mainly on the internet. Drawing on Ann Stoler's ideas, I see archives not merely as a virtual or material storage place, but as a composite social phenomenon. The archive is both a corpus of writing and images, and a force field that animates political energies and expertise. Archives order the world by repelling and refusing certain ways of knowing. It is never just what is in an archive that matters, but rather the form it takes, the sensibilities it animates, and the imaginations it promotes.¹ As I hope to show here, archiving the Left in the age of uprisings and revolutions animates sensibilities of hope and critique. Perhaps these archives can even play a role in the creation of a new episteme regarding not just the Left, but the history of the modern Middle East; a history where the Left is seen as a key actor rather than a marginal mid-century footnote.

Reviving the Left

The highest ranked journal in Middle East studies recently published a special section called Towards New Histories of the Left, an Arab Left Reader of key texts from the Arab Left tradition is under publication, based on a workshop at Cambridge University held in 2018, and a new book series focuses on radical and progressive histories of the Middle East.² Overshadowed until a few years ago by nationalism, Islamism, terrorism, and modernity, the Left in the region (often referred to as the Arab Left, to the detriment of other language groups and transnational forms of leftism) is no longer seen as an outdated research topic that met its demise along with the Arab radical revolutionary project of the 1970s. Propelled by the uprisings, revolutions, and wars since 2010, the Left has come back into fashion, both as an object of study and as a (Marxian) paradigm. Since the 1970s,

1 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 22.

2 *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 51.2 (2019); Towards an Arab Left Reader: Key Documents in Translation and Context, Conference, Cambridge, UK, 12-14 April 2018, <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/27446>; Radical Histories of the Middle East book series, London: Oneworld, 2019, <https://oneworld-publications.com/radical-histories.html>.

much of the discipline has adopted Saidian and post-colonial readings of politics and society that drew on, *inter alia*, ideological registers from political thought of the Arab Left tradition. However, a comprehensive new historiography of the Left has only emerged recently.

Now, historians explore untapped archives of states, parties, newspapers, and other sources that shed new light on left-wing groups. Intellectual historians reexamine Arab Marxist thinkers. Anthropologists interview surviving members of leftist movements from the 1960s and 1970s, and media scholars peruse the journals, posters, and films of radical movements of that time. This academic trend overlaps with a new interest in Arab Left history in Arab societies. Across the Middle East and North Africa, revolutionary groups, as part of their online practices, investigate their own intellectual and political predecessors.³ Veterans of the struggle publish memoirs, help set up new journals, and engage in debates about their experiences.

This process of retrieving, organizing, and reworking the past intersects with a general 'archival fever' in the region and in the world, which manifests itself in the arts, in academia, and across society. People attempt to create an archive because there is no archive. There is only a hybrid, fluid network of collections, interpretations, and representations of what the Left used to be, and perhaps what it ought to be today. In that sense, the people involved are also trying to organize political sentiments of loss, nostalgia, and anticipation related to re-readings of the past. Archive-making is both an archeology of knowledge and generative of political positions and hopes.

Archival Activists

As Leila Dakhliia points out, archive fever in the Arab Middle East today takes two forms.⁴ On the one hand, people seek to excavate and preserve existing archives, be they state archives, private collections, or the archives of institutions such as political parties and newspapers. The retrieval and protection of state archives is often part of a power struggle with authoritarian state apparatuses and therefore, as was the case in Egypt from 2011 to 2013, essentially a revolutionary act. On the other hand, archival activists 'make' archives online through collections of mostly visual material. Much of this work, as the articles in this volume show, aims to preserve and indeed shape collective memory of the popular uprisings since 2010 (see the essays by Atassi and mosireen_soursar). Other archives double as testimonial evidence that is meant to further the quest for legal justice, as in Syria (see the essays by De Angelis and Della Ratta). Most of these web-based archives are hybrid and not owned or regulated by state agencies or other large institutions. Abiding by the laws of the internet, they are multi-authored, multi-sited networked practices of knowledge creation and sharing. They come into being through the dedicated labor of archival activists, many of whom double as political activists, historians, or artists.

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- 3 Miriyam Aouragh, 'L-Makhzan al-'Akbari: Resistance, Remembrance and Remediation in Morocco', *Middle East Critique* 26.3 (2018): 241-263.
 - 4 Leyla Dakhliia, 'Archiving the State in an Age of (Counter)Revolutions', in Sune Haugbolle and Mark Levine (eds) *Altered States: Remaking of the Political in the Arab World Since 2010* (forthcoming).

Archival activists invest different emotions and politics in their quest to retrieve documents, images, oral histories, and other bits of history. For some, locating the archives of the Arab Left – whichever historical and geographical focus one might have – has become an important part of clarifying a revolutionary project today. For other scholars, artists, and activists, collecting Arab Left histories provides clues to the demise and failure of the Left in the region. They may themselves be aging activists who wish to throw light on and sometimes shape the public narrative of their own partisan past.

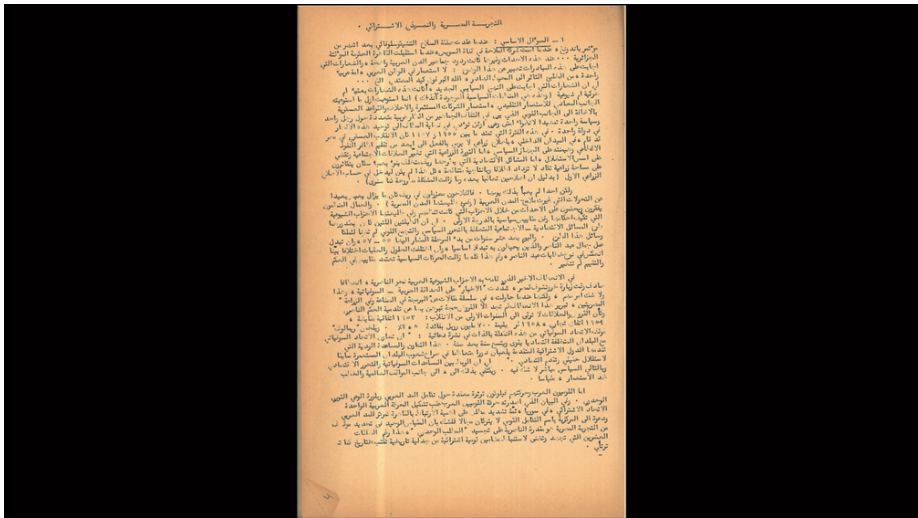


Fig. 1. Pages from Socialist Lebanon, archived on <https://adrajriyah.home.blog/>.

For example, former member of the small 1960s Marxist group Lubnan al-Ishtiraki (Socialist Lebanon), Ahmad Beydoun, recently made the back catalogue of the movement's journal from the 1960s available on his blog.⁵ Until now, scholars had to search for the journal in special collections. With increased interest in the group and Arab radicalism during the long 1960s generally, Beydoun is assisting a public rediscovery of the period's sophisticated theoretical texts.

Such individual efforts are just a small part of wider public debates and cultural production that carry an ongoing conversation (often more of a clash of positions) about the past that pertains to the Left. TV stations, such as the Beirut-based al-Mayadeen, profess to represent a living progressive position by celebrating icons of Arab resistance such as the female fighters Leyla Khaled and Jamila Bouhired, and by presenting their coverage of regional and global affairs through an anti-imperialist lens. Being partly funded by the Syrian regime, it is no surprise that al-Mayadeen largely draws on the heritage of the Syrian Baath Party. This register of leftist history contributes to a strident and highly ideological archiving practice that seeks to use the past to underpin the discourse of resistance and *mumana'a* (rejectionism).⁶

5 Ahmad Beydoun, Drawers of the Wind blog, <https://adrajriyah.home.blog/>.

6 Christine Crone, Producing the New Regressive Left, PhD dissertation, Copenhagen, Copenhagen

Other TV stations produce less openly ideological programming about the radical past.⁷ Newspapers and websites write feature articles about wars, coups, and revolutions of the 20th century, and publish portraits of iconic cultural and political figures of the radical tradition, all of which feeds into an ongoing reevaluation. This cumulative material is part of the hybrid archive of the Left. Although ephemeral, public debate and cultural production are a crucial source for historians and an important element in the act of archiving the past; not least because archiving, like memory, is a hermeneutical practice. Similar to the colonial masters and the modernizing classes in 19th century Egypt that Timothy Mitchell famously examined in his book *Colonizing Egypt*, archival activists also ‘put the world on display’, ordering a semantic and/or visual rhetoric that serves to shape both the collectors and their audiences.⁸

Missing Pieces to a Puzzling Puzzle

Everyone, it seems, is looking for missing pieces to a puzzle, in the sense of both searching for a larger picture and trying to address a puzzling question, namely: How can it be that a region which fifty years ago was dominated by progressive politics became the stronghold of fundamentalist and counter-revolutionary forces?

Some clues to the answer lie in the transformation of the Left itself. Although it might be tempting for some to focus on the democratic, humanistic Left, the object of inquiry is not just a flawless victim of suppression and regression. The Left, as anywhere in the world, spans widely and paradoxes abound. Self-proclaimed ‘Arab socialist’ groups such as the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties became vestiges of authoritarian states; some Arab Communist parties remained devoted to Stalinism; ostensibly radical leaders sexually abused their female colleagues; and socialists in name turned into promoters of neoliberal economies. For their part, Arab communists have inspired (and occasionally shape-shifted into) Islamist revolutionaries from the late 1960s onwards. A sizeable group of Palestinian Maoists even turned into jihadists.⁹ Many other leftists ended up in exile, dead, or in prison, along with other opposition forces. The new historiography of the Left is uncovering many new details about the contestations over ideology and political alliances between different parts of the Left, while social historians are giving us a better idea of the place and importance of the Left in Arab societies throughout the 20th century and beyond.¹⁰

In doing so, scholars rely on a plethora of sources and I have no ambition of cataloguing them all here. Rather, I want to offer some reflections on the different forms of archives and archival practices. First, there are what I call ‘hard archives’. Some research institutions, like the library of the Centre for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, hold large, well-organized collections archived

University, 2017, https://curis.ku.dk/ws/files/174493766/Ph.d._afhandling_2017_Crone1.PDF.

7 See for example MBC’s documentary series about the 1950s and 1960s, *Ayam al-Sayyid Arabi* (The days of ‘Mister Arab’), DVD, 2009,.

8 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

9 Manfred Sing, ‘Brothers in Arms: How Palestinian Maoists Turned Jihadists’, *Die Welt des Islams* 51.1 (2011): 1-44.

10 Sune Haugbolle and Manfred Sing, ‘New Approaches to Arab Left Histories’, *Arab Studies Journal* 14.1 (2016): 90-97.

for their own purpose of understanding and furthering a political goal, in this case the cause of Arab unification.¹¹ Political party offices, such as the national branches of communist parties, have libraries and archives that they may open up to researchers looking for reports, speeches, and perhaps more classified documents. The archives of some security services have been opened to the public, as for example the papers of Emir Farid Chehab, head of Lebanon's intelligence agency (the *Sûreté Générale*) from 1948-1958, whose reports on various leftist groups in the 1950s and 1960s are now available courtesy of the Wilson Centre's Public Policy Program.¹²

Such institutional archiving helps historians immensely. Still, most sources must be retrieved from private collections, obscure library stacks, or backroom bookshops. Many state archives remain closed to researchers. Sometimes missing pieces of information have to be put together from personal narratives of surviving members of the Left. Even when books, journals, and letters are catalogued, it can be difficult work to find them. Locating libraries and formal archives takes time and resources.

Sometimes scholars and artists share their works-in-progress and file them on research blogs and project webpages.¹³ Sometimes they collaborate on collecting oral histories, political documents, and art. Two outstanding projects on the Palestinian revolutionary movement show how different formats can be used to display such collections. Given the crucial importance of Palestine for the Arab Left, these projects intersect with various genres of Arab Left historiography and archival practices. The first, *Past Disquiet – Narratives and Ghosts* from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978, is an exhibition by curator Rasha Salti and researcher Kristine Khouri. The exhibition, which opened at the MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in February 2015 and has since travelled to galleries around the world, uncovers networks of individuals and practices behind a 1978 exhibition that the PLO organized in Beirut. Illustrating the multiple themes and interrogations that guided Salti and Khouri's investigation, *Past Disquiet* stitches forgotten histories together and maps lost cartographies from recorded testimonies and private archives of the international artists who participated in the event. By retracing the complicated affiliations and solidarities that linked militant artists across the world, the project offers historians a way into the imaginaries and the networks of the international Left at the time, and the means by which they made Palestine a central nodal point. In an interview, Salti and Khouri stress that we need to 'resurrect' these radical histories today if we want to understand internationalism in our recent past, and particularly the role that radical spaces like Beirut and radical movements like the PLO played in tying it all together.

The '70s are not the distant past, yet the universe of the international, anti-imperialist leftist solidarity in which the "International Art Exhibition for Palestine" was embedded seems to have lapsed from memory – it's not yet part of the art-historical canon. The

11 Centre for Arab Unity Studies, <https://caus.org.lb/ar/home/>.

12 Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/209/emir-farid-chehab-collection>.

13 See for example, <https://ruc.dk/en/entangled>.

struggle for Palestine galvanized many artists, as did opposition to the US war in Vietnam, the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the United States-backed dictatorships in Chile and Central America. The 1978 Beirut exhibition became a prism through which to look at these movements and the artistic practices affiliated with them. In one of the versions of the exhibition's press release, we had actually used the verb *suturer*, because at some level, we were mending tears, ruptures: This idea remains essential to our motivations.¹⁴



Fig. 2: Past Disquiet, exhibited in A Space, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, October 2016.

Resurrecting memories that are dead but should be living, mending a broken and scattered past, and re-collecting it in the age of new revolutions are the central ambitions of much artistic work focused on Arab radicalism. Salti and Khouri's output – a temporary exhibition and a catalogue – does not make use of the internet, thereby obviously limiting its archiving functions. The Palestinian Revolution, in contrast, makes full use of the internet. What was first a large international research project led by historians Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq Takriti has resulted in a bilingual Arabic/English online learning resource that explores Palestinian revolutionary practice and thought from the Nakba of 1948, to the siege of Beirut in 1982.¹⁵ Nabulsi and Takriti (who participated in the conference that led to this book) distinctly do not view their project as an archive, but rather as a pedagogical tool for teaching courses on Palestine, supplemented by an upcoming book that will go into further detail about the material available on the webpage depository. Indeed, the page does not function as a standard archive with indexing of the collection, nor does it contain the full amount of material collected in the project. However, if we view the Arab online archive as a hybrid networked venture, as they suggest we should, The Palestinian Revolution arguably participates in archiving the Arab Left, not least by storing rare texts and narratives (video-recorded and made available on YouTube).

14 'Interview with Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri', *Artforum International* 53.9 (May 2015): 330.

15 The Palestinian Revolution, <http://learnpalestine.politics.ox.ac.uk/>.

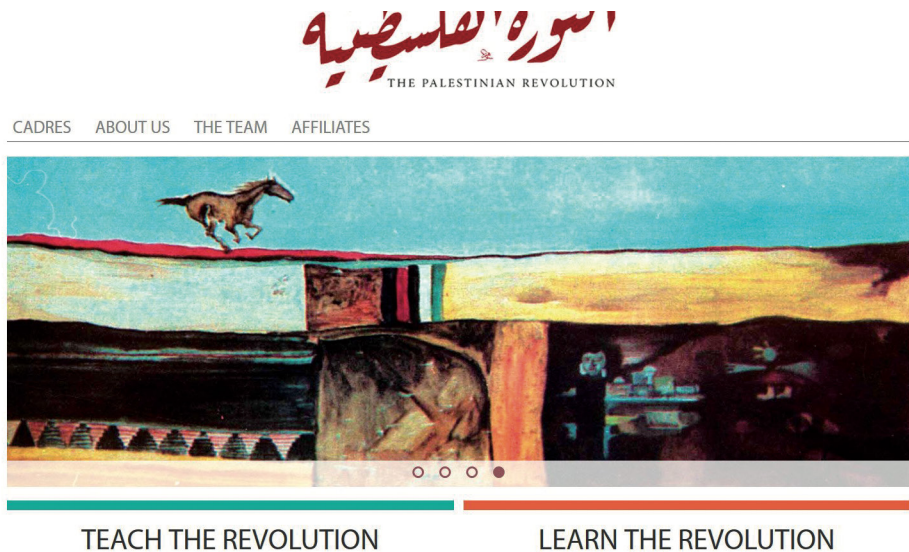


Fig. 3: The Palestinian Revolution webpage.

Hard Archives vs. Facebook Memories

Retrieving, collecting, and piecing together archives of the Arab Left is methodologically challenging. Some archives are hard – stored in libraries, formal collections, and institutional repositories. Meanwhile, as I have shown, traditional mass media, the art world, and the internet are bursting with individual and group efforts to come to terms with the region's radical past. The two archives – the hard and the hybrid – each has its strengths and weaknesses when it comes to furthering critical historical work. Historians today have to wrestle with both.

One instructive example of the possibilities and difficulties of online archiving is the Facebook group Collective Memory: Documents of the Left in the Arab World.¹⁶ Palestinian historian Musa Budeiri, author of a groundbreaking book about the early Palestinian communist movement, created the group in June 2017.

As a longtime resident of Jerusalem, he gathered a huge collection of documents mainly from the Arab communist tradition, without finding the time or space to work with most of the material. It was only after moving to London that he gained the necessary distance to organize it. Looking for ways to share his material and connect with others interested in the topic, he set up a Facebook page and began uploading documents bit by bit. After a few years, he became

16 See, <https://www.facebook.com/arabcommunistparties/>.

frustrated with the limited results of his efforts. In order to secure a more permanent place for his collection, he has therefore donated it to the Institute for International Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, where he plans to move the material soon.¹⁷



Fig. 4: Collective Memory: Documents of the Left in the Arab World.

Incidentally, I have been involved in efforts with other historians and veteran scholar-activists of the Left to retrieve collections of rare journals, letters, and papers from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria and move them to the IISH. These include collections of the groups Hizb al-'amal al-shuyu'i fi Suria and al-Tajammu al shuyu'i al-thawri. As the holders of one of the world's largest collections of documents from non-Western social movements, the IISH has the institutional resources to gather and protect papers that might otherwise disappear. Collecting them in one archive makes the work of historians immensely more manageable and creates a focus for a sustained new historiographical effort. Ideally, these collections would be digitized and freely available online. However, in an institutional setting, copyright issues matter more than in the 'hybrid archive', where people simply post their material. Digitizing and archiving online require substantial resources. As a result, there is still no guarantee that the documents from the IISH collection will be available to the public on a platform that allows non-academic audiences to engage with them.

17 Personal communication with Musa Budeiri, 2 September 2019.

Budeiri and the IISH represent two different ways of approaching the archival question. Budeiri's is individual, but generative of new publics and in that sense open and hybrid, connecting with other archivists, historians, and anyone interested in the topic. The IISH is institutional and organized, but also, by default, more closed and less generative and connective. The question is: How to make hard and hybrid archives connect? I believe this is necessary, because we need both. In addition, small efforts online can sometimes generate more exciting work than well-organized collections hiding in book stacks. In fact, Budeiri's disappointment with the results of his page contradicts my own sentiments and those of many of my colleagues who use the page. We appreciate the open source availability and the discussions that the Facebook platform facilitates. The page is a treasure trove of rare images, articles, speeches, and letters that we could not find elsewhere. Postings often lack the circumstantial evidence that is important when dealing with source material, such as the larger text corpus that a document is part of, when and how it was collected, and sometimes the precise authors. At the same time, the unexpected findings often introduce new perspectives to our work. From our point of view, although Budeiri may have wanted his archive to generate even more interest, it has been a roaring success because it is online on a platform that allows for engagement. Although some of us work to create a hard archive with librarians who protect the documents and index them properly, we depend on the hybrid archive to make research dynamic and connective.

Five Trajectories in Arab Left Historiography

Working with an emerging hybrid archive pushes us to look at the individual histories of revolutionaries, their movements, parties, and spaces. On a broader level, it raises questions about the bigger picture, the modern history of the region, and the role of the Left. One way to disentangle obfuscating narratives from each other is through a clearer periodization, and by default through a clearer ordering of historical sources. In the final part of this essay, I will suggest a way to periodize the history of the Arab Left that pays attention to current archiving practices. Most books and articles have traditionally privileged national ordering, such as the Lebanese Left, the Palestinian Left, the Saudi Left, etc. In contrast, online archive projects tend to privilege transnational aspects of the Left, perhaps as a reflection of the transnational concerns at stake for archival activists as well as the groups they tend to focus on archiving.

In the emerging scholarship resulting from engagement with Arab Left histories, five distinct historiographical projects with contiguous archives and sources intersect and overlap. First, historians of the Nahda reform period trace the beginnings of the Left back to the debate between Islamic reformers and so-called materialists in the late 19th century. Historical materialism as a way to rethink the relation between man, nature, and society laid the groundwork for socialist visions of development and independence. There is no central archive for the Left during this period and historians have to retrieve it from library collections in the region, in Europe, and in the US.¹⁸

18 See Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

The second historiography is that of Arab communism. After the early Arab Marxists became enthralled with the Bolshevik Revolution, they established communist parties in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine. The Marxist-Leninist dogma that Joseph Stalin's Comintern imposed left a deep imprint on Arab communist parties. It effectively meant that Arab communists struggled to develop the Marxist system of thought into a flexible methodology, which might have helped them understand the realities and differing conditions of their own countries. At the same time, communist parties became formidable organizations, particularly in Iraq. Many of the central archives, not least those in Russian, have yet to be analyzed properly. Part of the archival project here must be one of translation, as very few historians of the Middle East read and write in English, Arabic, and Russian.

Stalinism had a long-lasting impact particularly on the communist parties of the Levant under the lifelong leadership of Khalid Bakdash. In reaction to Bakdash's position, a group of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian intellectuals inspired by the British New Left of the late 1950s wrote critically against the party, against Moscow, and against the Arab socialism of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Baath Party. This 'New Left' of critics and subsequent revolutionary movements is the third distinctive subject area in the historiography of the Left. It had important iterations in the Maghreb and connected with student and solidarity groups in Europe. This intellectual vanguard coalesced with members of the Arab Nationalist Movement to form the revolutionary 'fronts' of the late 1960s and 1970s such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Communist Party-Political Bureau in Syria, and the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon. Many writers' political affiliations with these groups and their political and military struggles in the Lebanese Civil War, in the Palestinian resistance, and in the confrontation with the Syrian regime of Hafiz al-Asad, have strongly influenced the post-1967 Arab Marxist tradition, not least in the Levant. Their embattled history and the prominence of several of its protagonists in Arab cultural life has meant that this section of the Left has received a lot of attention. Some of their intellectual production is being archived, as mentioned earlier, but many sources are still untapped.

Republican Arab socialism, originating in the Baathist and Nasserist regimes of the 1960s and continuing in Syria and Algeria until today, constitutes the fourth historiographical cluster. It is perhaps the trickiest to deal with because these regimes defy any facile identification of the Left with 'the good guys' of Arab history. As previously mentioned, this is a wrong assumption that we should reconsider. One way to do that is to read the archives of the Iraqi regime's substantial engagement with the international non-aligned movement.¹⁹ Or one could point to the entanglement between the Marxist branch of the Syrian Baath Party on one hand, and various Marxist-Leninist groups on the other (some of which lay the seeds of the PFLP and the DFLP). These connections appear in state archives that scholars publish online, but also in historical work on the 'Arab New Left'.

19 Michael Degerald, *The Legibility of Power and Culture in Ba'thist Iraq from 1968-1991*, PhD Dissertation, Seattle, University of Washington, 2018. The author is working on publicizing his collection of Iraqi state files regarding the non-aligned movement.

Since the end of the Cold War, the global crisis of Marxism effectively dovetailed with the decline of socialist and communist movements in the region. This led to introspection among its former members. Consequently, much recent research on the left examines reflexivity and memory work since the 1990s, not least the work of Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers, many of whom had been part of the New Left decades before. While some maintained a dogmatic Marxism (mostly represented by currents around the official Arab communist parties), many drifted toward liberalism. Post-Marxism also involves feminist critiques from within communist movements. Some post-Marxists dismiss the claim that Marxism is an infallible scientific theory, some have moved on to theoretical pluralism. They maintain class analysis, while others only apply select elements of the Marxian heritage. In an Arab context, moving on to theoretical pluralism after the end of the Cold War meant critiquing the lack of internal democracy in Arab communism and its accommodation with liberalism. This accommodation also carried the practical implication that, by the mid-1990s, a significant proportion of Arab Marxists had left the party and became free-floating intellectuals. Post-Marxism and memory work constitutes the fifth historiographical trend. The main sources here are autobiographies and cultural journals such as *al-Adab* and *al-Jadid*. These journals, along with many others, have been archived on the webpage archive.alsharekh.org, along with many other radical, progressive journals.²⁰

Conclusion

What comes after post-Marxism is still an open question. It includes the time of the alter-globalization movement in the early 2000s and then the Arab Uprisings. It is our time and not quite history. Yet, as all the articles in this book show, the ability to archive online has created a reflexivity that supersedes all previous generations. We seem to make present history at a record pace. This generation of leftists, many of whom were active in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and protested against ruling parties in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and now Sudan and Algeria, came of age with a different outlook than their jaded parents and grandparents. They are condemned to follow what Stuart Hall called a 'Marxism without guarantees', a less teleological and self-assured leftism that characterizes late modernity.²¹ They are also hyper-connected with contemporary forms and grammars of mobilization through the internet. As part of the globalized, networked generation, they know how to tap into the mobilizing potentials of the internet. This includes the ability to archive their own political work and that of previous generations.

The history of the Left shows this young generation not just what went wrong in the past, but equally what we could call 'past futures', the utopias that failed and the avenues not taken. Some were borne out in revolutionary projects, some were brutally defeated, some went awfully wrong, and others failed to materialize. By submitting them to a collective, hybrid archive, activists have opened up a conversation about the Left that will continue to stimulate reflection and, one hopes, action.

20 See, 'Archives of the Levant', <http://archive.alsharekh.org/AllMagazines.aspx>.

21 Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.2 (1986): 28-44.

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02. TIME CAPSULES OF CATASTROPHIC TIMES

MARK R. WESTMORELAND¹

I wish we could just forget things, and I wish we could simply not have archives. It's liberating in a way, living with YouTube, as ephemeral records, is liberating.²

— Akram Zaatari

Until we find ourselves in a utopian moment, the archive is going to continually be in play, much like it is today, with varying degrees of urgency or with various targets. To continue to build and assemble out of these moments of recent history is something that, regardless of whether the revolution is completely successful or a complete failure, remains a political and humanistic imperative, something we must do to continue to build and go forward.³

— Sherief Gaber

Vis-à-vis

Two figures stand facing the calamities of history. One figure's face is full of wonder and horror, unable to look away from the spectacle of death while backpedaling away from the waste piling up in the wake of progress and power. The other's turns away from our gaze to direct us at his own vision of recurrent catastrophe. The first makes copious notes that desperately document the ruins before they disappear under more rubble. The second quickly sketches the fleeting moments of critical clarity that appear in a flash and then vanish as if they never happened. In the desperation of the moment, the first cannot organize these memos, but anxiously hides them so they won't vanish in the storm of violence as time marches on. Despite the urgency of the situation, the second knows we've seen it all before and are no longer moved, nevertheless remaining steadfast to bear witness and remember the symbolic connections being severed. When trying to escape from the fascists, the first is compelled to take his life knowing already that the alternative would be unbearable. While continuing the resistance in exile, the second is assassinated on the street by a traitor. The first figure is inspired by Walter Benjamin and his writings on

1 This text was written as part of the 'Resistance-by-Recording' project based at the Department of Media Studies (IMS), Stockholm University. The research was made possible by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond Reference No. P14-0562:1.

2 Stuart Comer, 'Uneasy Subject "Interview with Akram Zaatari"', in *The Uneasy Subject*, Leon, Spain & Mexico City, Mexico: Musac & Muac, 2011, p. 129.

3 Quoted in Alisa Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018. See also https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/234/sherief_gaber.

The Angel of History.⁴ The second evokes Naji al-Ali and his cartoon character, Hanthala.⁵

Faced with a growing mountain of rubble and ruins, the archive is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's seminal figure – the Angel of History – cast in an epic performance facing an endless storm of destruction called the past. Inspired by Paul Klee's drawing, in which the Angel faces us wide-eyed and open-winged, we as the viewers of this drawing assume a position in reverse of the Angel's perspective. We do not see what the Angel witnesses, but instead register her surprised affect. In effect we are bearing witness to the traumatization of the Angel of History, who in turn is witnessing the catastrophic accumulation of human destruction. While the future void is unknown and unseen, we can be sure that it will soon be filled with the debris of what has come to pass. The ambitions of continual progress will inevitably succumb to the catastrophes of lost causes.

If we recast the Angel of History as Hanthala – the iconic cartoon creation of Naji al-Ali of a Palestinian boy facing an unending series of disasters – we, as the viewers of these comics, steadfastly look over his shoulder to witness what he sees. Unlike Benjamin's engagement with the Angel, Hanthala refuses to face us (the viewer of the image), apparently turning his back on the world in a reflexive gesture meant to critique how the world has turned its back on Palestine. Whereas we can only imagine the violent storm blowing in the face of the Angel of History and feel her frontal affect, Hanthala serves as a guide for onlookers to recognize the destruction of Palestine and the larger Arab world without ever giving us his face.

The Angel of History and Hanthala could in fact be the same figure. Both facing the mounting catastrophe of history, bearing witness to all the calamity unfolding, while the records of these disasters recede on the distant horizon to make room for the next shocking event. And yet, neither the Angel nor Hanthala can face the future, whether merely because the future is unknown and unseeable, or because the past overwhelmingly blinds any other perspective. These two figures of the angel and the boy become emblematic of different theories of witnessing and serve as a reminder of the impossibility of historical equivalence and universal modes of witnessing. Whereas the Klee drawing structures an impossibility of witnessing what the Angel witnesses, but nevertheless assumes the accessibility of traumatic testimony, the Hanthala figure reflexively invites (perhaps beseeches) the viewer to see what he sees while refusing to give us access to his own affective experience. By refusing the conventional testimonial frame of a talking head, which privileges the face as a window to human interiority, Hanthala's refusal challenges the viewer to rethink one's assumptions about the act of witnessing.

What do these contrasting parables tell us – fellow scholars, artists, and activists – about archives in the Arab world? As the billowing pile of past progress becomes the material

4 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', trans. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations: Essays by Walter Benjamin*, New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 253-67.

5 The name Hanthala is commonly transliterated as Handala, signaling the difficulty of appropriately registering the Arabic letter *zā* in Latin script. For more on Hanthala, see Naji Salim al-Ali, *A Child in Palestine: Cartoons of Naji Al-Ali*, London: Verso, 2009.

remains of the future, how might contemporary archival practices lead us to see both the destruction rising up before them and their shocked expressions at what unfolds? Like al-Ali, we must recognize the importance of witnessing, of unflinchingly being committed to collecting evidence and making records of what's happening. Like Benjamin, we must document and organize these fragments into a unified whole to create a synergetic potential for a future generation. As witnesses to these calamities, we must commit ourselves to be the custodians of the past, carrying these precious remains into a new era without already having clarity of purpose. While the availability and accessibility of these material remains are prerequisites for their later activation, how can an archive be assembled with the potential to be activated again at another time? For image activists in the Arab world where the norms of video authorship and political action continually shift, the burden of archiving recent revolutionary events nevertheless poses many concerns about usage rights, authorship, accountability, and legality, not to mention history and representation.

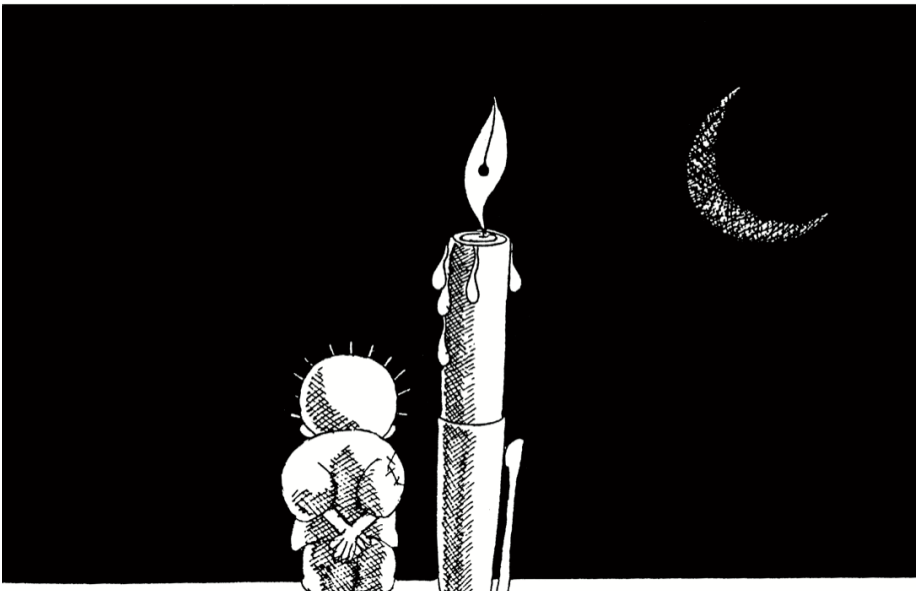


Fig. 1: Cartoon of Hanthala published with permission of Naji Al-Ali family; original publication 13 October 1982, Beirut, As Safir newspaper.

Eight-Hundred-and-Fifty-Eight Hours

The uprisings and downfalls across the Arab world since the end of 2010 have been fertile territory for citizen-journalists and activist-filmmakers to document both the assembling of mass protests and the atrocities of state violence. In Egypt, images played an unprecedented role during the initial uprising – from the frenetic scenes of spectacular violence to the online circulation of vernacular images to the rescreening of protest videos on the streets to the posters that provided English captions for foreign viewers of the events. Most of the people drawn to these street protests with their cameras had been neither politically active nor skilled in news-making beforehand. And yet, the videos they shot and shared provided the main

source of information for people across the globe before the major news outlets arrived on the scene. The dominant narrative in global media quickly became about Revolution 2.0 and the affordances of new mobile, interconnected digital technology to enable an unaffiliated network of filers to upload their videos for both those only a few blocks away and audiences watching thousands of miles from the scene.⁶ Although only a small number of these videos went truly viral, the collective recording of these events, producing thousands of videos from a multiplicity of perspectives, provided momentary glimpses of mass movements from the street.⁷

Although those videos circulating on social media and televised on satellite networks bore witness to the unprecedented events unfolding from a variety of vantage points, the shared exhilaration of these rebellious images circulating online often gave way to fleeting sensationalism. This mediated phenomenon mistakenly decontextualized these images from the spontaneous and improvised practices that created, collected, curated, and continued to care for them in the weeks, months, and years ahead. Despite being largely uncoordinated acts, the process of shooting video and uploading it online is an important context for thinking through the range of filmmaking practices needed to create and sustain an unaffiliated record of the revolution.⁸ As Alisa Lebow notes, 'it was crucial not only that there were cameras there to document it but that there was a place where that material would be stored, to be used to contest the government claims'.⁹ Disconnecting these practices from celebratory discourses about social media helps bring the mundane features of the archive into focus.

858: *An Archive of Resistance*, compiled by members of the Mosireen media collective, embodies many of the attributes of the uprisings that enacted new and inspiring modes of collective politics. The origins of the archive lie in the Media Tent during the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011.¹⁰ Among other forms of collective action mobilized in this liminal moment, the Media Tent became a site to channel the photos and videos being collectively produced in the square (and beyond). Here *the people* could pool their records of witnessing with the ambition of collecting visible evidence for future trials. This emergent archive also provided materials to international media producers absent from some of the most important events.

This initial archive of collective action served as the seed for the so-called Mosireen archive. Omar Hamilton recounts, 'The first mission was to collect and preserve of [sic] as much digital memory of the initial 18 Days as possible'.¹¹ But following the glorified 18 days that culminated in the ousting of entrenched President Hosni Mubarak, the regime continued to violently

6 Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

7 Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes: The Politics of Revolutionary Video in Egypt', *Visual Anthropology* 29, no. 3, 26 May 2016: 243-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2016.1154420>.

8 Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Documentary Film Making', in Mona Baker, Bolette B. Blaagaard, and Luis Pérez González (eds) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media*, New York: Routledge, in press.

9 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/226/mosireen>.

10 Nina Grønlykke Møllerup and Sherief Gaber, 'Making Media Public: On Revolutionary Street Screenings in Egypt', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 2903-2921; Lebow, *Filming Revolution*.

11 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Mosireen Video Timeline', *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/169>.

suppress dissent. Soon those who had connected in the Media Tent, like Hamilton, realized that if the continuing revolution was going to be documented it would have to be done by the people participating in it.¹² Many activists gained resolve in the turbulent months that followed with varying efforts to reoccupy the streets that ebbed and flowed with both celebratory and crushing force.¹³ On the scene during the army's horrifying massacre outside the Maspero state television headquarters, Mosireen's first edited film uploaded to YouTube 'The Maspero Massacre' crystallizes their imperative.¹⁴ Brought together around a shared belief in the basic tenants of the revolution – 'bread, freedom, and social justice' – and 'that media should always be confrontational toward power', around fifteen core members within a larger network of contributors and supporters constitute the media collective.¹⁵ Among a variety of citizen-journalist efforts and activist collectives, Mosireen (meaning 'determined ones', but also a play on the Arabic word for Egyptians, *ma riyyīn*) proved to be one of the more significant for their well-organized, multifaceted, and coordinated efforts. More importantly, the Mosireen media collective provided a key example of media activism committed to radically new political formations. Devoted to horizontal structures of non-hierarchical authorship and management, they refused outside funding or sponsorship, and found local support to offer training and equipment to anyone interested in contributing to the demand for camera-mediated activism. Their vision of social change remained resolutely revolutionary as they focused on documenting street protests, worker strikes, and mass sit-ins. From their crowdsourced material, the collective produced dozens of short videos covering different issues and events specifically from the perspective of the street, many of which featured in mainstream news. By January 2012, Mosireen briefly became the most viewed nonprofit YouTube channel in the world.¹⁶ That said, they emphatically placed their emphasis on addressing the local population – *the street* – holding impromptu public screenings in Tahrir Square and elsewhere.¹⁷ Out of the ephemeral cloud of social media and back down on the streets, another member of Mosireen, Philip Rizk, notes that they 'also disseminated [their] images through flash drives, CDs and Bluetooth connections in an attempt to use new methods to get our images into different spaces: living rooms, coffee shops, university dorms, or further street screenings'.¹⁸ The impromptu and spontaneous nature of these images, combined with their shared assembly and collective identity, added to the potentiality that anything was possible.

Online attention and public outreach led to an exponential growth in their donations and the initial collection from the Tahrir Media Tent quickly grew by several terabyte, spread over a series of hard drives. With only a small portion of the archive materials available in their

12 Khalid Abdalla, 'The Advent of Mosireen 25 February 2011', in Lebow Filming Revolution. https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/37/the_advent_of_mosireen_25_february_2011.

13 Abdalla, 'The Advent of Mosireen'.

14 The Mosireen Collective, 'The Maspero Massacre 9/10/11, 2011', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00t-0NEwc3E&feature=youtu.be>; Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: The Maspero Massacre: October 2011', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, <https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/170>.

15 Sherief Gaber, 'The Mosireen Collective', in Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/79/the_mosireen_collective.

16 Bel Trew, 'Egyptian Citizen Journalism "Mosireen" Tops YouTube', Bel Trew: Freelance Journalist (blog), 20 January 2012, <http://beltrew.com/2012/01/20/egyptian-citizen-journalism-mosireen-tops-youtube/>.

17 Mollerup and Gaber, 'Making Media Public'; Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes'.

18 Philip Rizk, interview by Shuruq Harb, 20 May 2013, http://www.artterritories.net/?page_id=2997.

online videos, the ambition to make the archive fully accessible online emerged early in its formation. But the magnitude of the collection, combined with a host of complicated ethical issues, saddled Mosireen with a monumental burden. Inexperienced with managing large data collections and facing a continual influx of new material, Mosireen struggled to implement the best practices in data management after the fact. Initially, a simple date and author folder structure enabled some level of organization, but these efforts had to be completed piecemeal as they were constantly responding to an unstable and dynamic political context. When editing their own videos or trying to provide content upon request, they had to rely on the distributed memory of the collective to identify the correct hard drive and file. Furthermore, they were not simply depositing material into an archive, but relying upon it ‘as a tool in the struggle’ to understand the events within a broader context of rapidly shifting political conditions.¹⁹ While committed to tagging and indexing the materials, they recognized the messiness as integral to the conditions of this archive and sought ways to ‘preserve the disorderliness’.²⁰

In a similar vein, Mosireen did not want the archive to serve simplistic purposes. One of the affordances of having such a massive collection was the ability to imagine different kinds of engagements. If queried in a generative manner – ‘How to get people in the rabbit hole?’ – the archive could help rethink the problems of the present. Sherief Gabr, who served as one of the main custodians of the archive, imagined a way of beginning with specificity, rather than grandiose ideas. Start with the extremely granular then pull back to see what emerges. Pick concrete variables that can be traced through the archive irrespective of conventional organizational schemes. A particular site examined from different positions in ways that displace the typical subject. This analytical approach to the archive enacts a ‘cybernetic storyteller’ as a generator of narratives and arguments, new political situations and analytical agencies, without prefigured connections.²¹ This is not what YouTube offers. As articulated by artist Lara Baladi, who with Mosireen initiated the street screenings of protest footage known as Tahrir Cinema:

the problematic nature of relying on the internet itself as an archive, given the algorithmic logic that drives Google and other search engines, which organizes material in ways that prioritize the new and the sensational, making it difficult if not impossible to find artifacts from the past, even the recent past.²²

Ethical dilemmas presented similar conceptual challenges. Unlike a repository hidden in the stacks where documents collect dust, Mosireen’s ideal for the archive required open access. This demonstrated their activist commitment to deliver stories and images entrusted to them by the people of the street. Mosireen felt burdened by their collection of images and the magnitude of their responsibility to give the images back to the people, not specific individuals, but a more collective sense of those revolutionaries who took to the streets to fight

19 Sherief Gaber, “The Archive,” in Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/80/the_archive.

20 Sherief Gaber, “Organising the Archive,” in Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/81/organising_the_archive_.

21 Sherief Gaber, Beanos, Zamalek, interview by Mark R. Westmoreland, March 2015.

22 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive>.

for justice, many losing life or limb. Access also presents infrastructural challenges to address the demands of delivering thirty days of footage to the servers in an organized manner, not to mention designing an interface to facilitate jumping down the euphemistic rabbit holes. The pernicious and multifaceted issues with access remain at the core of this and other archives of the Arab uprisings.

One of the risks of giving the archival footage an online Creative Commons license means that it can be freely appropriated for counter-revolutionary purposes. Access by nefarious parties can expose people to persecution. In fact, the viability of the archive required hiding it from authorities, making duplicates to be stored in different locations, and restricting access 'on the basis of networks of trust that seem [...] to be frail and unreliable'.²³ As Alisa Lebow has argued in her *Filming Revolution* project, the various unofficial efforts to produce 'a "people's archive" of the revolution' present the same dilemma on an official level.²⁴ This is evident even in the effort to create an official archive of the revolution, headed by historian Khaled Fahmy. While imagined to be an archive for the people, it became clear that the information gathered therein would likely be used by the state against those who participated in the revolution.²⁵ 'To gain access to any official state archive in Egypt, to this day, requires that the researcher get permission from state security'.²⁶

This question on how to balance their commitment to free access with the protection of people's identities grew increasingly difficult. Now that years had passed and different regimes moved through power, the notion of consent presented another problematic issue to address. Nothing has remained static or stable. Someone's politics at the time of donating footage may have radically shifted. This is even more challenging when considering those imaged in the footage. For Mosireen, there is a recognition that these issues cannot be completely resolved. While the footage may reveal compromising evidence, it was commonly understood that everything was being recorded at the time. Furthermore, as Gaber relays to Lebow, 'the state in Egypt does not seem to need hard evidence in order to detain or imprison those it deems dangerous, and thus it might not make much sense to worry about providing them with such evidence'.²⁷ Since asking for permission can be taken too far, Mosireen places the burden on others to contact them with requests for removal. That said, part of the arduous process of preparing the footage for public accessibility meant culling through it and withholding material that would clearly put people at risk.

Already exhausted and losing focus, the up swell of popular support for the army to remove the Muslim Brotherhood left those critical of both without a defensible position to protest. Though

23 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/234/sherief_gaber.

24 Lebow's meta-documentary is an archival project in itself that combines textual commentary with interviews about the creative process of filmmaking in Egypt during the Arab uprisings. Lebow uses a non-linear structural framework that makes it possible to trace different constellations of relations and to move through themes and topics in an organic manner or by following prescribed curated conversations.

25 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive>.

26 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/226/mosireen>.

27 Lebow, *Filming Revolution*, <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive>.

many of the Mosireen members may not have known it at the time, inertia had already sealed their fate.²⁸ After the Rabaa massacre in August 2013, where hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were murdered on live television, Omar Hamilton recounts:

We had no response. We were not there, we had not risked our lives to film it. We had fallen out of the equation of power in the stand-off between the Army and the Brotherhood. We were powerless and yet we felt complicit. We were racked by a confusion and guilt and impotence. We sat stunned in our office day after day, smoking, silenced.²⁹

While committed to radically new political formations, the collective had to change tactics under the new Abdel Fattah el-Sisi regime. As the revolutionary period collapsed, Mosireen became even more burdened by the custodial responsibility of what had become ostensibly the largest video archive of the revolution, particularly for its now silenced perspective from the street protests.

Another and ultimately more abstract question that confronted the collective turned on defining the archive. Despite the common idiomatic reference to the 'Mosireen archive', its members did not want to impose their claim to it. If it is an archive of the revolution, then it belongs to the street.³⁰ Whether the street can access online platforms is another matter. But if the revolution is framed in nationalistic terms as the Egyptian Revolution, then it reproduces the framework of the nation-state, which goes against the widespread spirit of revolution emboldened across the Arab world and part of the global phenomenon of public protests. The hopes and dreams of these borderless revolutions and unifying uprisings in most instances became crushed.

In the subsequent years, Mosireen struggled to maintain momentum. All their strategies up until then lost traction. Energy in the collective dissipated. Reflection mixed with pessimism, the exhilaration of witnessing something truly emancipatory with real potential for change confronted sentimental nostalgia and they began asking themselves if 'what happened meant anything at all'?³¹ And yet, researchers and journalists continue to laud Mosireen for its achievements as a success story, while the group tried to reconcile its 'post mortem' state vis-à-vis a failed revolution. Following the publication of its final video in February 2015,³² Omar Hamilton laments its weaknesses, 'This video feels, to me, like little more than a symptom of a moment of desperation as we became lost in the endless swamp of the judiciary's counter-revolution'.³³ Filming on the streets was no longer viable and releasing new videos

28 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Coup or a Continuation of the Revolution?', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, <https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/173>.

29 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: Prayer of Fear', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, <https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/174>.

30 Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes'.

31 Sherief Gaber, Mosireen and the Battle for Political Memory (1/4), AUC New Cairo, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRo0cgaHoR8>.

32 The Mosireen Collective, قضية الشوري: سنة وشهرين من العبت A Brief History of the Shura Council Trial so Far, Cairo, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UzXqfeA6IQ&feature=youtu.be>.

33 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Brief History of the Shoura Council So Far',

in social media became senseless. The burden of delivering the archive to the people of the street in many ways epitomized the larger sense of failure. Procrastination and neglect became understandable responses to tedious tasks of organizing and viewing thousands of videos of people and events that no longer remained, not to mention having to relive horrific scenes of violence. But these circumstances did not absolve Mosireen from their promise to make the archive accessible based on a shared expectation that the archive with all its parts is not merely a repository, but an 'arsenal' that must be activated.³⁴ In those hopeless years, the fate of their archive, now 12TB in size with over thirty days of footage, provided a faint beacon of purpose. Hamilton ends his depressing summary of their last YouTube video with optimism for the potential of the archive, 'soon the full archive, the raw, unedited archive will be online and open for anyone, for everyone, to step in and make the next [film]'.³⁵

The story of the Mosireen archive may ultimately be a testament to the perseverance of noble ideals and the hope for political reactivation. While the idea of publishing the Mosireen archive languished, progressing slowly in fits and spurts for another five years, becoming an endurance test for a small set of members who could muster the dedication needed, a half dozen or so members organized archiving retreats in 2016 and 2017 to oblige themselves to sit down and work through the materials. With technical support provided by members of the Pad.ma open source video archive, they designed front and backend elements of an archival platform to actualize their long-awaited goals.

After struggling seven years to make the archive accessible, the collective launched 858: *An Archive of Resistance* online featuring 858 hours of footage completely indexed and tagged with an interface that encourages crowdsourced annotation (<https://858.ma>). The platform encourages multivariate journeys through 'thousands of histories of revolt told from hundreds of perspectives'.³⁶ The platform also allows further submissions, indeed encourages it. The 858 aspires 'to make public all the footage shot and collected since 2011'.³⁷ Now that the archive has finally been released online, how does its absence in the streets reconcile the critiques of Revolution 2.0 over-emphasizing technology at the expense of on-the-ground work? The fate of this archive remains uncertain. It is unlikely that these documents will be used to incriminate leaders guilty of human rights abuses, nor will it compel protesters to return to the streets, but they may serve as an important resource for future revolutionaries. In more modest prose, 858 flags its inevitable limitations:

858 is, of course, just one archive of the revolution. It is not, and can never be, the archive. It is one collection of memories, one set of tools we can all use to fight the narratives of the counter-revolution, to pry loose the state's grip on history, to keep building new histories for the future.³⁸

Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, <https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/175>.

34 Gaber, Beanos, Zamalek, Interview by Mark R. Westmoreland, March 2015.

35 Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Brief History of the Shoura Council So Far'.

36 '858: An Archive of Resistance', <https://858.ma/>.

37 '858: An Archive of Resistance', <https://858.ma/>.

38 '858: An Archive of Resistance', <https://858.ma/>.

The archive is now available, accessible to whomever would like to utilize it. And yet, it may still be too soon. The undertow of crushed hope has yet to dissipate. In the present moment, nobody may possess the ability to activate these images with revolutionary potential. If the images of the Egyptian revolution have become bankrupt, lifeless, or otherwise inaccessible, what hope can we anticipate for them in the future?

Archival Foundations

Elsewhere in the region, at an earlier time, others were also imagining an archive of images made by the people across the Arab world. The Arab Image Foundation was established in 1997 by a generation of artists, photographers, intellectuals, and otherwise members of a Lebanese post-war creative class. Establishing the AIF enacted an urgent and critical response to a series of issues facing the image cultures of Lebanon, if not the entire region. On the one hand, photographic archives of the Middle East were principally produced by outsiders to the region, taken back home, and now located in European and North American capitals. On the other hand, photographic collections within the region were at risk of destruction either from passive forms of neglect or more active threats under conditions of war and political instability. In the context of Lebanon, many of the earliest studios in Beirut lost their collections during bombings, fires, and looting (often only for the silver content of the negatives). For those displaced from their homes in war-torn areas within Lebanon and beyond, family collections were often abandoned, looted, or destroyed. Elsewhere, well-meaning institutions often disposed of their photographs after haphazard scanning processes intent to only salvage the content of the image. The results of this situation also meant a loss of photographic heritage and a lack of access to local visual cultures. Accordingly, one of the aims in creating this collection was to safeguard the photographic heritage of their region in the face of ongoing political violence and institutional neglect.

In the absence of a distinctly Arab photographic archive, the AIF provided a mandate for its members to collect thousands of historical photos and negatives from countries across the region. The members of AIF endeavored to create a collection that could enable them to write a different history or even multiple histories of photography in the Arab region. Recounting his reasons for co-founding AIF, Akram Zaatari says, 'I was eager to discover what was out there that had been inaccessible to me'.³⁹ Through a process of conducting research, collecting materials, and producing art projects, Zaatari was 'guided by the possibility of discovery'.⁴⁰ This generative approach resisted the idea of the archive as a preconstituted source, opting instead for a notion of actively assembling it as an outcome of various research projects. These projects became key sites for writing personal histories and addressing the way broad historical trends became 'translated into the micro, into people's day to day'.⁴¹

39 Mark Westmoreland and Akram Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari: Against Photography Conversation with Mark Westmoreland', *Aperture* 210 (Spring, 2013): 62-3.

40 Westmoreland and Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari'.

41 Eva Respini, Ana Janevski, and Akram Zaatari, 'Projects 100: Akram Zaatari', MoMA The Elaine Dannheisser Projects Series (blog), April 2013, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/projects/akram-zaatari/>.

In the context of an emergent critical art scene in Beirut, which has intensely problematized the representation of war and trauma in the region, the archive has served as a master symbol of evidentiary knowledge politics and the precarity of historically determined futures. As an infrastructural platform to build upon and an ideological edifice to push against, the AIF stands at the center of a key dilemma – the desire to preserve is easily corrupted into regimes of speculative value, while at the same time the physicality of the architecture remains vulnerable to the same fate as the nearby ruins of yesteryear. Discursively, the archive echoes the warnings of official history and traces of erasure, but creatively it has nourished artists and intellectuals seeking inspiration in the material forms of evidence. As such, Zaatari insists that the AIF is not a photographic archive, but rather an archive of research practices, which ‘has decontextualized a lot of the original images – taken them out of their social and political economy and moved them into perhaps more of an archival/market economy’.⁴² According to Zaatari, the problem with framing the AIF as a photographic archive is that these items have been displaced from their original context, but are nonetheless assumed to speak definitively about their origin as if undisturbed. This sort of direct access to history that many documentary forms assume typically relies on erasing the context of the artifact’s current existence in an archive. The appropriation of thousands of photographic records and documents of research to the foundation’s vaults also presents an ethical responsibility to care for the vast quantities of other people’s images. The burden of this obligation has only revealed itself in hindsight, from which Zaatari has recounted his own uncritical enactment of an archival impulse.

Burdened by an unending custodial responsibility to these complicated objects, Zaatari has rhetorically offered a radical reversal to the archival impulse by suggesting that the AIF return the photographs to whence they came. We should not interpret this as a naive nostalgia as if things once displaced can ever return to their original status. On the one hand, his intent emphasizes a political act of repatriation, in which ‘we would be most likely able to have new encounters with new people, get in touch with new ideas, new questions regarding the function of photography in people’s lives now’.⁴³ On the other hand, this signals Zaatari’s anxiety that the archive will eventually fail as a source for critical intervention, thus anticipating its potential for symbolic exhaustion. In the parlance of Jalal Toufiq, the traditions inscribed in these photographs may disintegrate in one’s hands, falling into the abyss of radical closure in which all threads of connection to their origin are lost. As such, this transfer may serve as a rescue mission to prevent the archive from becoming a dead-end. Zaatari thus proposes a radically different idea of preservation – one that is less concerned with an image’s material support than its symbolic potential.

While only rhetorical, we can see the same logic at work in another one of Zaatari’s artistic gestures. Indeed, Zaatari’s oeuvre has shown a synergy between archival collection practices and archaeological excavation practices. Both involve a process of extraction. In a parallel inversion, returning the photographs is coupled with the gesture of burying them in a

42 Anthony Downey and Akram Zaatari, ‘Photography as Apparatus: Akram Zaatari in Conversation With’, Ibraaz 006, 28 January 2014, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/113/>.

43 Respini, Janevski, and Zaatari, ‘Projects 100: Akram Zaatari’.

time capsule. Time capsules represent the principle of the archive to save something for posterity, to bury a treasure of knowledge, something taken from the present that is perhaps unremarkable in its ordinariness or overburdened by its potentiality, with the anticipation that one day in the future it will offer a surprise to those that opened it. Zaatari's contribution at documenta 13, entitled 'Time Capsule', performed the burial of a set of images for the future. If someone were to unearth this time capsule in the future, they would only find tiles painted in various shades of blue dedicated to a photographer losing his sight. He imagines this performance as a script for radical preservation, which 'recognize[s] the necessity of timely withdrawal [...] of documents and artifacts in times of risk'.⁴⁴

In catastrophic conditions, in which time does not unfold in a linear progression, what does the posterity of an archive mean for future generations? Zaatari's gesture suggests not only that future generations may have a use for the archive, but also that we in the present are not ready to engage these images. The mandate to create an archive for posterity implies that it is being saved for a time when it is needed. Central here is the idea that we are not making this for ourselves in our time, but are hopeful that conditions (whether in our making or otherwise) will enable those who follow to harvest this material. Put another way, perhaps these images are not for us in this moment at all. While such photographs and footage have had an impact, in their contemporaneity their effects are ephemeral and fleeting, if not also unpredictable. The images from Egypt may definitively reveal responsibility for war crimes and human rights abuses, which may flatly contradict the claims by these regimes, but we cannot know if, how, and when such documents will come to be used for such purposes. Indeed, what will future generations make of these archives? Will they appreciate the content for the reasons that we assume are self-evident now? Or will they be able to see something in the material that most of us nowadays can't see?

Hindsight / Foresight

The photographic heritage of the region may not seem immediately comparable to the circumstance of image production in contemporary media activism. The challenges facing the Arab Image Foundation serve as conceptual models for thinking about some of the latest iterations of catastrophic violence faced by *Mosireen*. Conceptually, this is important as it helps place the material traces of the recent uprisings within a larger context of social precarity and political activism in the Arab world. The juxtaposition of different archives helps nuance the crucial set of concerns around collecting, organizing, and sharing images as a political act in its own right. The lessons of the archive by intellectuals, artists, and activists working in the Arab world remind us once again of the revolutionary imperative to enact modes of witnessing that account for the *longue durée* of recurrent catastrophe. This day, like any ordinary day, is full of images and image practices that continually reshuffle, remix, and remediate scenes of catastrophe.⁴⁵ In a way, the archive makes this recursive historiography possible.

44 Westmoreland and Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari', p. 64.

45 This Day / Al-Yaoum, (dir. Akram Zaatari, 2003); Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Making Sense: Affective Research in Postwar Lebanese Art', *Critical Arts* 27, no. 6 (November, 2013): 717-36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2013.867593>.

The temporal and spatial shifts afforded by the mediation and assemblage of these scenes from the Arab revolution challenges the spectacle of event-based witnessing and the fragmentation of linear historical time with its subsequent periodization. Like the detritus amassing before our Angel of History, the particularity of these events inevitably is flattened into a landscape of ongoing political violence and abuse. This is not to conflate them and disregard their historical particularity, but aims to redress the myopia generated during the Arab Uprisings and place the temporality of the archive within a context of recurrent catastrophe. While seemingly exceptional at the peak of the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011, the world has lost interest in these struggles. In the intervening years the production of video activism has had to shift concerns and strategies, taking solace in Hanthala's steadfast commitment to face perpetual injustice. The juxtaposition of these cases helps to resituate the exceptionalism of the Arab Uprisings, while retaining the revolutionary affect of these images to hold open the potential for unrealized outcomes.

While Hanthala and the Angel remain fixated on unfolding histories of violence,

Zaatari's proposal for a future perspective on these images lingers in my mind: What if we buried the archive of the Arab Uprisings in a time capsule for another era? By relinquishing the right to the present, this act of altruistic posterity poses important questions for the role of the Arab Archive and whether it should be accessed in the present or carefully packaged for another time. Unlike in the case of family albums and studio photographs, the prospect for repatriating the images may be more complicated but remains at the center of key concerns and debates among media activists in the Arab world. Efforts to relinquish the burden of the archive by making it available to their creators rely on sustaining the egalitarian notions evoked at the time of the uprisings like *the people* and *the street*. But how then do we imagine our posterior audience? How do we imagine the *future* modes of witnessing within these archives? What sort of symbolic power will these materials have when unearthed and activated in unforeseen ways using the latest technological modalities?

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03. 858: NO ARCHIVE IS INNOCENT. ON THE ATTEMPT OF ARCHIVING REVOLT

MOSIREEN_SOURSAR

In the summer of 2016, some members of the Mosireen collective gathered after years of inactivity to open up the mess of an archive we had mainly filmed, but also gathered from others, over the course of three years of the Egyptian revolution, resulting in 858. Collectives are complicated. In times of revolt, the urgency of the struggle and the intensity of working together tended to bring us together even when differences existed, too occupied with the reality of things to let these differences tear us apart. Today, in a period when the struggle is at an ebb, we've lost the closeness of continuous collaboration, and the differences emerge. I want to lay bare some of the discussions hidden behind the clean interface of the archive 858 because we think fights can be constructive and these differences are important to learn from. The act of archiving is also complicated. Behind every category, every naming, the use of language, title, and date, lies a decision that appears to have been simple when seen in its finalized form. Every one of those decisions is a choice to participate in the game of power.

The current text is written by one member of Mosireen, it does not speak for the whole collective. It is written particularly for comrades in revolt, near and far, for you in parallel to whom we fought our battles, to those of you considering the act of archiving. I will describe three fights and four discussions we had amongst ourselves in the making of 858, in the effort to make an archive that we desired to be 'sympathetic to those practices which sabotage capitalistic accumulation, and those which have an interest in the future, and in the "unrealized".'¹

#1 Discussion: Why this Archive?

Before any words are laid down on the work of archiving, particularly of archiving revolution, I need to start with a disclaimer: what matters is having bodies on the street. I don't want to fall into the trap of giving images more power than they are due. Let us not over-celebrate archives. Archiving revolt is a critical act, but it is a secondary one. First and foremost comes the revolt, taking the risk, confronting state violence, the pain of loss, the sleepless nights, and facing your own fears. Before I begin, I want to make clear that this act of archiving is not the revolution, nor can this collection be the memory of that time. It entails traces of events, particular angles, and selected excerpts of a coming together; it encompasses rage, marches, chants, rocks thrown, and desires enacted, screamed, and spoken. Every archived moment entails the lack of a lot of others that aren't. We could not access the torture

1 Pad.ma, 'Thesis #5', *Pad.ma's 10 theses on the archive*, April 2010, <https://pad.ma/documents/OH>. The archive 858 was solidly influenced by the archiving practices of Pad.ma. They workshopped and interacted with a number of Mosireen members long before the collective came about and they were the first interlocutors when we met to seriously turn our material into an archive.

chambers, we could not lay bare the military tribunals, nor can any archive relay the effect of years of economic policies that privileged a few at the expense of the majority, or this invisible thing we call neo-colonialism that keeps re-inventing itself in the most brutal of ways. Now, in spite of all this, why the archive?

We started 858,

because the narrative of events is day by day being written by the media outlets, through school curricula, through new laws, through the continuous incarceration of those who dare to speak out, through the writing of books and the speaking of speeches of the tyrants in power and their 'democratic' partners across the globe who engage in trade and diplomacy and general statist performances, because the narrative is thereby taken from those who shouted 'we want the downfall of the system';

because there are lessons to be found in those chants, in the tactics, in the battles won, in the things people spoke in front of or behind a camera or audio recorder in the time of revolt;

because there are traces of the solidarity that existed between cities, between struggles, as well as evidence of a lack thereof, both of which are critical to reflect on for the coming uprisings;

because we must learn our lesson from the tactics of the counter-revolution that attacked and subverted a vibrant revolt;

because the archive has the potential to shape our ideas and move our emotions, to act as a reminder, to prepare for what is to come;

And yet, at the end of the day, 858 can be just that, nothing more.

#2 Fight: Who Took the Images?

There is a clue in the wording. We talk about image-makers, but never image-takers.

With all our failed attempts or shortcomings, one thing I certainly celebrate about Mosireen, is that we remained a collective. With a few exceptions when we succumbed to pressure or when we were presented as such against our wishes, our work was not assigned individual authorship. This beautiful composition was questioned within the collective only years after the biggest struggles had past, while discussing how to deal with authorship within the archive structure. It was a debate that carried on for over a year.

Eventually we agreed on a position to maintain pseudonyms for the collective's cinematographers, which meant that we would prioritize the collective nature of the struggle over the individual 'taker' of the image, i.e. we would prioritize the crowd in front of the camera, rather than the person that is behind it. Can the images belong to those who struggled? By canceling the assignment of authorship, can we subvert the industry that

seeks to individualize, to name in order to feed its own logic? By having the images online, downloadable for all, can the image belong to the greater collective? Mosireen contacted non-collective cinematographers whose footage was in the archive and asked them to decide for themselves to reveal or anonymize their identity.

These are attempts to undermine the hegemony of authorship.

#3 Discussion: Who Owns the Images?

It's simple, whoever owns the server owns the images. Thus:

On March 16th, 2018, the private Egyptian TV channel OnTV removed from its YouTube channel the archive of four programs that ran during the time of revolution.

Google's fourth quarter report of 2017 announced that the company removed over 8 million videos with 'a machine-learning-based algorithm to flag videos for terms of service (ToS)-related violations [...] to expedite the removal of propaganda videos'.² We know that countless videos of the non-violent protests that began the Syrian uprising were purged during this time. No other copies of many of these exist. From these consequences, we can judge the political intentions behind such an 'algorithm'.

The collective didn't want an algorithm, government, or company to decide for us which traces to preserve and which to delete.

Pad.ma's thesis 3 proclaims how important it is to keep images 'in, or bring them into, circulation, and to literally throw them forth (Latin: *proicere*), into a shared and distributed process that operates based on diffusion, not consolidation, through imagination, not memory, and towards creation, not conservation'.³ It was during the time of revolt that Mosireen attempted this strategy of throwing forth, by projecting on the street critical videos that the dictatorship and private companies were censoring from their channels. Tahrir Cinema was one attempt not to limit our dissemination to the internet, to bring the images and the debate around them to the street. We tried different distribution methods, handing out free CDs after screenings or mass bluetooth distribution. Bluetooth sounded like a perfect fix as it did not rely on the internet, nor was its activity recordable through mobile networks, yet we learned that the technology was not strong enough to allow for a high number of simultaneous transfers. With 858, we are trying with care to disseminate copies of the archive on servers worldwide so that they remain accessible even after a potential attack or blocking of any one server.

These are attempts to undermine the hegemony of ownership.

2 Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://www.fastcompany.com/40540411/erasing-history-youtubes-deletion-of-syria-war-videos-concerns-human-rights-groups.

3 Pad.ma, 'Thesis #3', *Pad.ma's 10 theses on the archive*.

#4 Fight: What Is the Name of the Archive? (The Factor of Time)

During the debate about naming the archive, the collective was divided, largely between two groups: those that fought for the name ‘an-archive’, in reference to an archive that acts as a counter-archive, and others who wanted to give the archive a name that referenced the Egyptian revolution more directly. Those opposing the first group found ‘an-archive’ too ideological in its nebulous reference to anarchism, while many others did not want to accede to the archive’s usual power to determine the factor of time. The battle over narrative begins in the details. I did not want the archive to determine when a revolt ends or begins. I did not want us to be the ones to solely decide on which event matters and which don’t. For example, currently the archive’s first video dates from 23 January 2011 in the city of Suez. Protesting there began on the 23rd in solidarity with Tunis, a matter that is overlooked in most narratives of the 25 January revolution.

The collective couldn’t agree on the name, so we settled on 858 for the hours of footage in the archive on the final day of that debate. This meant leaving the matter of identity open to change with time. By keeping the factor of time open, the archive is able to take away the glorification of a centralized narrative around Tahrir Square, allowing for the continuation of something still to come.

#5 DISCUSSION: WHAT IS IN THE ARCHIVE? (THE FACTOR OF SPACE)

I don’t believe in nation states. As much as they were conjured up one day they will disappear again on another.

Archiving isn’t an innocent activity and in its most routine manifestation is wrapped up in the institution of the state. It is deeply violent. We have a crisis that remains unresolved. The footage currently dominating the archive emulates the mainstream narrative that overemphasizes the centrality of Cairo and its Tahrir Square. This practice of centralization within 858 is taking place within the broader problematic of the overemphasis of the Egyptian revolution in the region’s recent and ongoing revolts. Though some members of the collective spent time traveling around the city and the country, the majority of the footage is of Cairo and Tahrir, where we lived. We carried out workshops in various Egyptian cities for some time trying to collect footage, but this remains an incomplete task. Recently, some members of the collective had a conversation about 858 with other activists and filmmakers outside the borders of Egypt. But this issue remains unresolved because the collective doesn’t want to create an archive that replicates centralized archives, rather we want to open the conversation for others to add their footage here or to create sister archives that overlap in form or function or channels of distribution.

I offer this text as an invitation to you to join Mosireen in this conversation and activity.

#6 FIGHT: WHO ANNOTATES THE ARCHIVE?

Mosireen participated in the revolt not as journalists, but in roles other than that of filming and spreading images. In our relationship to 858, we disown one of the root definitions of the term archive as ‘records or documents preserved as evidence’. The purpose of our collection is to learn from these traces of events; we want to do this together with others, to eat together, to remember together. We did not collect the images as evidence, we won’t appeal to a law that is absent – on both a local and global scale. We want to decide what a revolt or a civil war is, whether we decide to call it a riot or protest. This archive is not about documenting crimes, but about narrating our version of the story.

#7 DISCUSSION: WHAT KIND OF IMAGE IS IN THE ARCHIVE?

Pad.ma’s thesis 4 states:

Archival initiatives have unconsciously continued this theological impulse. Their desire to document that which is absent, missing or forgotten stages a domain of politics which often privileges the experience of violence and trauma in a manner in which the experience of violence is that which destroys the realm of the ordinary and the everyday.⁴

858 includes images of protest and images of violence carried out by the forces that attacked us, but it also hosts images of the everyday, images of the day after and the day before. Images that don’t yell, but entail the ingredients to help us prepare for a better world. Like this one:

<https://858.ma/ANP/editor/F>

I believe it is important that this archive begins to include images of narrative fiction, both used or unused parts of acted films. Too often performance can do things we can’t do in other ways; the words of the poet have an effect that the direct recounting of the event does not arouse. The origin of the word fiction entails the act of ‘kneading or forming something out of clay’, and so this act of fiction-ing entails an act of imagination before the thing is formed. If we continue on with the origins of words for a moment, the term ‘utopia’, as it was first conceived by the writer Thomas More, was meant to be a play on words, between eu-topia, the better place, and ou-topia, the impossible place. It is not surprising that the bards of history, the scribes of the victor, have wiped away this duality and impregnated the word with the latter meaning, thus marking utopia as the impossible world and putting an end to the act of dreaming and imagining the status quo. 858 is full of traces of will and desire, both a roar and a whisper. 858 wants to evoke all of these because we remain adamant about the future and the unrealized.

4 Pad.ma, ‘Thesis #4’, Pad.ma’s 10 theses on the archive.

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04. THE VIRTUOUS CIRCUITS BETWEEN UPLOAD AND DOWNLOAD: DIGITAL AND ANALOG ARCHIVES AND THE CASE OF GRAFFITI ART IN REVOLUTIONARY EGYPT

MITRA AZAR

The political impact of digital technologies on the Arab revolutions has been addressed at length by the media in the Western world, and yet remains misunderstood most of the time. Taking as an example the Tahrir Revolution of 2011 and its aftermath –which I had the opportunity to experience firsthand while based there from 2011 to 2014, collaborating with local activists and shooting a couple of films¹ – I would like to briefly tell a counter-history of the impact of digital technology as a way of archiving the then unfolding Egyptian revolution. The main aim of this essay is to show how the events of the Egyptian revolution are not the result of the use of new technologies, but rather of the capabilities of Egyptian revolutionaries to create a virtuous circuit between digital technologies and their offline impact, or, in other words, to create a virtuous circuit between an online archiving practice and the IRL world. This digital archiving practice exists concurrently with a fully analogical form of archiving, one which has served as one of the most powerful tools in the construction of Egyptian revolutionary consciousness: the practice of street art by Egyptian activists.

I had the opportunity to closely follow the rise of revolutionary Egyptian street art while working on the movie *Art War*, a documentary that tells the story of the Egyptian revolution from the point of view of the graffiti artists who transformed the walls of Cairo into an open air revolutionary newspaper, updated on a daily basis for its duration.² In a way, the practice of street art allows for a complete re-framing of the role of technology during the Tahrir Revolution. Street art functions as a symptom of how the label ‘Facebook revolution’ – the name for the Tahrir Revolution coined by the international media – has been misleading, enforcing a narrative which wants to shift agency from the people to the technologies used by them.³ By doing so, this label pushes the idea of the essentially *good nature* of digital

1 I was an assistant director and director of photography on the production of *Cyberwar* (dir. Jakob Gottschau, 2013) for DR TV Denmark, and on the production of *Art War* (dir. Marco Wilms, 2014). The latter was screened at the Berlinale Film Festival in 2015 and described the unfolding of the Egyptian revolution from the point of view of street art.

2 *Art War* (dir. Marco Wilms, 2014).

3 Jose Antonio Vargas, ‘Spring Awakening: How an Egyptian Revolution Began on Facebook’, *The New York Times*, 17 February 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html>. Although the title confirms the tendency of international media to simplify the role of digital media in the unfolding of the Egyptian revolution, the article manages to somewhat clarify their role and use, departing from the book *Revolution 2.0*, published by Wael Gohim, the man who created the Facebook page ‘Kullena Khaled Said’ (‘We Are All Khaled Said’), which has been simplistically taken as the impetus of the Egyptian uprising; Wael Gohim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

media, especially of social network platforms. On the contrary, and following a provocation by Egyptian activist and friend Alaa Abd El-Fattah, it is possible to say that ‘the Egyptian revolution happened because the biggest mistake Mubarak made during his last days was exactly that of switching off the Internet’.⁴ This reading is quite different from the one that wants the Egyptian revolt to begin with a Facebook post. I had the chance to reflect on this together with the Egyptian activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah and Julian Assange, who joined Abd El-Fattah over Skype one dusty and sultry afternoon in the spring of 2012.⁵ At that time, Abd El-Fattah was still free.⁶ Abd El-Fattah believed that Western mass media had overplayed digital media’s central roles in archiving and activating the images coming from the Arab revolts in order to immunize their revolutionary message, while pushing through a basically domesticating and comforting counter-revolutionary narrative: the Egyptian revolutionaries were broadly and symbolically assimilated to young Western internet users. Nonetheless, this reading cannot account for why, a year after the revolution, 49% of Egyptians voted for the Muslim Brotherhood and 25% voted for the Salifists. By the end of the call, Abd El-Fattah reminded Assange how counterproductive closing down both the internet and phone lines had been for the regime during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution, since it was exactly thanks to the inability to access information via those media – from computers to cell phones to home phones – that a large slice of the population poured out into the streets, relying on old social networks: neighborhood tea-rooms, mosques, churches, squares.

In order to more accurately describe how internet activism and archival practices have worked and how these forms of digital archiving were successful during the Egyptian uprising, we might instead imagine a circular path which, from an offline situation, generates an online campaign (the *upload*), which in turn spills into the real world (the *download*), loaded with the potential gathered from its online circulation. After examining a couple of examples of such practices, I will point to one which I believe to be the most radical of all; one that allows us to rethink the role of physical and public space in relation to the archiving practice of the very images which defined and fueled the Egyptian uprising, namely the role of street art and graffiti artists in the unfolding of the Tahrir movement and in the circulation and archiving of its images.

One of the collectives I followed the most while in Cairo was called Kazeboon.⁷ Kazeboon means ‘liars’ in Egyptian Arabic. Kazeboon’s work cycle starts with a Facebook page and a

4 I remember Alaa Abd El-Fattah telling me this right before we started shooting a conversation between him and Julian Assange for *The Julian Assange Show*. The conversation is part of a series of short films for *The Julian Assange Show*, which portrayed Julian Assange in dialogue with a number of activists and controversial political figures worldwide: *The Julian Assange Show*, ‘Julian Assange’s The World of Tomorrow: Nabeel Rajab and Alaa Abd El-Fattah’, Episode 4, YouTube, 8 May 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdVoBIABSp&list=PL19A6F6A10DCFB253&index=5&t=0s&frags=pl%2Cwn>.

5 *The Julian Assange Show*.

6 Wikipedia Contributors, ‘Alaa Abd El-Fattah’, 20 September 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaa_Abd_El-Fattah.

7 Wikipedia Contributors, ‘Kazeboon’, 20 June 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazeboon>. See also an article written by friend and activist Wael Eskandaar about the Kazeboon collective: Wael Eskandaar, ‘Egypt’s Kazeboon: Countering State Narrative’, Mei.edu, 12 July 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/egypts-kazeboon-countering-state-narrative>.

website, which consists of a simple application form through which users can notify them of the kind of revolutionary event they would like to organize and the kind of support they would need.



Fig. 1: Kazeboon logo. Courtesy of Sally Toma, co-founder of the Kazeboon collective.

Kazeboon events aimed to detect the lies enforced by the military regime that took power upon Mubarak's demise. These have taken the shape of illegal video-projections, concerts, demonstrations, graffiti sessions, and workshops. In this respect, Kazeboon is a decentralized, living, archival project: autonomous nuclei of people propose an idea and independently realize it, logistically supported by the Kazeboon network, such as when a video projector and loudspeakers are required for outdoor screenings or electricity must be unlawfully tapped from street lamposts. Kazeboon finds a format that will enable the almost real-time activation of the on-going archive of images and sounds, thus emerging on the streets of Cairo and all over Egypt from their online archiving. While writing this essay, I got it touch once more with Sally Toma, one of the founders of the collective, to ask her if she could send me some visual materials from the Kazeboon archive (the application form, some graphics, the map of events).⁸ She told me that the Kazeboon website and all Facebook pages have been hacked in the last years, and that 'due to security issues I have and had for a while now I cut myself from accessing any of this online... [it has] been subjected to a lot of cyber attacks and real ones'. She concluded by telling me that, ultimately, Kazeboon decided to '[take] it down ourselves for future uploading on a website but not now or from here'. When asked about whether there are any backups of Kazeboon's materials, she replied, 'I am sorry dear these are questions I can't answer here...or anywhere really...' – an answer which gives a sense of the current political state of affairs in Egypt today, almost nine years after the beginning of the Tahrir Revolution. Finally, she sent me a link to a screenshot of Kazeboon's calendar of events. Her response highlights the fragility of online archiving and its offline impact on the lives of the people

8 Sally Toma, Facebook chat with Mitra Azar, 21 September 2019.

producing it. Besides the attempts of the regime to take down platforms such as the Kazeboon page, a process of self-erasure has been on-going to cope with the increasing risks of a more-than-ever brutal dictatorship.⁹



Fig. 2: Kazeboon's calendar, January 2012. Screenshot found on Facebook. Courtesy of Sally Toma.

The well-known Tahrir Cinema, a public cinema screening series taking place in Tahrir Square and coordinated, among others, by members of the Mosireen collective, served as inspiration for Kazeboon's own screening events.¹⁰ Sally Toma recalls how 'if Tahrir cinema tried to bring more people to Tahrir with the cinema, we wanted, instead, to bring Tahrir Square to the people through cinema'.¹¹ Kazeboon subsequently started to produce videos that attempted to create 'cognitive dissonance' between what the military regime was saying on television and the images recorded during protests, which depicted a completely different reality.¹² They then screened them in conservative areas of Cairo.

- 9 In her essay about Syria included in this book, Donatella Della Ratta refers to processes of erasure in relation to the Syrian revolution. See Donatella Della Ratta, 'Why the Syrian Archive is no Longer (only) About Syria'.
- 10 Wikipedia Contributors, 'Mosireen', 23 June 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosireen>.
- 11 Sally Toma, Facebook chat with Mitra Azar, 26 September 2019.
- 12 Toma, Facebook chat. 26 September 2019; The first video produced by Kazeboon collective denounced the abuses taking place in December 2011 during a number of sit-ins around and in Tahrir Square. See Kazeboon, 'Haqiqat al-kazeboon – nuskha mu'addala', YouTube video, 25 December 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avXDap44jA&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR21P7Ni1I6FSrUmL7oQerOFw6tdM6Jvi_SSPA8wN0U1uLWfI9e1j67xdw.

Tahrir Cinema stands as a fine example of a virtuous circuit between an online archiving practice and its offline impact. It is, in a way, a virtuous circuit between an upload and download phase. Mosireen activists recorded images during demonstrations and clashes with military and police, and uploaded and archived them online to give worldwide visibility to the events happening in Tahrir Square. Furthermore, they collected numerous videos from other activists who were not affiliated to the collective via the internet and their wide network of contacts in Cairo. The download phase does not end here and culminates in the precipitation of these images in the physical world, especially in Tahrir Square in the form of a public cinema. In this sense, Mosireen's practice goes beyond solely archiving images recorded by their members and attempts to build a wider and more encompassing archive, which eventually resulted in the 858 online archive.¹³



Fig. 3: Tahrir Cinema screening. Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

The most ambitious Kazeboon archiving project consisted of the creation of an online interactive map designed as a counter-narrative platform. It prompted people to identify military figures from the Mubarak regime attempting to occupying civilian jobs in the newly forming administrative apparatus that followed Mubarak's fall. This map is at once a form of decentralized archiving and a leak platform capable of verifying information accrued from citizens through Kazeboon's widespread network, an independent mesh of people scattered across Egyptian territory, including beyond Cairo. Kazeboon also opened a Facebook page called 'No Military Officers in Civilian Position'. Sally Toma explained to me that the goal was to deconstruct the regime's military structure by archiving and making visible the hidden movement between military and civilian roles. In this case, the archival practice turns into an interactive map of the country, where users can see where these processes are happening and take action. After exposing the army's violence and lies

13 The archival work conducted by Mosireen can be found at: 858 - An Archive of Resistance, <https://858.ma/>.

against the civil population, Kazeboon's archival practice now aims to reveal how power processes are not just repressive, but active as well.

The last example of a successful digital archiving practice I would like to highlight is the work of the 18 Days in Egypt collective.¹⁴ When I say successful, it is important to underline that I mean this not because of the nature of digital media, but because of the IRL consequences these archiving practices have set in motion in terms of developing new forms of organizing and for political agency offline, more specifically in the spaces where the recording of the images fueling these archiving practices commenced. The 18 Days in Egypt collective to me is an exemplary case. It was the first platform that allowed for a form of crowd-sourced cinematic documentary practice. This is how it works: my friends and I decide to take part in a public event; armed with cameras, smartphones, and an internet connection, we all agree on specific tasks to fulfill; one takes pictures, one shoots videos, a third tweets, another posts on Facebook. Once at home, we upload all of these different real-time digital artifacts to the 18 Days in Egypt platform, where we are given access to an online non-linear editing software, which allows us to intertwine the different materials into a single stream composed by all the members of the group involved. Every invited member can combine the materials and thus produce a collective editing that mirrors the collective recording from the streets. 18 Days in Egypt is, to me, the very first attempt to address the necessity to *narrativize* the bits and pieces of the gigantic archive of images produced during the Egyptian uprising and build from them a counter-narration that connects the dots of a scattered digital puzzle. In a certain sense, the Mosireen 858 archive would benefit from such a practice.

Finally, there has been a form of archival practice where the actual archiving has happened fully offline and in an analog way, only to be transferred to the internet later. This is the case of street art. Here, the virtuous circuit between *online* and *offline* (or *upload* and *download*), defined through the successful practices of the digital archiving examples outlined above, is somewhat inverted. While in the previous examples the images recorded with mobile phones and cameras were uploaded online and only after being downloaded again got invested once more in the physical spaces where they were recorded, the practice of street art produces an archive which is, in a way, self-contained within the offline world, and which functions independently of its online uploading and archiving. Street art performed a key role in the narration of some of the crucial events of the Egyptian revolution and the walls of Cairo became a real-time bulletin which alternatively honored martyrs, accused the military regime, documented and spread information about police and military violence, supported the activists arrested, and generally kept the Egyptian population updated about the state of the country. 'I liked how the walls were like a newspaper; people wrote things like, "Don't go down this street, there are *baltageya* [plainclothes thugs] down here"', says Ammar Abo Bakr, whom I met while shooting the movie *Art War* (of which he became the

14 18 Days in Egypt, <http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/>. The project gained a lot of visibility and it also features on the online page of the MIT Documentary Lab, <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/18-days-in-egypt/>.

leading character).¹⁵ Ammar, who came from Luxor to Cairo to use the walls of the capital as a form of public newspaper, quickly became one of the prominent graffiti artists involved in the newly-born revolutionary street art movement.¹⁶

One of the first tools used by graffiti artists were stickers, which in a way tested the ground before they engaged in large-scale murals, in the beginning of their practice. It is worth remembering the famous ‘Mask of Freedom’ designed by Ganzeer, which was stuck all over Cairo in February 2011, right after the Council of Military Forces (SCAF) took charge of the country after Mubarak’s ouster – an act for which Ganzeer was, inevitably, arrested.¹⁷



Fig. 4: Ganzeer, ‘Mask of Freedom’. Courtesy of the artist. The text reads: ‘Mask of Freedom – Salut from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the loving son of the nation – Now available for an unlimited period of time’.

Stencils – also quick to make and reproducible in bulk not only by the artist but by whoever sympathized with the message and was given agency by accessing stencil models on social media – paired with stickers at the very beginning of the street art movement and tested the ground for more complex drawing operations.¹⁸ A stencil appeared in the spring of

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- 15 Mia Jankowicz, “‘Erase and I Will Draw Again’: The Struggle Behind Cairo’s Revolutionary Graffiti Wall”. *The Guardian*, 23 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/23/struggle-cairo-egypt-revolutionary-graffiti>.
- 16 The other key figures of this movement, together with Ammar Abo Bakr, were Ganzeer, El Teneen, Alaa Awad, Mohammed Khaled, Abdo El Amir, Sad Panda – most of them are featured in *Art War* (dir. Marco Wilms, 2014), to which I contributed.
- 17 Ganzeer, ‘7 Things I Have Learned from the Mask of Freedom’, May 2011, <https://ganzeer.com/7-Things-I-have-Learned-From-the-Mask-of-Freedom>.
- 18 I will show what, to me, is the most iconic stencil of the Egyptian Revolution in the photo essay at the

2011 portraying Samira Ibrahim, the young woman who managed to open a case in front of a civilian court after being forced into a virginity test, which allegedly served to prove that soldiers had not raped her, while in fact the virginity test itself became a form of rape. The soldiers carried out the virginity tests and other types of brutalities after arresting a number of activists involved in a sit-in in Tahrir Square on March 9, 2011.¹⁹ Samira Ibrahim stencils appeared on the wall of Mohammed Mahmud Street beside one portraying Aliaa Magda Al-Mahadi. This young female blogger posed naked at home in protest against the military regime and the military violence in the streets of Cairo, posting the picture on her blog, arebeldiary.blogspot, and describing her action on her Facebook page as ‘screams against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy’.²⁰



Fig. 5: Stencils of Aliaa Magda Al-Mahadi and Samira Ibrahim. Picture courtesy of Sally Zohney.

The power of graffiti art consists of its analog character, virality, and visibility: there is no need for an internet connection and most of the time not even the need for literacy on the part of the audience, as the majority of these works are mostly visual, and, even when they are accompanied by text, self-explanatory within their local context. The archival form practiced by graffiti artists took its most radical expression on the walls of the American University of Cairo (AUC), situated on Mohammed Mahmud Street, leading away from

end of this text.

19 Samira Ibrahim's story is the focus of *Cyberwar* by director Jakob Gottschau: *Cyberwar*, 'Civil Cyberwar in Egypt', Express TV, Denmark, 2013, <https://www.express-tv.dk/civil-cyberwar/>; see also Wikipedia Contributors, 'Samira Ibrahim', 17 August 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samira_Ibrahim.

20 The image is no longer there, although the blog is still active. See Aliaa Magda Al-Mahadi, *A Rebel's Diary* (blog), <https://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com>; Aliaa Magda Al-Mahadi, Facebook page (now deleted), November 2011.

Tahrir Square.²¹ Graffiti artists started painting one of the walls of AUC right after the clashes that happened there between police and protesters on November 19, 2011.²²



Fig. 6: Mohammed Mahmud Street, graffiti honoring martyrs by multiple authors. Courtesy of Mitra Azar.

The explosion of graffiti art in Mohammed Mahmud Street, the number of layering, erasures, and additions, has no equal in Cairo, nor I believe in any other context of politically-engaged graffiti art inside or outside of Egypt. As such, it discloses the truly unique dynamism of this form of archival practice, capable of reacting in real time to the events of the revolution, serving to both commemorate and activate the people. The complexity of the symbols, often drawn from traditional Egyptian painting – such as in the work of Alaa Awad, extensively featured in Mohammed Mahmud Street – discloses the depth of this form of art and allows us to think of it as an attempt to re-write not only the current history of the country, but also its roots.²³

21 For a description of the function of the graffiti in Mohammed Mahmud by the very same artists who realized it, see the conference held at AUC in April 2012: Abo Bakr, Ammar, Alaa Awad, Hanaa El Deghem, and Ahmed Aboul Hasan, *The Epic Murals of Tahrir: Visualizing Revolution*, conference held by American University Cairo, 2 April 2012, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/research/cts/Pages/TheEpicMuralsOfTahrir,visualizingArtist.aspx>.

22 Mona Abaza, 'An Emerging Memorial Space? In Praise of Mohammed Mahmud Street', *Jadaliyya*, 10 March 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25363/An-Emerging-Memorial-Space-In-Praise-of-Mohammed-Mahmud-Street>; Wikipedia Contributors, 'Mohammed Mahmoud graffiti', 29 July 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Mahmoud_graffiti; Jack Shenker, 'Egypt: Violent Clashes in Cairo Leave Two Dead and Hundreds Injured', *The Guardian*, 19 November 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/19/egypt-violent-clashes-cairo-injured>; and Lucia Ryzova, 'The Battle of Cairo's Muhammad Mahmoud Street', *Aljazeera*, 29 November 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/201111288494638419.html>.

23 For more information about the references to Egyptian traditional art in the work of graffiti artist Ala Awa, see Mia Grondhal, *Revolutionary Graffiti*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2013.



Fig. 7: Work by Ala Awad (detail), graffiti using paintings from the Ancient Tomb of Ramose, 18th Dynasty. Courtesy of Mitra Azar.

Furthermore, once the military regime decided to erect walls in Mohammed Mahmud Street and the vicinity of Tahrir Square to deter people from getting closer to the Ministry of the Interior and other official buildings, graffiti artists started targeting those walls too.



Fig. 8: Graffiti over one the walls built by the military to block access to government buildings. Courtesy of Ursula Lindsay.

An interesting process is at work here: on the one hand, the military erects walls to block people from approaching state buildings, confronting the police, and recording images of these confrontations which could be shared online and worldwide. This attempt by the army to render invisible the clashes between the people and the military reached its most gruesome point with the deployment of snipers to specifically target the eyes of the protesters.²⁴



Fig. 9: Graffiti by Amma Abo Bakr honoring the people shot in the eye by military snipers during the Mohammed Mahmud demonstrations. Courtesy of Themba Lewis.

On the other hand, this attempt at erasure was somehow counteracted by the practice of the graffiti artists, who moved archiving from the internet to the streets, developing a form which hacked the visibility ban of the regime, keeping alive the possibility of sharing images and information by enforcing an analogical sharing in physical space, rather than online. The peculiarity of a graffiti-based form of archive rests in its immediate availability and yet this quality pays the price of some sort of volatility. The regime promptly attempted either to remove the graffiti, not only in Mohammed Mahmoud Street, but all over Cairo, or to intervene via supporters of the regime re-drawing parts of them and thus changing (I should say inverting) their meaning.²⁵ This happened to the famous graffiti of the 'Tank vs Bread Biker' first produced by Ganzeer during the 'Mad Graffiti Weekend', an initiative launched online by Ganzeer himself to show that 'the streets belong to the people [...] They [the military officials] think that they're [the streets] some kind of official government-controlled entity. I think it's important to remind people that they're not'.²⁶

24 This is why Mohammed Mahmud Street was renamed Sharei 'Uyuun al-Hurriyyah ('Street of the eyes of freedom') by protesters. See Abaza, 'An Emerging Memorial Space?'.
 25 Abaza, 'An Emerging Memorial Space?'.

26 Jano Charbel, 'Mad Graffiti Weekend', *Egypt Independent*, 22 May 2011, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/mad-graffiti-weekend-challenges-military-tribunals/>; Kristen Chick, 'Egyptian graffiti artist Ganzeer arrested amid surge in political expression', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 May 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0526/Egyptian-graffiti-artist-Ganzeer-arrested->



Fig. 10: Ganzeer, *'The Tank and the Bread Biker'*. Courtesy of the artist.

Ganzeer's design was later joined by an image of a panda by the artist Sad Panda, and then modified again by the graffiti artist Winged Elephant with the addition of bleeding bodies crushed by the tank, a reference to the victims of the so-called Maspero massacre of May 2011.²⁷



Fig. 11: Winged Elephant's graffiti addition referencing the Maspero massacre.

amid-surge-in-political-expression. The story of the 'Mad Graffiti Weekend' and the 'Tank vs the Bread Biker' graffiti is laid out in fuller detail in the film *Art War*, for which we also managed to interview the people who modified the drawing in support of the regime.

27 Wikipedia Contributors, 'Maspero Demonstrations', 13 September 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maspero_demonstrations.

At this point, the collective work of the revolutionary graffiti movement became the target of a military supporter group going by the name of the Badr Battalion, who attempted to overturn the meaning of the graffiti by erasing the crushed human figures and adding a cheering crowd with Egyptian flags in front of the tank.



Fig. 12: Cheering crowd by the Badr Battalion.

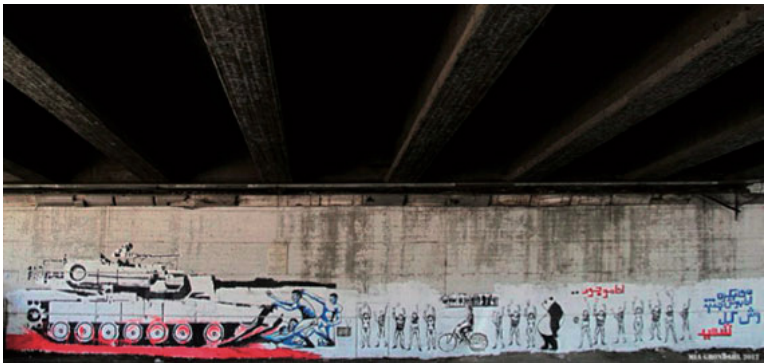


Fig. 13: Overview of the graffiti after the additions made by Winged Elephant and the Badr Battalion.

Revolutionary graffiti artists Mohammed Khaled and the Mona Lisa Battalion answered by erasing the crowd and adding a monstrous version of Tantawi, the General of the Supreme Council, eating up protesters.²⁸



Fig. 14: *Tantawi eating up protesters by Mohammed Khaled and the Mona Lisa Battalion.*

The story of ‘The Tank and the Bread Biker’ says a lot about the dynamism of a graffiti-based form of archive, both in terms of authorship and of the form’s capacity to cope with an ever-changing situation, in both cases echoing some of the features that define the uploading and sharing of images online. As in the case of the Kazeboon or Mosireen collectives, authorship is collaborative and in the service of the necessity to generate and share images almost in real time. The difference between graffiti art, functioning as an analogical archival practice, and the digital archives and related activism which emerged from the Egyptian revolution – from which graffiti art also benefited, as we have seen through the distribution of stencils and the organization of the ‘Mad Graffiti Weekend’ – is that graffiti art shifts the focus to physical public spaces rather than to the corresponding online ones. This shift proves, once again, that online activism serves its purpose only when it is subservient to and designed for mobilizing people in the offline world. The reactive erasure in the form of analog white-washing enforced by the regime, who continuously attempted to delete revolutionary graffiti, has been matched in the online world. This happens not only through the regime’s removal of the means of communication used by the activists (such as was the case with the internet), but also via the self-erasure that certain activists have been forced to perform in order to protect themselves after online and offline aggressions. To cope with this form of reactive erasure, the graffiti artists manage to practice a form of active erasure that compromises both the online and offline strategies of the regime. This active form of erasure consists in erasure by addition: an affirmative form of erasure that, by layering graffiti, promotes a creative appropriation of the

28 The story of this graffiti is also fairly well described in an article by Soraya Morayef, ‘Army Loyalists and Activists Battle on the Walls of Cairo’, *Egypt Independent*, 6 February 2012, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/army-loyalists-and-activists-battle-walls-cairo/>. For a comprehensive visual story of the graffiti and of the unfolding of revolutionary street art during the Egyptian revolution, I recommend Karl Don Stone and Hamdi Basma, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*, Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing, 2014.

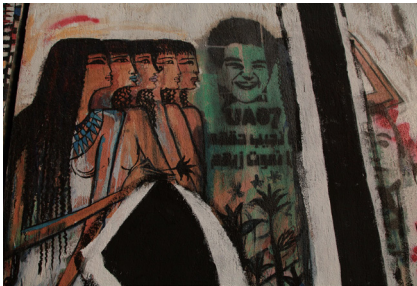
urban space that accompanies and sustains the protesters in their actions and answers the urgency and unpredictability of the events. One particular piece of graffiti I saw on the walls of Cairo springs to mind: Twitter's blue bird behind a back-slashed circle (the 'no' symbol): 'The revolution will not be tweeted'.



Fig. 15: 'The revolution will not be tweeted', Courtesy of Mitra Azar.

These images were shot by Mitra Azar in the spring of 2012 with the intention of showing the erasure-by-adding strategy adopted by graffiti artists on one of the walls of the American University of Cairo, located in Mohammed Mahmud Street.

Courtesy of Mitra Azar.





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05. THE DIGITAL SYRIAN ARCHIVE BETWEEN VIDEOS AND DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

MOHAMMAD ALI ATASSI

After the images showing the torture of detainees in Abu Ghraib Prison by American soldiers were leaked to the media in 2004, Susan Sontag published a long article in the *New York Times*, titled 'Regarding the Torture of Others.'¹ The article, written a few months before her death, revisited central arguments from her renowned book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, published in 2003 prior to the invasion and occupation of Iraq.² In particular, she argues that there is a need to publish images of victims, and that those images were effective in putting pressure on American leaders and politicians. The latter already knew that those practices were taking place in Iraqi prisons, but had not been forced to put an end to them until the images were leaked. Dealing in her article with various issues of colonialism, sovereignty, and racism involved in the practices depicted in those images, elaborating on their details and condemning them at length, the famous American writer failed to pose a central question regarding the Iraqi prisoners. Their bodies had been photographed naked, under torture, and in humiliating postures, without their faces or identities being covered. In short, the question was: did those prisoners have a right to their own image?³

Many Western anti-war activists rushed to publish and circulate the images with the best intentions, yet without bothering to obscure the faces and hide the identities of the victims. They also failed to consider that, after the sanctity of those prisoners' bodies had already been violated, and then violated again as they were photographed, they might not appreciate being violated a third time through the publication and circulation of their images in international media, especially since the majority or perhaps all of them were still alive at that time.

Equally astonishing is Susan Sontag's failure to note that the most powerful country in the world had also established this spectacle of killing in Iraq for the first time – long before ISIS – by publishing and circulating images of the corpses of Saddam Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay, disfigured and covered in blood; and a second time after the corpses were preserved, made up with cosmetics, and placed in a tent for public display and global media coverage. It was as if they were trying to prove to the entire world that the dictator's two sons had truly been killed.

1 Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>; 'Regarding the Torture of Others', in *Cultures of Fear: A Critical Reader*, London, Pluto Press, 2009, pp. 272-281.

2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003.

3 See The Abounaddara Collective with Katarina Nitsch (ed.), *The Questions of the Right to the Image*, supported by the Swedish Institute, March 2019, http://www.abounaddara.com/THE_RIGHT_TO_THE_IMAGE.pdf?fbclid=IwAR19G-0bmwJ7jclthlEopYURL1rNjKf7ryv9aP-15-UJGbZAAcfNoohsbdQ

The complete neglect of the Iraqi prisoners' rights to their own image, even as she defends their rights to justice, dignity, and the sanctity of their bodies, is remarkable for a figure as important and empathetic as Susan Sontag. Still, it does not inhibit her awareness of 'the other' in photographic relations. To quote from *Regarding the Pain of Others*: 'the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying'.⁴ Nor does Susan Sontag hesitate to question the conditions surrounding the production of those images, or the ways in which people use and consume images. In the same book she writes that:

It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people's pain in an art gallery. Even those ultimate images whose gravity, whose emotional power, seems fixed for all time, the concentration camp photographs from 1945, weigh differently when seen in a photography museum, in a gallery of contemporary art; in a museum catalogue; on television; in the pages of *The New York Times*; in the pages of *Rolling Stone*; in a book.⁵

Despite her silence on the issues of rights, Sontag was cautious and critical of the ways in which such images of atrocity were used and exploited, notably with their entry into art galleries, the pages of magazines, tabloids, and TV screens.

In 2004, when Susan Sontag posed these questions about the leakage of pictures of Abu Ghraib prison, their media circulation, and their potential political impact, YouTube and social media had not yet acquired the power and propagation they have now – most particularly demonstrated by the Arab Spring revolutions, specifically the Syrian revolution. Back in 2004, pictures of demonstrations, acts of repression, and videos of torture and murder were yet to be broadcast online daily and in huge numbers.

The contradictions in Sontag's approach could be our entry point to the study of the varied uses of videos and images coming from Syria.⁶ In the age of social media, images of the Syrian tragedy have been uploaded on YouTube for over seven years, at times even live-streamed on international media. Their production is completely unregulated and lacks professional standards, and little heed has been paid to the rights of those appearing in the videos. In this age, it is common to re-use and re-mix such videos for media outlets, film-making or advertisement, or even for archives. In other words, the images often become unimaginably detached from their original context.

Understanding how these images and videos were produced and subsequently used is necessary for any approach to the archival question being raised today. As counter-revolutions and the rehabilitation of the old dictatorships continue to unfold, the issue of constructing a new archive of these revolutions is being raised among activists and professionals in the

4 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 63.

5 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 107.

6 For a critical reading of Sontag's text, see Judith Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 951-966.

image industry. Such a revolutionary archive stands in opposition to the archives of the ruling states and regimes, preserving the visual memory of the groups that were involved in the revolutionary waves and who have attempted to break the Arab status quo and push for real political and social change.

While the issue of archival and visual memory and their relation to artistic and cinematic practices is being raised in most Arab countries that have witnessed revolutions, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, in each case it takes on specific dimensions. As regards Syria, not only did violence escalate and spiral into civil and regional war, but the conflict at large was also unpredictable over the prolonged stretch of the past seven years, encompassing most of the Syrian territory, villages, and cities alike.

Syrian Videos

There are no precise figures for the number of videos Syrians have shot and uploaded on YouTube. Most estimates are in the hundreds of thousands. The majority are short videos of no longer than three minutes, taking various types and forms and dealing with various issues. Shot all across Syria, most of them are overwhelmingly anonymous and even indifferent to the issue of authorship. A substantial amount of these clips was filmed by people participating in the events they were filming, reacting to them in real time. They were mostly shot with a single take, uploaded unedited and with little to no post-production. Cécile Boëx notes that these videos were mostly shot as proof of witnessing, in order to document, as well as to coordinate the work of revolutionary committees.⁷

When Syrian activists and citizen-journalists began to film protests taking place across Syria and uploaded those videos to YouTube or sent them to international and Arab satellite news channels, their concern at the time had nothing to do with producing an alternative cinema or even reportage. Such questions were not part their priorities or even their fundamental practices. Rather, their concern was to attract the attention of the world to what was happening in their country and to convey those events to the international media. They were under the impression that the camera might protect them and their fellow protestors from the regime's crackdown, in the hope that documenting crimes as they were being committed would someday stop them from happening. At the time, those activists and citizen-journalists never expected that the world would look on impotently, or that their videos, no matter how intense and enormously revealing, despite the drama and humanity they contained, would not change much in the way Great Powers view the struggle in Syria, nor inspire them to attempt to end to the killing of civilians. Because Syrian activists never imagined that the crimes would continue and even worsen, despite all the images and the documentation pouring out of the country, they never thought about the future of such images, their fates, or the ways in which others might appropriate them in the aftermath.

7 Cécile Boëx, 'La création cinématographique en Syrie à la lumière du mouvement de révolte: nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux récits', *REMMM* 134 (Décembre, 2013): 145-156.

Alongside the images uploaded by activists and citizen-journalists, from early on the Syrian regime and its supporters were manipulating activist videos to raise doubts about their credibility, circulating videos that served their own propagandistic purposes. Many of the Islamist and Jihadist factions did the same, flooding YouTube with their own promotional videos, which would later lead ISIS to create their own specialized clips, i.e. scenes of horrific murders uploaded online and thrust into international media. From this point onwards, Syrians no longer owned these Syrian videos, nor could they help support their case in any way.⁸ Soon after, international media outlets appropriated the images for their own purposes. Rather than being challenged by the videos, media outlets, such as Aljazeera and CNN, coexisted with them. In other cases, this new form of media was co-opted by killers of various stripes, including the Syrian regime and ISIS. These two actors produce videos that serve their propaganda, upload them to YouTube, and circulate them for media coverage, manipulating the videos and images of victims and raising doubt about their authenticity. This was particularly the case when videos of the victims of the chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta came out on 23 August 2013.

Which Category for Which Videos?

Differing from the media's use of videos and from the celebratory and often romanticized treatment of those videos by critics, Stefan Tarnowski attempts to categorize those videos and images according to the ways in which they were interpreted, treated, and employed.⁹ He proposes a distinction between the 'forensic', the 'commodity', and the 'poetic' interpretation and treatment of images. The forensic treatment of images, according to Tarnowski, is not focused on the identity of the person who shot the video, their political leanings, or the reasons behind shooting and uploading. The forensic treatment of images means that:

a video from Syria can be many things: data to verify or disprove narratives by cross-referencing; evidence of a crime that has been committed; the basis for future justice ... All of it is information, data that can be verified, and then mobilized to attack or defend narratives in order to build up a picture of the truth that can potentially be used in a court of law.¹⁰

On the other hand, says Tarnowski, the treatment of images as commodities leads to the use of these videos for their exchange value in the economy of war. Tarnowski notes the

8 Jon Rich, 'The Blood of the Victim: Revolution in Syria and the Birth of the Image Event', *e.flux Journal* 26 (June, 2011), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/26/67963/the-blood-of-the-victim-revolution-in-syria-and-the-birth-of-the-image-event/>.

9 See for example Chad Elias and Zaher Omareen, 'Syria's Imperfect Cinema', in Malu Halasa, Zahir 'Amrin, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud (eds) *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, London: Saqi Books, 2014; Stefan Tarnowski, 'What Have We Been Watching? What Have We Been Watching?', Bidayyat.org, 5 May 2017, http://bidayyat.org/opinions_article.php?id=167#.Wae5qpOg9E4.

10 Tarnowski, 'What Have We Been Watching?'.

example of the British government funding a Free Syrian Army media office, the Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office (RFS Syria), which uploaded nearly a thousand videos about a number of themes, from the documentation of battles to aid work, all the way through to media reportages in areas outside the regime control. In addition, Tarnowski refers to the massive proliferation of YouTube videos documenting the use of American TOW anti-tank weapons, estimated at roughly 20,000 uploads. Their primary aim was not to promote the Free Syrian Army, nor to attract new recruits, but rather to confirm the way in which those TOW missiles were being utilized, since evidence of use was a condition for extra replacement ammunition.

By the summer of 2015, there were over twenty thousand videos of TOW missiles sloshing around on YouTube. From interviews, I learned that the weapon was provided under one condition: that there must be a video documenting every time it was fired, showing the act of firing, the target, and whether or not the target was successfully hit, and that video must also be uploaded on YouTube. Only after the video was uploaded would replacement missiles be provided. Videos uploaded online were exchanged for munitions. For Tarnowski:

These clips are more than mere representational images, depicting the “reality” of the battlefield. They are commodities, active in the economy of war, and contributing directly to it. Traded for guns, funds and allies, under the direction of Western governments, making a YouTube clip can be an act of war.¹¹

What about what Tarnowski calls ‘poetic’ images? He summarizes the position of those who adopt a poetic reading of images as follows: ‘The foundational claim of the poetic interpretation of videos from Syria is: “The videos are cinema and the people who shot them ... are filmmakers”’.¹² Of course, the poetic use and reading of those videos greatly differ from the forensic and even the commodity ones. The poetic approaches are concerned with political and emancipatory aspects, and the spontaneity of both the videos and the activists behind them, as well as the aesthetic value of the revolutionary images as such. Despite their alternative and revolutionary value, however, these are also low-resolution pixelated images, competing with the high-resolution images associated with the authorities and the market.¹³ Here, the ‘poetic’ approach to revolutionary videos goes beyond the mere analysis of their use and value, and problematizes their use by filmmakers in their films, especially within films entirely composed of an edited collection of such videos. A good example of such a ‘poetic’ approach is Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan’s documentary film, *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait* (2014), in which YouTube videos are used abundantly and considered new cinema.

Documentary Films and Activist Videos

Any observer can spot the similarities between the activist videos and the numerous feature and short documentaries produced during the revolution. They range in style from the markers of haste that have shaped the filming and production, the similarity in equipment used (the

11 Tarnowski, ‘What Have We Been Watching?’.

12 Tarnowski, ‘What Have We Been Watching?’.

13 See Rabih Mroué, ‘The Pixelated Revolution’, *TDR: The Drama Review* 56.3 (Fall 2012): 18–35.

absence of a production team, small digital cameras or mobile phones), and the pixelated texture of the picture of some films reminiscent of the activist and citizen-journalist videos, all the way through to the fact that many of these films were anonymously produced and uploaded, just as were most activist videos. These similarities, however, do not necessarily mean that the videos are 'cinema'. In my opinion, the problem with this poetic reading of the Syrian images is that it overlooks the conditions of their production and filming, together with the person who filmed them and their primary drive to film them, as well as the way they have been utilized or appropriated. In addition to these problems, this reading also considers those raw videos 'cinema', and goes as far as to sometimes term them 'imperfect cinema'!¹⁴

Another problem with such a reading arises when some researchers and filmmakers consider these videos a new cinema and the people shooting them amateur filmmakers, as in *Silvered Water* mentioned above. Such interpretations begin to impose on those videos the formats and categories of film analysis, ignoring the fact that these videos belong to a world far different from that of cinema. The critical approach adopted towards these videos is not consistent with the tools of film analysis, such as narrative, dramatic structure, authorial intention, visual language, scope for interaction, boundaries and continuity between these new videos, and previous cinematic experience, etc.

The majority of these videos were shot to document and convey a particular event. They do not share any of the production values of films, nor do they make any cinematic or artistic claims. Their producers usually do not term their productions 'films', and they do not identify as filmmakers. While some of these videos can be used as evidence of a particular event, be it in fiction or documentary film that tackles that particular event in its narrative structure, things begin to become complicated when these videos are seen as cinema or considered footage, material to be used for cinematic production.

Critics and filmmakers nonetheless call these videos 'footage' or 'rushes', and they deal with them on that basis.¹⁵ Their state or form is defined as raw materials for films, waiting to be claimed by a filmmaker, taken to an editing suite in order for their film to be re-written; they just need to be edited together. The major issue here is not that the filmmaker did not shoot the specific YouTube video they are appropriating themselves, nor that they did not pay for using it. It is rather that the person behind the footage did not film and upload for the sake of this film, or for the sake of any film! No one asked their opinion about the use of their material in this film or that, or for this purpose or that. Even if it is possible to find certain clips, frames or images that are poetically cinematic and visually aesthetic, that does not mean that these videos *are* cinema or that their makers are filmmakers.

What we are talking about here are visual practices that belong to two different worlds, ruled by different professional ethics and contexts, and with different technical and moral stakes. This is not to say that the boundaries between the two worlds are clear or impervious, nor that it is unattainable to cross from one side to the other. These videos might have an impact on

14 Elias and Omareen, 'Syria's Imperfect Cinema'.

15 Elias and Omareen, 'Syria's Imperfect Cinema'.

the relationship between filmmakers and images, as well as on the formulas by which they produce their films, narratives, fictions, and stories. They might have an impact on the form of actual cinematic language and on the way in which people produce and direct films. However, this does not make the videos films, nor does it turn their producers into filmmakers. As said, the person who shoots such videos does not claim to be a filmmaker; the video usually comes in one take and without editing, no credits, and there is no claim of belonging to the field of cinema.

Digital Syrian Archives: What are its Sources, and What Is its Use?

Given these differences between activist videos, with their own particular origins, and the way they are used and interpreted, and given the distinction I have made here between these videos and the documentary films that have been produced in recent years, I think that we can address the question of the digital archive in post-revolutionary Syria from a different angle. The idea of constructing a digital archive for the past eight years is primarily based on an attempt to collect and preserve the memory of the oppressed by way of building a different narrative, one that stands in opposition to that of the state and the dictatorial regime that triumphed over its people. Such an archive draws on the huge amount of visual material accumulated on the internet and the hard drives of professionals in the image industry. Yet good intentions, good material, and logistical capabilities are not sufficient to achieve real and tangible progress in this regard. In particular, the attempt to limit the process of constructing and collecting the material for the archive to a single party or single data bank can itself turn into a totalitarian action that contradicts the diversity of these visual materials, not to mention the security and authoritarian risks that act would present.

The chief and most meaningful step towards an archive would be to define the professional and legal regulations of the collection of such an archive, and to define the themes and sections under which the archive will be indexed. In addition, regarding the image material, there is a need for accountability, sorting, and proper investigation of source, use, and purpose. There are countless issues to be addressed, such as the identification of the people who shot the films. Why did they shoot it? Who uploaded it? Who first used it and how? Equally important is the verification of the images, their validity, timing, original location, subject matter, and the rights of their owners and of those appearing in them.

One may ask what the relationship is between the new documentary filmmaking and the question of constructing and collecting the archive, when the internet hosts thousands of videos and millions of hours of pictures uploaded as Creative Commons? There is no doubt that the documentary, as a creative artistic work that deals with and demonstrates reality, is in itself a visual (and sometimes an archival) document that adds extra dimensions to the Syrian situation. Not least given the important role that the Syrian documentary cinema has played in recent years in documenting events and telling people's stories, as well as in producing and supporting a narrative challenging the regime's authoritarian narrative. Hence, the inclusion of any documentary as a finished art product into a digital archive must be governed by the rules of collecting that goes into the making of an archive in addition to regulations such as employer approval, respect for copyright, and respect for the finality and completeness of the artwork.

On the other side, we are now facing a new situation that is constantly changing through the propagation of digital technology: the sheer amount of footage accumulating during the filming of documentary films in crises such as the Syrian one. When finalizing the editing of some films, there often remain hundreds of unused hours in the film's narrative and visual structure. This in itself poses another challenge regarding the fate of such materials, especially if they are associated with highly symbolic events, people, or places. The question that arises here is whether such material should remain in the director's personal archive, or whether it is better to keep it in a digital archive whose task is to preserve collective memory and make it available to researchers. I believe that the basic aim should be to preserve the rights of production and those of the author, and to respect the latter's ownership of their material and their desire not to contribute the remaining rushes of their film to the construction of any archive, if that is indeed the case.

Many Syrians suffered from the trauma of open wounds and the difficulty of mourning their dead following the 1982 Hama massacre, which killed dozens of thousands. Not only were they unable to find the bodies of most of these victims, who had been secretly buried in mass graves, but there was also a lack of any images or videos that could serve as visual evidence of the massacres and help to establish their narrative in national memory. Today, however, the exact opposite is true. Syrians are suffering precisely from the abundance of images, videos, and visual materials documenting the massacres committed against the Syrians in the last eight years, sometimes live. Despite that and because of that, the trauma is still there, growing boundlessly, and mourning is still pending if not impossible. As Zeina Halabi writes about the fate of Arab revolutions:

In all such instances, the photographs and footage are there but the truth is not. Although lenses captured these tragedies, the narrative surrounding them was constantly challenged, undermined, or erased. Hegemonic narratives continue to tell us that the tragedies we have seen never really took place, that what we have seen is not real. Here, melancholic affect does not feed on an absent archive – for the archive is there, so haunting in its tragedy – but rather on a tragic experience that is not validated.¹⁶

But the disaster is here and now, and what has happened is still happening. Victims are not figures, prisons are not unpopulated structures, and the destroyed cities are not decorations in a video game. As such, our salvation may not lie in the construction of this archive, but rather in its ambiguous and shocking presence, which will preserve for victims their names, for places their memories, for truth its meanings, and for life its seeds.

16 Zeina Halabi, 'The Missing Archive of Loss', Bidayyat.org, 28 April 2017, http://bidayyat.org/opinions_article.php?id=166#.WwW7LlOFNE4.

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06. THE CONTROVERSIAL ARCHIVE: NEGOTIATING HORROR IMAGES IN SYRIA

ENRICO DE ANGELIS

Introduction: The Orphan Images of Syria¹

On the 4th of April 2017, early morning, Adham al-Hussein intercepts a call with his walkie-talkie. The call informs him that a chemical attack is underway in Khan Shaykhoun, a small town situated in between Hama and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, and that assistance is urgently needed. Al-Hussein immediately takes his car and drives with a few other people towards the location where the missile supposedly fell. When he arrives, he finds the White Helmets, a group specialized in providing assistance to civilians, already lining up the bodies of those exposed to the gas. He helps with the first aid activities. He faints for a few minutes, as the effects of the gas have not yet vanished. As soon as he can, he grabs his camera and begins to shoot video and take pictures – he is a freelance journalist, providing visual content to different local and international media.²

He decides to send the videos and the photos to Smart, a Syrian media organization born after 2011. The material is received by Nisal al-Haddad, herself a photographer and photo editor at the outlet. Usually, she says, Smart does not publish pictures showing corpses. However, in this case the children are shown alive, even if they are suffocating. It was a difficult decision, she adds, but they decided it was necessary. She mentions the massacre of Deir Ezzour, in January 2016, when ISIS killed hundreds of people, but no pictures documenting what happened were published.³

Around nine in the morning, the first images were already online.⁴

Smart selects five photos. They all include very emotional content. One portrays men lying down, half naked, their clothes and shoes abandoned between them. One is a close shot of a child in agony. Another shows a group of children huddled together. The last portrays a

1 Methodological note: This article is based primarily on a series of interviews and conversations with a number of Syrian photographers and image-makers inside and outside Syria: Mohamed Abdullah, Maya Abyad, Abd al-Kader Habak, Adham al-Hussein, Mohamed Abo Kasem, Hosam Katan, Orwa al-Mokdad, Amer al-Mouhibani, Muzaffar Salman, Yahia Alrejjo, Rafat al-Zakout. Five photographers still living inside Syria at the time of writing asked for their names not to be revealed. Additionally, I observed Facebook conversations around the images produced by some of these photographers and others such as Sameer al-Doumy, Mohamed Badra, Zakaria AbdelKafi, and Baraa al-Halabi. All the interviews in Arabic were translated by the author.

2 Adham al-Hussen, Interview, 22 May 2017.

3 Nisal Mohana al-Haddad, Interview, 23 May 2017.

4 The photos can be seen at: Smart News, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/album/225625#33623>.

young man agonizing, his body visibly contracted. The images rapidly invade social media. Several professional media outlets also republish the material. Additional images and videos, produced by media activists and journalists, soon begin to circulate. The news of the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhoun provokes strong international reactions. A few days later, the US navy bombs a Syrian military airport in retaliation. President Trump explicitly mentions the images of ‘poor children’ as the main trigger behind the attack.⁵

The story of Khan Shaykhoun, Adham al-Hussein, and Smart News offers a typical example of the context of production of horror images in Syria, i.e. photos portraying forms of violence against individuals. A large part of the visual content in Syria is produced by local, freelance, or citizen journalists.⁶ The victims portrayed in their photos may be friends, relatives, or people from their neighborhood. Only a very limited portion of the content makes its way to international media, while most of it is archived and circulates only on the web. In the process, often the name of the photographer and the victims disappear, and the images circulate alone. They are orphan images, images that, in the words of the photographer Muzaffar Salman, ‘do not have a father, a mother, or a story, or a background, nothing’.⁷

In this specific case, Adham’s name is reported with the photos on Smart News’ website. However, his name soon disappears when the images are published on Facebook profiles and groups. In other cases, Smart News does not disclose the name of their reporters operating in Syria for security reasons. The names of the victims also often remain unknown. In the end, the images circulating on social media do so without references, as bare documents of what happened: a chemical attack against civilians. Who were those children and the other photographed persons? Who was the photographer? Why were they there and what was the relationship with the photographed subjects? Under which conditions did they shoot those images and with what kind of equipment? All of this is forgotten as a means of producing only an image symbol of a war crime, in this case so strong as to trigger a foreign intervention.

However, not all anti-regime activists share the pictures on their Facebook profiles and some of them criticize the exposure of the victims for ethical and strategic reasons. Some of them invite those involved to stop publishing them, pointing out that they deprive the victims of their dignity and do not provoke any form of international solidarity. It is not the first time. On similar occasions, a debate on how to handle images including violent content emerges among Syrian civil society groups and figures: artists and intellectuals, journalists and media activists. It is an intermittent discussion, surfacing whenever violent pictures flood social and corporate media.

Indeed, the Syrian uprising, since escalated into a conflict, constitutes an unprecedented case when it comes to visual documentation. The production of audio-visual material by journalists, media activists, and ordinary citizens is overwhelming, probably making the Syrian

5 On Trump’s reaction to the chemical attack, see for example: Luke Harding, ‘It Had a Big Impact on Me’: Story Behind Trump’s Whirlwind Missile Response, 7 April 2017, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/07/how-pictures-of-syrias-dead-babies-made-trump-do-unthinkable>.

6 Enrico De Angelis, ‘The State of Disarray of a Networked Revolution: The Syrian Uprising’s Information Environment’, *Sociologica*, 3 (2011): 1.

7 Muzaffar Salman, Interview, 10 April 2018.

issue one of the most documented international events of all time.⁸ As a recent article by AFP describes, the verification and contextualization of the available material is prohibitive for any media organization.⁹ All this production shapes what I define here as a 'controversial archive'. The very notion of whether we can call it an archive is indeed an object of debate. Some writers, as Marlene Manoff points out, tend to consider a digital archive everything that exists anywhere in digital format. However, the storage dynamics of social media, the access to the material, and its classification pose several questions to the political nature of archival processes at their core.¹⁰

The archive of horror pictures is especially controversial because its inner *raison d'être* is often put strongly into question by the same constituencies (Syrian activists, journalists, intellectuals) who are supposed to be its main producers and consumers.

In this article I aim to analyze the cultural negotiation surrounding the controversial archive in the Syrian networked public sphere that emerged from the 2011 uprising against the Syrian regime. It explores how Syrians discuss and define the status of the horror images, and how they frame and react to its current apparent failure.

Indeed, if one of the main aims of the archive's production was to create visual narratives capable of changing the course of the conflict according to their political desires, as many of the interviewed photographers described, its failure appears undeniable today. The cultural negotiation of images I consider here takes several forms: public and private discussions, articles, but also individual practices characterizing the approach to digital images. To look or not look? Share them or not? How to use them? How to comment or present them? These forms shape a discourse denouncing the deficiencies of the 'field of vision' that characterizes the ways most horror images are produced, distributed, and looked at.¹¹ In this sense, the discussions around images can be considered as an 'archival work' aimed at collectively negotiating what of these events should be remembered, and how.¹² Also, the negotiation of horror images serves as a base to elaborate strategies of resistance against the dominant field of vision. It helps to create alternative individual and collective ways of approaching horror images in order to establish, even if only for a limited time and group of people, strategies of resistance. In the end, the aim is to identify a status for the horror image that is more respectful of the relationship between the photographer, the photographed, and the spectator.

8 Joshka Wessels, 'YouTube and the Role of Digital Video for Transitional Justice in Syria', *Politik* 19.4 (2016): 30.

9 Christian Chaise, 'Behind AFP's Syria Coverage', *AFP Correspondent*, 18 March 2018, <https://correspondent.afp.com/behind-afps-syria-coverage>.

10 Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines', *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4.1 (2004): 9.

11 For a description of the concept of 'field of vision' see: Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2008.

12 Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines': 19.

The Interpretive Communities of the Visual Narrations

I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Syrian photographers, media activists, and authors in order to investigate their relationships with horror images and their consideration of the media, political, and social environments in which such images are immersed (see note 1 for the complete list of interviewees). Some of them still live inside Syria and some left during the uprising. I also examined articles about visual production in Syria that were published in different Syrian electronic magazines over the last few years. Some posts on Facebook were also taken into account.

One's relation to the controversial archive is an individual matter. Each individual has a personal approach to images depending on their past experiences, current life conditions, and psychological state. The relation changes not only from individual to individual, but also according to different phases in a single individual's life. Even during the same day, some Syrian photographers point out, there are moments you feel you can look at the horror and others when you just cannot.

At the same time, distinct patterns shared by different groups can be identified. Around the controversial archive different 'interpretive communities' emerge. By 'interpretive community' I refer here to a fluid group of individuals who constantly discuss the status of horror images and the practices surrounding them.¹³ The negotiation produces shared values and behaviors, even if a definitive agreement can never be achieved. In this context, a specific tension has emerged in the last few years in relation to the controversial archive. At one extreme, we find 'image-savvy communities' composed of individuals who carry a more critical approach to images and who today mostly live outside of the country. They are able to follow the entire cycle of life of the images and their effects on different publics. These people are generally above thirty years old and have lengthier experience in cultural production. At the other end of the spectrum, we find groups of younger activists and citizen journalists who live inside the country and who produce most of the material that constitutes the controversial archive. I will refer to them as the 'unknown photographers', as their names are usually lesser known or even completely lost in the networks and the flows of information.

All of these communities are quite fluid, and contacts between single individuals enable a continuous exchange between them. In fact, they embody diverse stances towards the images that can often coexist within one single individual. Some of the professional photographers who work or worked for international agencies and organizations have a particularly relevant role in connecting different communities, having worked inside Syria after 2011 and often having trained young photographers.

13 Sue Robinson and Cathy DeShano, "Anyone Can Know": Citizen Journalism and the Interpretive Community of the Mainstream Press', *Journalism* 12.8 (2011): 963; Dan Berkowitz and James V. TerKeurst, 'Community as Interpretive Community: Rethinking the Journalist-Source Relationship', *Journal of Communication* (Summer, 1999): 125.

The image-savvy communities and the unknown photographers are bound by a complex relationship, symbiotic and conflicting at the same time. The first group generally tends to adopt a very critical stance towards the controversial archive. They aim to expose the fantasies that characterize the bare and uncritical exposition of Syrian pain and they question its strategic validity. At the same time, anyone who is engaged, in some way or another, in cultural production about Syria, has no choice but to rely on the controversial archive. The criticism of the archive, and even its complete rejection, is ultimately possible only because the archive exists. A moral issue also interconnects the different communities. Staring at horror images is, in the eyes of many Syrians in the diaspora, a moral obligation: you must stare at least at the conditions under which your fellow citizens are still living. Doing otherwise would mean denying the very existence of the unknown photographers.

The complex relation between different approaches to horror images among Syrians encourages us to avoid any simplistic analysis of the controversial archive. If it is true that images in Syria failed, the controversial archive offers the raw material through which single individuals and collectives can experiment with practices of resistance and different relations to the image.

The (Im)possible Syrian Civil Contract of Photography

The debate Syrians engage with in relation to horror images can be interpreted through the lens of what photographer and photography theorist Ariella Azoulay defines as the 'civil contract of photography'.¹⁴ Azoulay circumscribes the civil contract of photography as a social fiction: a tacit agreement that is never formally set. It primarily embroils the participants involved in the act of photographing (the photographer and the photographed) as well as the public (the spectator). In her view, the photos can be a powerful tool, and often the only one available, to express the flawed, non-existent, or temporarily suspended nature of the photographed persons' citizenship. The picture can rehabilitate a negated citizenship and testify to the violations perpetrated by human violence or natural disasters against it. It exposes how some citizens are not granted the same rights as others. In the community of photography, everyone is a citizen, independent of state institutions, gender, origin, or class.

However, the civil contract of photography requires a certain field of vision be established. Azoulay imbues the act of staring at the picture with a great responsibility in this process. The spectator has to take on a 'cinematic watching',¹⁵ which enables the photographed victim to become an active participant in the act of photography.¹⁶ A single photo is only 'a projective

14 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. I use here Azoulay's approach as it has the advantage of placing at its center the relationship between the photographer and the photographed, which in the complexity of digital flows risks being marginalized. For this reason, I will not indulge here in an analysis of the status of the images in relation to the wider dynamics of the networks. On this topic, see for example Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*, London: Pluto Press, 2018; and De Angelis, 'The State of Disarray of a Networked Revolution'.

15 For an analysis of the concept of 'cinematic watching' see also Justine Carville, 'Intolerable Gaze: The Social Contract of Photography', *Photography & Culture* 3.3 (2010): 353.

16 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 342.

surface that never discloses anything in itself'.¹⁷ It is a statement among other statements and its content is always partial and obscure. Approaching the photo through cinematic watching also implies not reducing it only to what is immediately visible within the frame. Rather, the picture has to be treated as a document that in the first place testifies to the immanent encounter between the photographer and the photographed person. In this sense, a sort of archaeology of images has to be established. As Georges Didi-Huberman does with four photos taken by the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz in his book *Images in Spite of All*, the spectator has to use the photo as a fragment to reconstruct the act of photography, including the positioning of the photographer.¹⁸

Cinematic watching enables the avoidance of an 'identificatory gaze', which reduces the photographed persons to a pre-fixed meaning that ruling systems of vision try to impose.¹⁹ The photo has to be approached critically, as a space through which new political relations can be constantly re-negotiated and the grievances of the photographed person rightly addressed. The criticism of the controversial archive is an appeal against the systematic violation of the civil contract of photography in Syria, even if this concept itself is never explicitly mentioned.

In the aftermath of the chemical attacks against Khan Shaikhoun, when images of dying children were circulating on social media, Razan Ghazzawi, a prominent feminist and dissident activist, wrote on her Facebook profile: 'disseminating images of naked children bodies on social media as means of documentation does not help restore their humanity killed by Assad'.²⁰ In a statement entitled 'We are not artists', the cinema collective Abounaddara writes:

The world's screens showed corpses deprived of Dignity, talking only of religions and sects, of geopolitics, and The Thousands and One Nights. [...] Remember: images of the victims of terrorist attacks in Europe and North America are never published in the name of a principle of Dignity inscribed in the charters of journalistic ethics in both the traditional media and YouTube.²¹

The Syrian leftist magazine *al-Jumhuriya* hosted a series of articles between March and June 2015 dedicated specifically to the issue of horror images. The debate begins with an article by Yassin al-Haj Salah, a prominent dissident intellectual, criticizing Abounaddara's stance towards images. Even if problematic, al-Haj Salah maintains there is a moral obligation to stare at the horror for those who have not witnessed it directly. The rights of single individuals to manage their own images come only after the right of the public to know what happened and the need for Syrians to build up a visual memory for future generations.²²

17 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 311

18 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

19 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, pp. 202, 375.

20 Razan Ghazzawi, Facebook update, 7 April 2017. Text no longer available.

21 Abounaddara, Facebook update, 24 March 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/abounaddara-films/dignity-has-never-been-photographed/1404543922939644/>.

22 Yassin al-Haj Saleh, 'Tahdiq fi wajah al-fazia', *al-Jumhuriya*, 29 May 2015, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33487>.

Other authors, however, responded to al-Haj Saleh in the same magazine, criticizing his position. Al-Hay al-Sayeed, a human rights lawyer, says:

We will not break this system of watching unless we present the pictures of the victims differently: a critical presentation that aims at making accountable the pre-existent meanings of the predominant system of watching and the recognition of the necessity to deeply shake it, and this will not happen by flooding the market of vision with pictures that attract little or no attention.²³

Ali Atassi, the founder of the documentary production company Bidayyat, also stresses this point:

Unfortunately, the majority of the images that detail the torturing and defaming of Syrian bodies circulate in the Western world, where they are consumed without any accountability. [...] How and why do we accept and contribute willingly to being treated in that world as *second-degree citizens*?²⁴

For Ali Atassi, al-Sayeed, and others, horror images should be collected only within non-public, organized archives, and not circulated on social media. The ruling system of vision is accused of exploiting the images of Syrian victims for different reasons than those for which they are produced. As Azoulay points out, the 'hit-parade' of images automatically prevents the spectator from establishing a mode of cinematic watching.²⁵ The orphan image, deprived of the name of the photographer and the photographed, condemns the victim to being a symbol of any victim, a ghost of the real photographed person. A process of *territorialization* of the disaster becomes impossible.

The over-exposure of Syrian pain, Abounaddara and others point out, trivializes the horror, de-politicizing it into representing an abstract, universal, human condition. As Rana Aisa writes:

the problem the artist today faces is not that of spatial definition, but rather the emptying of this space of its meaning, [...] and the artist contributes to the coverage of a *political obscuration* that is part of how the peaceful world deals with the world at war.²⁶

In the Syrian case, the visual insistence on violence also culminates in reinforcing the narratives that local and international powers try to impose on the Syrian conflict. It encourages the representation of Syria as a sectarian, barbaric, orientalist conflict, in which

23 Abd al-Hai al-Sayeed, 'Surat al-dhahiya wa karamat al-dhahiya', al-Jumhuriya, 20 July 2015, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33651>. All the translations from Arabic and the italics are mine.

24 Mohamed Ali Atassi, 'Al-karama fi hudhur al-faza'a', al-Jumhuriya, 2 June 2015, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33499>.

25 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 299.

26 Rana Aisa, 'Al-sura wa al-'anf', Bidayyat, 21 February 2018, http://bidayyat.org/ar/opinions_article.php?id=178#.Wr3eZ9NuaRs.

political responsibilities are nowhere to be found and Syrian society and identity disappears. Another problem is inherent to the photographic act in and of itself. The photographed Syrian is treated as a citizen of 'second order'.²⁷ As Abounaddara point out, Western victims have a right to privacy and dignity that is not conceded to Syrians. Ali Atassi asks:

How we can persuade a mother or a sister or a wife, or a son, that someone has the right to publish the image of their tortured son or his corpse? How do we allow ourselves to do this, in the name of what is right, according to which human principle, heavenly legitimacy, legislation, logic, or art?²⁸

Dellair Youssef, a video-maker, adds: 'In Syria we do not respect privacy. There is no photographic culture [...] I am against showing the victims and especially their faces. This does not respect the dignity of the victims, nor the identity of those victims.'²⁹ The lack of professional ethics among many young and unknown Syrian photographers is then associated with their exploitation by a global media industry they do not know or control, caught as they are in a desperate act of photographing the horror. However, the criticism of the controversial archive and its failure also exposes some paradoxes and unresolved issues at its core.

Reviving the Unknown Photographer

While the condemnation of the ruling field of vision in which horror images are immersed is crucial to identifying the violations at the base of the civil contract of photography, it also comes with a paradox: thousands of Syrians keep producing and spreading these images. We should then recognize that the problem cannot be reduced to the commodification of Syrian pain by international media. Indeed, Syrian photographers inside the country keep incessantly documenting the horror and many Syrians all over the world often decide to share and stare at violent images.

The photos are orphan, circulating mostly without the name of the photographer or the photographed. Often without even a caption or any other reference. The photographic act is very problematic, as most of the times the victims do not formally agree to be photographed. Without other information, the photo alone is vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation even more than it usually is. And yet, the photos are there. The unknown photographers keep taking and spreading them.

These photographers are predominantly young people, well under thirty, and they mainly started to take pictures with their mobile phones and then cameras only after the eruption of the protests. There are several reasons why they remain unknown. Sometimes it is for security reasons. Other times it is because of the policies of local media and organizations. Other times because the photographers want to avoid any publicity or reward for their activity. When asked about the criticism that some other Syrians throw at their work, their reaction is always

27 Ali Atassi, 'Al-karama fi hudhur al-faza'a'.

28 Ali Atassi, 'Al-karama fi hudhur al-faza'a'.

29 Dellair Youssef, Interview, 17 April 2018.

astonishment. Not only do they not see the problems inherent to the ruling field of vision, they also do not see any alternative to their actions. Usually, they do not even come into contact with critical stances towards images. None of the interviewed photographers inside Syria, for example, had ever heard of the name Abounaddara. Their act of photography is desperate and immediate. For them, it is the only possible way to create a memory of the victims against attempts at erasing them from history and the world. The conditions of photographing are often extremely dangerous. Planes often come back to bomb the same site a short while later, in order to prevent both relief operations and documentation. Many photographers have died while they were documenting, and many I spoke with had been injured several times. Under these conditions, the relationship the photographer establishes with the photographed is very problematic and cannot be compared with other, much more controlled disaster situations in the West, as for example in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

The photographic act becomes the last resource against the danger of oblivion. Here we can clearly identify the deepest impulse that drives any other archive building: the need to retain memory. As Saeed al-Batal, a documentary filmmaker, writes:

The camera, as it films, mirrors the plane: its exact opposite. The camera strives to protect, clinging on to every reflected shaft of light in order to preserve it forever, while the plane seeks to obliterate everything, to wipe out every memory and the keys to that memory, even smell itself.³⁰

Film director Orwa al-Mokdad writes about taking images of the victims after the bombings:

Here the camera that insists on a mutilated body becomes a ritual that replaces the burying of the dead. The anonymous death and the dehumanization of the human being are the worst forms of oppression and humiliation practiced by the regime, even in death. The camera is not only an eye or tool that accompanies the event: it is a ritual through which the victims' beloved wants to give meaning so that the dead did not die unknown. [...] Because the killer wants to erase his crime, and when a barrel bomb, missile, or grenades fall on an inhabited area, the names, features, and forms of the victims are lost.³¹

Some of the photographers burst into tears when they tell about losing their photo archives in Aleppo and other areas that have fallen back into the hands of the regime.

How the figure of the unknown photographer is considered, plays a crucial role in the cultural negotiation of horror images. Many Syrians who distance themselves from a total rejection of the photos do so in the name of reintegrating the unknown photographer into the frame. This comes with a conscious change of perspective towards the issue. While it should be

30 Saeed al-Batal, 'A Cigarette, and My Anti-Craft Camera', *Bidayyat*, 27 April 2015, http://bidayyat.org/opinions_article.php?id=124#.WsEZPdNuaRs.

31 Orwa al-Mokdad, 'Dafan al-Mawta bil swar', *Bidayyat*, 28 February 2014, http://bidayyat.org/ar/opinions_article.php?id=70#.WtM2cNNuaRt.

acknowledged that the civil contract of photography is globally hindered by a ruling field of vision, there is also an individual moral responsibility when it comes to establishing a different relationship with the photo. The single individual, and specifically a Syrian, has the responsibility to set up a cinematic watching, in spite of the wider field of vision. This implies, first of all, re-imagining the unknown photographer as an indispensable actor within the civil contract of photography.

The accent no longer falls on the effects of the photos on the public after they begin to circulate, but rather on the cultural meaning of the photographic act itself. The unknown photographer in this context is not to be evaluated as a professional photographer. They often come from within the community, or a neighboring village. They live the same war reality. The photographic act not only documents the victim portrayed in the photo, but also what the photographers see every day and their state of mind. On this point, Muzaffar Salman says:

I know that those images are not effective in relation to the West, but my relation with them is not to think about the victims: I think about the photographer, who sees these images each day. He shares this with me so that I can see it. He does not feel the violence [of the images]. So, I developed another kind of empathy: the empathy towards those who see this violence every day, and do not perceive the violence anymore.³²

In this context, we could say those images have to be stared at 'in spite of it all', to paraphrase Didi-Huberman.³³ As Maya Abyad, a Syrian video journalist and trainer, points out: 'I look at them because I think it is the bare minimum responsibility we have to undertake. We are not being subjected to the same level of violence. And we are hiding way too much in our bubble if we refuse even to see it'.³⁴

The Controversial Archive and its Different Uses

Through the controversial archive, different interpretive communities can agree on what is wrong and what is right when it comes to visually narrating the horror. Its bare presence avoids a problem that Azoulay describes in relation to, for example, the absence of images documenting rape in Western culture. Without images, it becomes extremely difficult to properly analyze what rape, in all its forms, looks like, and its divergences from and similarities to portrayals of women in advertising or the porn industry.³⁵ Even when Syrians decide to critically reject horror images, they can do so only because these images are there. Anyone can stumble on them, decide when and how to look at them, and, in this case, evaluate what has to be changed in the field of vision.

32 Muzaffar Salman, Interview, 10 April 2018.

33 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of all*.

34 Maya Abyad, Interview, 16 April 2018.

35 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 217.

The controversial archive is pervasive. Even when not explicitly mentioned, its presence offers a materiality that floats in the background. It is a necessary point of reference for any other visual production that tries to narrate the horror. We could ask ourselves: would Abounaddara productions make sense, or simply possess the same critical power, if the controversial archive did not exist? Orphan horror images, in other words, play a dirty but not eliminable role in exposing fragments of reality in a way that can then be criticized, rejected, and transformed.

I will now analyze in detail three cases illustrating different approaches to the controversial archive. Each one presents different ways of conceiving, using and relating to it, and ultimately of shaping alternative forms of resistance against the ruling field of vision.

The Syrian Archive

Hadi Al Khatib is one of the founders of the Syrian Archive.³⁶ The organization was founded in 2014, with the aim of collecting, verifying, and analyzing visual documentation related to human rights violations in Syria since 2011. The material is collected primarily in order to support legal court cases and advocacy campaigns. Another of its aims is to build up a memory repository for a future process of transitional justice.³⁷ Until now, the organization has focused mainly on chemical and other illegal weapons, as well as attacks on hospitals and other civilian facilities. The eight people who work within the organization are mainly software developers, engineers, and data analysts. They have developed software aimed at automatically collecting visual content (videos and photos) from over 5,000 sources on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

The relation between organized archives such as this and the controversial archive is complex. Hadi Al Khatib presents it as a dilemma. The content distributed on social media is overwhelming and often does not abide by basic professional and ethical norms. Al Khatib recognizes that the amount of violent content and the way it circulates can bring about a de-humanization of the victims. Additionally, valuable but isolated videos and photos risk being lost in the networks and ignored. For these reasons, the content should be verified, contextualized, curated, and stored. The Syrian Archive takes care of all these aspects, congregating the material on only one platform. Significantly, Syrian Archive chose to make the database available online, so that anyone can further use the material.

At the same time, the *Syrian Archive* could not have been created without the controversial archive and its dispersed, unregulated, and pervasive content. If the flows of content production on social media suddenly stopped, so would the organized archive. The pervasiveness of the networks is what assures preservation and completeness, at least in the Syrian context. Local, smaller archives are always in danger of becoming lost because of the war or when the country is not accessible to journalists. Without the controversial archive and those who produce it, Syria would be engulfed in silence. The availability of content on social media exists without any realistic alternative in terms both of safety and outreach. Al Khatib explains this point clearly:

36 Syrian Archive, <https://syrianarchive.org/en>.

37 On this point, see, for example, Sune Haugbolle, 'Evidence, Justice, and Peace-Making in Syria', SyriaUntold, 8 December 2016, <http://syriauntold.com/2016/12/evidence-justice-peace-making-syria/>.

We are a small civil society organization. Even if we had many more resources, we could not compete with those companies (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter). They have a huge outreach and infrastructure. Even if people were willing to send their material directly to the archive, well, many of them may not even know about us. Also, the archive would need the capacity to store everything and this is simply impossible.³⁸

FROM PHOTOGRAPHING TO CURATING

Mohamed Abdullah is a Syrian photographer known as Artino. Before 2011, he used to take photos as a hobby, but during the conflict he started to work for Reuters. He lived for one and a half years in Eastern Ghouta, documenting the siege, until he left in August 2014. Artino describes how his relationship with horror pictures changed gradually during his years as a photographer in Syria. In the beginning, documenting the war's impact on civilians was an automatic, more or less uncritical operation. He used to publish pictures with violent content on social media, guided by the idea that the public had the right, but also the obligation, to look at what was happening. With time, he started attributing more importance to the relationship with the photographed persons, and tried to produce more photos of daily life and personal portraits. Also, he began to investigate the effects of his work on the spectators. He says:

I was talking to other people, friends outside the agencies, asking them what the impact of these pictures was. I also started to pay attention to what some NGOs and organizations were posting and publishing. I started to receive comments from people telling me that too much blood was coming out. I started to avoid sharing pictures of violence in the way I used to do in the beginning. In 2014, I met with Abounaddara in Beirut and I learned a lot from them and about their way of showing the situation. And I met many Syrian artists who were narrating the horror in different ways. I learned lot, while I was still under the siege. I learned how to show the situation but in a different way.³⁹

The case of Artino illustrates well the cultural negotiation around horror images and their ramifications for creating common guidelines when it comes to dealing with them. Like many other photographers, he stresses the moral obligation of documenting the horror and staring at it. However, he also acknowledges the issues related to the visual narratives characterizing most of the images' production.

The predominance of violent pictures in Syria is itself a problem. As photographer Muzaffar Salman describes, photojournalism has almost no tradition in Syria. Before the uprising, it was an activity mainly relegated to the production of touristic postcards. When the power and the relevance of photography emerged, combined with the availability of cheap digital devices, the lenses were directed almost exclusively at the war.⁴⁰ As Mohamed Abdullah relates:

38 Hadi Al Khatib, Interview, 21 May 2018.

39 Mohamed Abdullah, Interview, 20 April 2018.

40 Muzaffar Salman, Interview, 10 April 2018.

When I was in Aleppo, I was working with activists who were also working for Reuters and I was training them. And I was trying to tell them what it means to produce photos of daily life, because they do not know how to do it. If there is violence they shoot and publish it. If you ask them to portray daily life, they do not know what you are talking about. One day a young photographer asked me: were you photographing before the revolution? Yes? But what you were photographing?⁴¹

This context contributes to creating a huge gap between ‘normal’ and ‘horror’ images, augmenting a portrayal of Syrians based on the dichotomy of victims and executioners. For these reasons, many professional photographers like Mohamed Badra, Sameer al-Doumi, and others consciously began trying to produce visual narratives that could balance out the blood filling most of what was being produced.

Artino went even further. He started to work for the organization The Syria Campaign, selecting photos for circulation on the web and writing short articles about them. Instead of only producing photos, he also curates already existing content. Having identified the issues related to the orphan images and their negative impact on the civil contract of photography, Artino acts as a curator of the controversial archive. In fact, he provides a ready-made archeology of the images, rendering the identity of the photographer and the photographed, as well as the story behind the photographic act, accessible to the public.

As an example, he mentions a photo taken in Douma (see Fig 1). The photo depicts a number of people, among them children, sitting in what appears to be an ancient cave or catacomb. The photo is in black and white, and, in the background, under an arc, a religious metal frame hangs. The photo circulated on Facebook without the name of the photographer and the photographed people, and without any description. It was difficult to reconstruct when and where it was taken, and what it represented. Artino thought the photo was interesting, but also that it needed more information in order to be properly contextualized. He decided to search online for the photographer and soon found him. His name is Abou al-Hussein and he is not a professional photographer. He revealed that the people in Douma dug the cave themselves, as a refuge against the bombings. It took a month and a half to make it. Given the lack of space, it was reserved mainly for children, old and injured people. Poor people in Eastern Ghouta, who do not have the possibility of fleeing, often dug these holes in order to have more chances of survival. The photo was then republished, together with an interview with the photographer.⁴²

41 Mohamed Abdullah, Interview, 20 April 2018.

42 The Syria Campaign, ‘This photo memorialises life [...]’, Facebook update, 27 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/TheSyriaCampaign/photos/a.608812989210718/1711973765561296/?type=3&theater>.



Fig. 1: *Abou al-Hassan al-Andalusi*, courtesy of the author.

ART AS CINEMATIC WATCHING

Diala Brisly is a Syrian sketch artist and painter. Her work focuses mainly on children. She defines her relation with the controversial archive as a constant and irresolvable ‘internal battle’. On the one hand, she completely understands those who tend to reject horror images. For many Syrians, it is a matter of protecting themselves from the horror. Also, she recognizes that the overabundance of visual violence can anesthetize or even push people away from the Syrian tragedy. Horror images do not necessarily make one understand or feel what it means to live through a war. On the other hand, Brisly’s work relies heavily on the controversial archive. This is not only because of a moral responsibility to those who left the country. It is also because, if someone from outside pretends to produce narratives about Syria, this is the only way Syrians can maintain contact with the reality on the ground.

At the time of writing, she was working on an illustrated book about a group of Syrian children who left the country between 2015 and 2016.⁴³ The book covers their stories in Syria during the war and then as refugees in Lebanon, and is based on a series of interviews conducted by Italian journalist Francesca Mannocchi. Brisly uses the controversial archive extensively when it comes to producing her illustrations. When the children describe

43 Francesca Mannocchi and Diala Brisly, *Se Chiudo gli Occhi: La Guerra in Siria nella Voce dei Bambini*, Roma: Round Robin Editrice, 2018.

scenes of war, she does not feel she possesses the necessary visual knowledge or proximity in order to draw them immediately. She then engages in what she calls 'visual research' into the horror. She goes on Facebook or Google and looks for images related to a certain scene. In one of the interviews, a young girl for example tells how she goes out to buy something for her mother and on her way back a bomb hits her. She wakes up in hospital. In order to depict a scene like this, Brisly collects several images portraying children in field hospitals. Most of the time, they are photographed sitting and waiting, often covered in their own blood, for someone to give them treatment. She then creates 'puzzles' of images. She stares at them for a long time before she is able to start drawing. She is interested in understanding how the children feel after going through such a traumatic event. She says:

Most of the time the children look at their own bodies. They are shocked and they do not understand what has happened. Their gaze is empty. Sometimes they stare at their hands, as to see if their bodies are still complete. The horror is present in their look and in their minds, even more than in the scene itself.⁴⁴

Other times, she works on a single photo she has spotted on Facebook. She is especially interested in images taken with mobile phones by non-professional photographers. It is this kind of image, she says, that sometimes strikes her as particularly relevant. Some of these images can reveal fragments of reality if you stare at them properly, but on Facebook, as they are, they often pass by completely ignored.

One such example is an orphan photo portraying a group of people removing a child from under the debris of a bombed building. The episode takes place at night and the rescuers use mobile phones to illuminate the scene. Brisly has made an illustration based on the photo (see Fig 2). The light is much stronger and its range wider than in the original photo, and she has also added more mobile phones in the hands of the people surrounding the hole.

This is a typical scene in Syria that has occurred thousands of times during the last few years. The added light stresses the value of the nocturnal rescue act. The abundance of mobile phones represents the role of this technology in Syria today. They document the scene, have produced the original photo that served as inspiration. They are also the lamps enabling the search for the people buried under the rubble. Instead of being used for entertainment purposes only, as anywhere else in the world, the phone-as-lamp acquires a completely different meaning.

44 Diala Brisly, Interview, 11 May 2018.



Fig. 2: Diala Brisly, courtesy of the author.

Another example is a photo of a young boy in a hospital. He is photographed standing up, with bandages enveloping him and blood sacks swinging from his body. Brisly reworked the photo with only a few changes (see Fig 3). The boy's feet do not touch the ground, as if he is levitating. She also added, next to the blood sacks, other objects: a kite, a heart, and some photos. Brisly says her idea was to shift the attention from the physical loss (the blood, the wounds) to other elements: the boy's dreams and memories, his childhood and innocence.



Fig. 3: Diala Brisly, courtesy of the author.

In both cases, the translation of the images into illustrations can be interpreted as an operation of cinematic watching. Both photographer and the victim remain unknown. However, the illustration imposes on the spectator a type of cinematic watching that the artist has performed on the original photo. The horror cannot be trivialized anymore. The drawing does not document the horror that has happened: it becomes a visual document trying to understand what the photographed persons (and the artist) may feel in that instant. It avoids the identificatory gaze that invites the spectator to indulge in the meaning of the framed event. The child is no longer only the ghost of a victim; the scene over the rubble is isolated from the series of photos of destruction that risks reducing it to a normal event of war.

Conclusion

Different stances towards the controversial archive at a collective or individual level, constantly confront each other, from those who uncritically contribute to a 'slaughterhouse' of images generated from a desperate photographic act,⁴⁵ to those who would prefer to relegate these images to organized archives, keeping them out of the public eye. However, even the criticism of horror images ultimately relies on the controversial archive. It is the presence of images that make it possible to identify the deficiencies of the field of vision, the issues that arise from the current visual narratives and their consumption.

The overwhelming, unprofessional, and dispersed production of orphan images in Syria can develop due to a lack of control over the field of vision, rather than the opposite. In contradistinction to conflicts in which military powers can regulate the flows of images more easily, in Syria the overabundance of audiovisual material reveals how the regime, as any other armed actor, has limited control on the ground of the production of visual narratives. In this sense, the Syrian conflict is at least not invisible. The deregulated production of horror images, albeit very problematic, offers the raw material through which the issues inherent to the current visual narratives can be debated and, in the end, even rejected.

The very presence of these images is what enables people to denounce the failure of the civil contract of photography in Syria and discuss the unresolvable questions related to how to narrate the horror. A contradiction exists in the heart of those who reject horror images when their rejection relies on ethical and strategic grounds. Without the controversial archive, it would be extremely difficult to explore different and innovative types of narratives. Individual or collective efforts in relating differently, and painfully, to the controversial archive expose this contradiction. As the analyzed cases prove, endless interpretations of and approaches to horror images coexist, while at the same time recognizing the problems inherent to the wider field of vision.

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45 See Abounaddara, 'The Revolting Animals', Facebook update, 8 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/abounaddara-films/the-revolting-animals-de-revolterande-djuren-la-r%C3%A9volte-des-animaux/1745373475523352/>.

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07. CORPORATIONS ERASING HISTORY: THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN ARCHIVE

HADI AL KHATIB



Fig. 1: Photo by Muzaffar Salman in Aleppo 2014.

The World Health Organization has revealed that between April and June 2017, 41 medical facilities in Syria had been attacked, amounting to one attack every two days.¹ Many civilian casualties and injuries as a result of those attacks were reported, and damage or destruction to the facilities caused a shortage of medical care that affected over a million people.

Most of those medical facilities were located in Idlib, the largest remaining opposition-controlled city during the 2017-2019 period. Earlier in the Syrian conflict thousands of Syrians were displaced from the rural areas around Damascus, as well as from the cities of Daraa,

Aleppo, Homs, and other locations, with the majority relocating to Idlib or Aleppo's countryside.²

1 World Health Organization, 'Attacks on Health Care', 1 April 2017, https://www.who.int/emergencies/attacks-on-health-care/Attacks_Dashboard_2017_Q2.pdf?ua=1.

2 Patrick Wintour, 'Thousands of Syrians Displaced as Threat of Idlib Attack Grows', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/10/thousands-of-syrians-displaced-as-threat-of-idlib-attack-grows>.

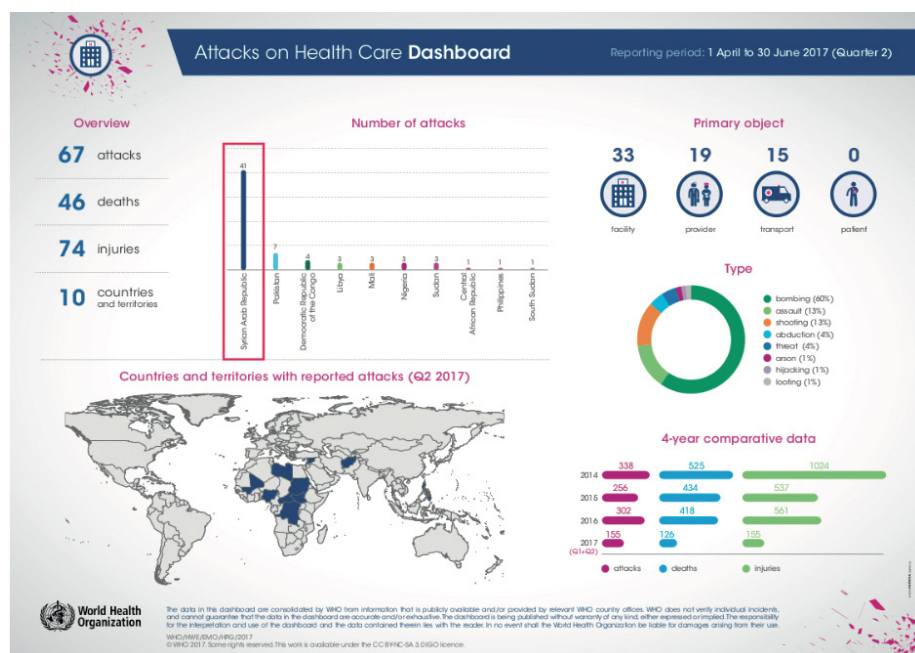


Fig. 2: WHO reported attacks on medical facilities in ten countries including Syria between April 1 and June 30, June 2017.

We at the Syrian Archive worked to collect, preserve, and verify videos, photos, and other social media materials documenting these attacks on medical facilities. The Syrian Archive is an organization made up of human rights advocates, archivists, technicians, and open source investigators.³ We are dedicated to preserving, memorializing, and adding value to publicly available information related to human rights violations committed by all sides during the Syrian conflict through verifying and enhancing digital content, establishing verified databases for reporting and advocacy purposes, and acting as an evidence tool for legally implementing justice and accountability efforts as concept and practice.

Content Takedowns

On June 26, 2017, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube jointly announced the formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism.⁴ In their announcement, the companies stated that they would be working on developing and utilizing technological solutions for content moderation, including the use of machine learning. Since that time, Google

3 The Syrian Archive, <https://syrianarchive.org/en>.

4 YouTube Official, 'Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube Announce Formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism', *YouTube Official (blog)*, June 2017, <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2017/06/facebook-microsoft-twitter-and-youtube.html>.

has removed 7,762,431 videos from their YouTube platform, of which they have claimed 6,182,263 were initially detected by automated flagging before being manually reviewed and removed.⁵

Shortly thereafter, in July 2017, we at the Syrian Archive, together with Syrians for Truth and Justice and Justice for Life, published a report that focused on eight attacks on medical facilities perpetrated either by the Syrian or Russian armed forces.⁶ At the time, those facilities served a combined population of 1.3 million people (a beneficiary group larger than the population of Brussels).⁷ Just before publishing the report, we checked the status of all the videos that we had used as source material for our report. We wanted to ensure that the videos were accessible online so that readers could review our findings and analysis. However, we found that despite having the videos archived within our internal infrastructure, most of the ones from YouTube that we had included in our analysis had been removed or otherwise been made unavailable.

This would not have been a problem had the videos been glorifying violence or promoting terrorism, which supposedly are the justifications for stricter content moderation policies by platforms. But we found that, in many cases, videos documenting attacks on medical facilities were published by established media groups like Aleppo Media Center, Baladi News Network, SMO Syria, Sham News Agency, and Qasioun News Agency.⁸ Others were published by humanitarian groups, including the Idlib Health Directorate, well-regarded human rights documentation groups, for example the Violation Documentation Center, or citizen reporters like Muaz Al Shami.⁹

YouTube channels such as the one for Shaam News Network, have been active since the early days of the Syrian uprisings and have uploaded videos of peaceful protests from various cities in Syria.¹⁰ At the time that this YouTube channel was made unavailable, on November 4, 2017, it housed over 200,000 videos. Similarly, Aleppo Media Center held 4,700 videos prior to their removal.

5 Google Transparency report, 'YouTube Community Guidelines enforcement', October 2017, <https://transparencyreport.google.com/youtube-policy/removals?hl=en>.

6 Syrians for Truth and Justice, <https://stj-sy.org/en/>; Justice for Life, <https://justiceforlife.net/>; The Syrian Archive, 'Medical Facilities Under Fire', July 2017, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/Medical-Facilities-Under-Fire/>.

7 The Syrian Archive, 'Medical Facilities Under Fire'.

8 Aleppo Media Center, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoUs821xB8HYAXBHdDcygdg>; Baladi News, <https://www.baladi-news.com/en>; Syrian Media Organisation, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/smosyria>; Shaam News Network, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SHAMSNN>; Qasioun News, <https://www.qasioun-news.com/en>.

9 Idlib Health Directorate, <https://ihd-sy.org/en/>; Violations Documentation Centre in Syria, <https://vdc-sy.net/en/>; Muaz Al Shami, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUIMqmvEsSY1zJvpV539z8g>.

10 Shaam News Network, '18-3-2011 مظاهرة درعا أمام المسجد العمري', YouTube Video, 18 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiUA7M0gGVM>.

One of the videos published by Aleppo Media Center¹¹ features the first moments of the attack that targeted the Al Rahmah hospital in Khan Sheikun.¹² This video documents what happens inside the medical facility, where children's voices are clearly heard in the background.

Another video published by Aleppo Media Center includes an interview with one of the workers at the hospital, who explains:

The hospital received hundreds of injured people as a result of the chemical attack. This included women and children. The Russian and Syrian air force attack targeted the medical point with fifteen airstrikes which damaged the medical point very badly, and it's out of service now.¹³



Fig. 3: AMC video published on YouTube documenting the damage to the interior of Al Rahmah hospital in Khan Sheikun.

We reached out to Aleppo Media Center, Shaam News Network, and many other news agencies to get copies of the emails they received from Google in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons why the content had been taken down. As an example, Shaam News Network received three separate emails explaining that the channel received 'strikes' for three specific videos, allegedly for violating YouTube's community guidelines about violent or graphic content, content that incites violence or encourages dangerous activities.¹⁴ Two of the videos were published online in 2012. These videos documented people and children killed as a result of alleged shelling by the Syrian government.

11 Aleppo Media Center, 'اللحظات الأولى لقصف الطائرات الحربية مستشفى خان شيخون في ريف إدلب الجنوبي', YouTube Video, 4 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mZa0S94eXU>.

12 The Syrian Archive, 'Medical Facilities Under Fire'.

13 Aleppo Media Center, '4-4-2017 شاهد آثار الدمار الذي خلفته الغارات الجوية على مستشفى الرحمة في مدينة خان شيخون', YouTube Video, 4 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtDy8xoRuSc>.

14 YouTube, 'Community Guidelines', <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/policies/#community-guidelines>.

Starting in July 2017, when we were finishing our report on medical facilities that had been attacked, our team began communicating with Google to try to reinstate the materials that had been taken down. As a result of our discussions, over 200,000 videos and hundreds of YouTube channels have been reinstated, but numerous problems remain unsolved.¹⁵ Hundreds of YouTube channels documenting human rights violations remain currently unavailable, such as the YouTube channel of KafrZita media group. One of their videos that was taken down documents a chlorine attack that targeted the city of KafrZita on April 18, 2014, as reported by the OPCW fact finding mission.¹⁶ This video is archived and accessible via the Syrian Archive platform.¹⁷

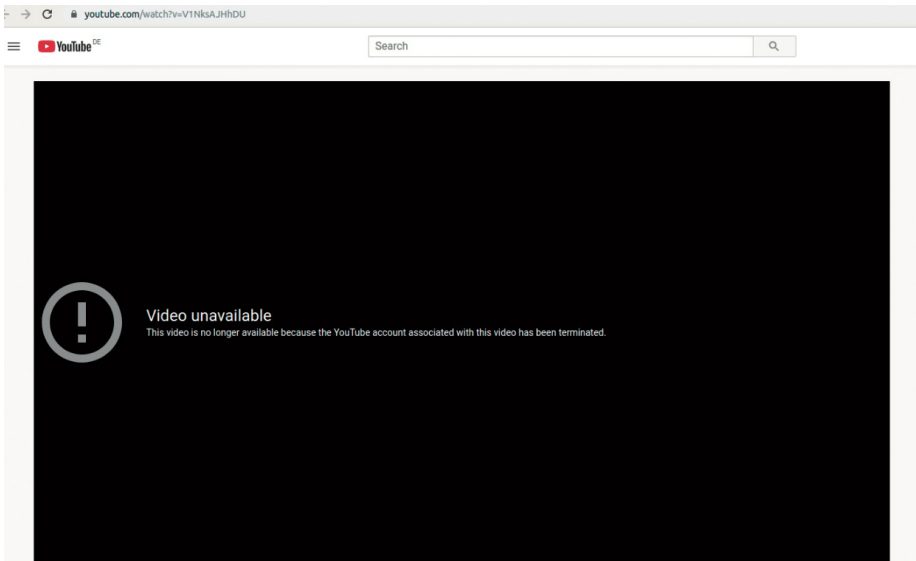


Fig. 4: Removed video from the KafrZita media group YouTube channel.

15 The Syrian Archive, 'Technology and Advocacy', <https://syrianarchive.org/en/tech-advocacy>.

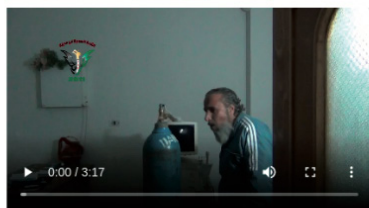
16 Security Council Report, 'Third Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism', 24 August 2016, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_738.pdf.

17 KafrZita Media Group, '4 18 هـام للإعلام حماة كفرزيتا إخلاء الجرحى وطواقم أحد المشافي نتيجة استهداف المدينة بغاز الكلور السام 18 4', YouTube Video, 18 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1NksAJHhDU>.

Verified Observation: fd03b8c /Syrian Archive

✕

Warning: this video may contain graphic content



Download file ↓

Online Link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1NksAJHhDU>

Meta

md5 734407e625f28c174fa7ace8a5f926e5 - acquired 2015-08-23

Incidents:

KZ1180414

Online Title:

Evacuation of the medical staff and the patients from the hospital as a result of the chemical attack

Summary

The video begins with footage that seems to be from the reception hall at one of the medical points. The camera then focuses on the building entrance, showing people who appear to be leaving the place, as well as a person wearing a gas mask. The person who is filming the video can be heard saying: "Hama Kafarzita Hospitals evacuation ". The camera then goes back to the inside, showing a person wearing a medical uniform and a toxic gas mask while he runs. Then the video shows footage of a person wearing a toxic gas mask, seem to be evacuating an injured from a room which contains beds and a blue gas cylinder, where a person wearing a toxic gas mask appears on one of the beds while another person is providing himself with an oxygen mask. The camera then goes outside the building, where a number of people appear, some wearing toxic gas masks, and then the camera returns inside to show the carrying of a person who puts a toxic gases mask; and taking him out to be placed in a white car parked at the entrance to the building.

Fig. 5: Syrian Archive's video database.

It is very difficult to reach out to each and every person who has uploaded videos documenting crimes to YouTube, in order to reinstate their channel. Many of those citizen reporters have been displaced within Syria, are refugees in third-party countries, or have been killed during the war. These are just some of the reasons why the removed videos might remain lost forever.

This problem is not specific to the Syrian context. With the proliferation of mobile phones and better-quality internet and communication infrastructures, many other conflicts and human rights violations, such as in Yemen, are being documented on social media platforms by brave people who imperil their lives to do so. These materials risk being removed from social media platforms due to political and technical decisions, such as the EU Proposal on the Prevention of Terrorist Content Online, and the implementation of machine-learning to detect graphic videos and photos, which partially automates their removal.

Why Visual Documentation Is Important

There is an emerging body of literature and case law in which user-generated digital content from social media platforms is scrutinized or has been used in legal claims. Archiving and

preserving digital materials that provide information about human rights abuses and war crimes are increasingly recognized as critical for justice and accountability efforts globally. There are a number of cases that illustrate this. In August 2017 and again in 2018, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for a Libyan national accused of being directly responsible for the killing of 33 people, based on video material and transcripts, as well as posts made on social media platforms.¹⁸ And in both Germany and Sweden, individuals have been found guilty of terrorist offenses and human rights violations due to incriminating content posted to social media platforms.¹⁹

In Syria, content preserved and verified by the Syrian Archive project might offer the only evidence indicating whether a human rights violation even happened. Such material can help implicate potential perpetrators in the many areas where the Syrian government has gained control and has been destroying physical evidence and reconstructing crime scenes.²⁰

But visual documentation is also important for other reasons. Content can strengthen the political campaigns of human rights advocates by providing, for instance, documentation on the violation of children's rights, sexual and gender-based violence, violations against specifically protected persons and objects, or the use of illegal weapons. Visual documentation can also feed into humanitarian response-planning by helping to identify areas of risk or need, and contributing to the protection of civilians.

Such materials also allow us to tell untold stories, by amplifying the voices of those on the ground. Not every incident in the Syrian conflict has been reported by journalists. Very challenging conditions have made it extremely difficult for local and especially international media to work in Syria, meaning that many incidents have been missed or under-reported.²¹

Finally, verified visual content can help human rights activists and Syrian citizens to set up a memorialization process and create dialogue around issues related to peace and justice. Such dialogue has the potential to recognize and substantiate the suffering of citizens. It provides multiple perspectives on the conflict, which prevents revisionist or simplified narratives, while raising awareness of the situation in the country and highlighting the futility of violence to future generations.²² Video and images often complement official narratives and press accounts of an event or situation, adding both detail and nuance. At other times, they directly rebut certain factual claims and contradict pervasive narratives.²³

18 International Criminal Court, *The Prosecutor v. Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfalli*, Case No. ICC-01/11-01/17, Warrant of Arrest (15 August 2017 and 4 July 4 2018), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/libya/al-werfalli>.

19 Södertörn District Court, Sweden, *Prosecutor v. Mouhannad Droubi*, Case No. B 13656-14, Decision (26 February 2015), <http://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/3296/Prosecutor-v-Mouhannad-Droubi/>.

20 Jeff Deutch and Hadi Habal, 'The Syrian Archive: A Methodological Case Study of Open-Source Investigation of State Crime Using Video Evidence from Social Media Platforms', *State Crime Journal* 7.1 (Spring, 2018): 46-76.

21 Deutch and Habal, 'The Syrian Archive'.

22 Deutch and Habal, 'The Syrian Archive'.

23 Jeff Deutch and Nico Para, 'Targeted Mass Archiving of Open Source Information: A Case Study', in

As social media companies remove these important materials, archiving becomes necessary to ensure that this content is available and accessible in the long term, in order to reconstruct and verify the digital collective memory of what happened and when, and who has been responsible for committing crimes in Syria over the last eight years.

Preserving this material will also avoid manipulation of the Syrian historical narrative and provide means to search for the truths that Syrians have wanted the whole world to witness and not forget. Hopefully one day it can be used to prosecute war criminals who have been responsible for killing thousands of people with full impunity.

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08. WHY THE SYRIAN ARCHIVE IS NO LONGER (ONLY) ABOUT SYRIA

DONATELLA DELLA RATTA

Introduction: The Archive as Evidence

February 2019 marked a milestone in the history of international justice against war crimes and crimes against humanity. Two Syrian citizens, who had sought asylum in Germany in 2012, were arrested in their hosting country on allegations of ‘carrying out or aiding torture and crimes against humanity’.¹ The charges were mostly built around an investigation carried out by the Berlin-based European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) who had interviewed torture survivors. Substantial evidence was gathered from the archive of a former member of the Syrian military intelligence known as ‘Caesar’, who had turned into a ‘forensic’ photographer and smuggled thousands of images documenting torture and human rights abuses committed by the regime.

‘Codename: Caesar’ was an exhibition of selected material from the 55,000 photographs documenting torture inflicted on around 11,000 Syrians between 2011 and 2013.² It toured the world and, in 2015, made it to the UN headquarters in New York, where it generated outrage and indignation. ‘It is imperative that we do not look away,’ the US deputy representative to the UN declared at the time.³ Articles, interviews, and awareness campaigns followed. And yet, despite the media buzz and the appalled declarations of politicians around the world, for many years ‘Codename: Caesar’ remained just an exhibition; a visual representation, an ‘aesthetic’ object, although a very graphic one – until February 2019 when, for the first time, it finally turned into visual evidence to bring perpetrators to trial.

‘Why do you risk your lives to film?’, I asked my Syrian friends back in 2011, when I was still living in Damascus. ‘The world does not know what is happening in Syria,’ they replied. ‘Once the world knows, the world will act. As soon as information flows, mobilization will start.’⁴ Syrians started their networked, visual, online uprising in parallel to the street protests on the ground, with the absolute faith in the ‘evidence-image’, an image born from its makers’ aspiration of serving proof of human rights violations.⁵

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- 1 Kate Connolly, ‘Germany Arrests Two Syrians Suspected of Crimes Against Humanity,’ *The Guardian*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/13/germany-arrests-two-suspected-syrian-secret-service-officers>.
 - 2 GOAL, <https://www.goalglobal.org/stories/post/the-caesar-photographic-exhibition>.
 - 3 Raya Jalabi, ‘Images of Syrian Torture on Display at UN: “It Is Imperative We Do not Look Away”’, *The Guardian*, 11 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/11/images-syrian-torture-shock-new-yorkers-united-nations>.
 - 4 Donatella Della Ratta, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria’, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 10.2-3 (2017): 109-32.
 - 5 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Chicago: University

The Syrian image possesses an 'unbearable lightness'. It is light, almost imperceptible, as its pixelated, blurred qualities equal little to no aesthetic value in the professional news-making business. Yet this very lightness becomes unbearable in the moment when it is 'burdened with an ethical demand' that the pixelated aesthetics themselves help construct through their immediacy, liveliness, and apparent lack of mediation.⁶ It is as if the *being there* of the filmer would necessarily guarantee the truth-value of the image and push the viewer to act.

Syrian image-makers discovered quite early in the uprising and at their own expense, that there was no 'straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action'.⁷ Shooting as in filming was quite soon matched by the parallel movement of shooting as in killing, the only relevant difference being that Syrians, who once 'used to be killed in the dark', were now murdered in broad daylight.⁸ Syrians started to lose faith in the ethical power of the image and turned to its aesthetic qualities instead. In the past years, international art venues and film festivals have paid tribute to the Syrian image with successful exhibitions, workshops, screenings, and prestigious awards.⁹

Yet February 2019 marked a new beginning in the history of the Syrian image, or perhaps rather a 'homecoming'. The Syrian image came back to its original evidentiary purpose. Its ethical stance seemed to have been restored, its call for justice revived. Perhaps the German court sentence can pave the way to similar decisions by other countries and the visual material accumulated during almost a decade can finally meet its initial goal of serving as the historical documentation of a genocide. Projects such as the Video and Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) or the Syrian Archive, striving for justice through the visual, can help bring those who are responsible to court and, at the same time, accumulate layers of visual knowledge in order to build a counter-narrative to that of the regime.¹⁰

The battle on the ground has moved to the digital. The Syrian image, once the quintessential tool of unarmed and peaceful resistance, has now opened a new frontline in the domain of the immaterial, in the fight for control over the past to build a narrative for the future. The Syrian archive functions as a collection of evidentiary forms that aspire to become

of Chicago Press, 2008. For a discussion of the evidence-image in the Syrian uprising see Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*, London: Pluto Press, 2018.

6 Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 158.

7 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso, 2009, p. 75.

8 Josepha Ivanka Wessels, 'Syria: The Role of Grassroots Videos in Conflict Escalation', in Ole Waever and Isabel Bramsen (eds) *New Theories and Approaches in Peace & Conflict*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

9 Many Syrian films have been awarded in prestigious venues in the past years, such as *Coma* (dir. Sarah Fattahi, 2015, *Visions du Reel*) and *Chaos* (dir. Sarah Fattahi, 2018, Filmmakers of the Present golden award, Locarno Film Festival 2018), *Still Recording* (dir. Saeed al Batal and Ghyath Ayoub, 2018, Fipresci prize, Venice Film Festival 2018), and *Last Men in Aleppo* (dir. Firas Fayyad, 2017, nominated for the Oscars, won the World Documentary Grand Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival 2017).

10 The Syrian Archive, <https://syrianarchive.org/en>.

historical documentation and crystallize into memory to be passed down from generation to generation.

While this digital frontline has been opened and the German court sentence seems to have brought a renewed faith in the evidentiary power of the Syrian image, other issues remain more opaque and ambiguous, requiring highlighting and dissection. Focusing exclusively on the evidentiary function of the Syrian image bears the risk of losing sight of other features and functioning mechanisms that have emerged from Syria, while they are no longer (only) Syria-related.

This essay is an attempt to think and theorize the Syrian archive in light of these dynamics that manifested in post-2011 Syria, but have turned into issues of global concern in relation to the political economy of contemporary image-making and image-distribution. To many extents, Syria proved to be a laboratory for experimenting with techniques and tactics of surveillance, repression, and control that are image-related and are now implemented globally and often by corporate subjects with commercial purposes. The hegemonic web 2.0 or 'social web', particularly after the boom of social networking platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram, has connected narratives of socio-economic wealth and political progress with networked practices such as open access and peer-production, and sharing and remixing user generated content.¹¹ And yet the Syrian case brings to the surface the dark side of participatory cultures, which is now also becoming apparent globally with increasing levels of surveillance and repression performed through the visual – facial recognition being just the latest of these techniques.

In this regard, Syria provides us with an extremely compelling case study of a hypertrophic visual production that, when taken out of the exceptional context in which it was generated (the 2011 uprising turned into civil war), suggests that concerns of storage, access, ownership, and distribution should be analyzed in the broader framework of contemporary visual political economy on a global scale.

Who Owns the Syrian Image?

'Poor revolutionary fools, millionaires in images,' is Jean Luc Godard's bitter comment on the loss of thousands of lives of Palestinian activists who had filmed their revolution in the 1970s in the hope of celebrating its 'victory', but instead had to face military defeat, and eventually death.¹² They had lost not only their political struggle, but also the ownership and control over of the images of the revolution. Those were appropriated by third parties who violated their 'here', their place of origin, their revolutionary goal, and transposed them into an 'elsewhere', where their fate was 'to be distributed and commodified just

11 Tim O'Reilly, 'What is Web 2.0', *O'Reilly*, 30 September 2005, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

12 *Ici et ailleurs* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1976); *Until Victory* (*Jusqu'à la victoire*) was the original title of the film when the shooting took place in 1970. Six years later, after Black September and the defeat of the Palestinian uprising, the film was released with the new title of *Ici et ailleurs*.

like any other good'.¹³ Godard's film *Ici et ailleurs* ('Here and elsewhere') is a tribute to the Palestinian activist-filmmakers and a critical reflection on the increasingly visual quality of contemporary capitalism, which generates a disjunction between those who make images and inject them into the global circulation circuit, and those who keep, preserve, and own them.

Godard's distinction between image-makers and image-keepers couldn't be more appropriate for describing the circumstances under which Syria's visual production takes place. Syrian video activists, who filmed and shared their footage in the excitement of the revolutionary moment, firmly believing in the distributed ownership and anonymous authorship of what was made in the name of the collective 'we', later had to realize that they were no longer keepers of their own images.¹⁴ As soon as the revolutionary moment faded away, to be replaced by the armed conflict, the revolutionary commons were also exposed to disruption and looting.

Those who had filmed anonymously claimed back ownership when they realized that the Syrian image was highly commodified and sought-after by international subjects, from NGOs and TV networks to art galleries and film festivals. Paradoxically, the more Syria as a geographical entity was disrupted by violence, destruction of buildings and cities, and displacement of the population happening on the ground, the more it was in high demand as an immaterial good, whether in the form of media or an art commodity.¹⁵ Sadly, the dispute over copyright and ownership of immaterial goods previously identified as collective commons has materialized in a number of legal controversies that have oftentimes, for example, prevented Syrian films from being distributed and watched in public.¹⁶

When it comes to the ownership of the Syrian image, the decisive power is no longer located in Syrian hands. Rather, it's Silicon Valley platform capitalism that controls the fate of the Syrian archive and rules over what images should be passed to future generations and become 'memory', and what images ought to be condemned to digital removal and eternal oblivion. 'It is like we are writing our memories – not in our own book but in a third party's book. We don't have control of it,' says Hadi Al Khatib, co-founder of the Syrian Archive project, commenting on this paradoxical situation.¹⁷

13 Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p 146.

14 Peter Snowdon, *The Revolution Will Be Uploaded: Vernacular Video and Documentary Film Practice After the Arab Spring*, PhD diss., Hasselt, Belgium, University of Hasselt, 2016, p. 18.

15 See, for example, international film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, Locarno, Sundance, who have all featured Syrian films, which oftentimes have won major prizes. In terms of art exhibitions, I have myself curated a show with 141 Syrian artists, *Syria off-frame*, which was supported by Luciano Benetton Foundation and hosted by the Fondazione Cini in Venice, 2015.

16 *Jellyfish* (dir. Khaled Abdulwahed, 2015) is one of these. See Chapter 4 and 8 in Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*.

17 Sarah El Deeb, 'History of Syria's War at Risk as YouTube Reins in Content', *AP News*, 13 September 2017, <https://apnews.com/d9f1c4f1bf20445ab06cbdf566a2b70>.

In 2018, YouTube deleted 33 million videos deemed ‘terrorist propaganda’.¹⁸ Between June and September 2017, around 180 channels connected to Syria were eliminated from the online realm.¹⁹ Among them, Shaam News Network, a popular opposition group that had nearly 400,000 videos on his YouTube channel.²⁰ These clean-up operations are legitimate and lawful, as their rationale is based on the company’s terms-of-service to which every user has to subscribe before being allowed to sign-up and open a channel. The same applies to Facebook and every other social networking site, which are private companies by nature, with (so far) no obligations to preserve a country’s digital memory and history. However, things risk becoming even more complicated when an institution decides to rule over the chaotic environment of social networking sites, which is what has been debated within the European Union, particularly since the March 2019 massacre in Christchurch’s mosque live-streamed on Facebook.²¹ A new anti-terrorism bill at the EU level could put tech companies into an ‘even more assertive enforcement role’ that, under the threat of massive fines, could push them ‘to invest more in aggressive machine-learning content filters to suppress potentially objectionable material.’²²

Paradoxically, this combined action between market and state censorship could end up benefiting authoritarian regimes. Syrian activists’ endeavors to build an evidentiary archive to hold crime perpetrators responsible in international courts could be sabotaged, albeit by accident and unwillingly, by the joint action of technology and law, by the compromise between corporations and governments in the name of anti-terror laws, hate speech, and violence regulations. The evidence-image, to the production of which many Syrians have sacrificed their lives, is at risk of disappearing not as a result of an openly coercive act of censorship from an authoritarian regime, but in the most neoliberal fashion of all, silently and sophisticatedly choked by market and state regulations.

The survival of the Syrian archive is thus threatened by the very nature of today’s visual political economy. The disjunction between image-making and image-keeping, the latter lying in the hands of Silicon Valley platform capitalism, generates the paradoxical situation by which the memory of an historical event – albeit one as controversial as the March 2011 uprising – is controlled and managed by a third party not directly involved in that very event. Tech companies are the custodians of the Syrian image. They do not have a ‘biological’ relation to it but they have to take care of it within a sort of foster-care framework.

Sometimes these images are ‘orphan’, as Enrico De Angelis calls them in this volume. Orphan images ‘do not have a father, a mother, or a story, or a background’, they are uploaded to social networking sites, circulated, manipulated, and downloaded in the seemingly endless

18 Bernhard Warner, ‘Tech Companies are Deleting Evidence of War Crime’, *The Atlantic*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/facebook-algorithms-are-making-it-harder/588931/>.

19 El Deeb, ‘History of Syria’s War at Risk’.

20 El Deeb, ‘History of Syria’s War at Risk’.

21 Heather, ‘Facebook Changes Live Stream Rules After New Zealand Shooting’, *CNN*, 15 May 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/14/tech/facebook-livestream-changes/index.html>.

22 Warner, ‘Tech Companies are Deleting Evidence of War Crime’.

stream of data where the tracks of their original makers get lost.²³ But even when images are identified, attributed or copyrighted, even if carrying a certified paternity, they are still submitted to an involuntary regime of foster-care and subject to the rather arbitrary and cruel possibility of being removed from the digital past, and therefore from the future, of the country.

And yet the question of digital oblivion, which dramatically hits Syria as a war-torn country, is in fact a more general question that should interest individuals living in neoliberal democracies as well. Every time we upload a piece of content on a proprietary platform we should be aware of the volatility of this very act, which exposes our digital past, and therefore our future, to the arbitrary nature of choices made by private actors and to the constant fluctuation of the market rules to which they are subject. For example, our belief in the 'cloud' as a safe and always accessible storage space is ideological. The cloud, as much as social networking sites, is a private environment ruled by regulations that are set up by the platform owner and might therefore theoretically be subject to change any time, arbitrarily. Until open-source, non-proprietary alternatives are implemented, we will be somewhat like Syrian image-makers: deprived of maternity, looking for our expropriated images, begging our custodians to allow us even to see them.

Content Moderation, Gatekeeping, and the Fate of the Syrian Image

So far, the process of image-keeping and ruling over the fate of digital images has been discussed publicly mostly by focusing on the role played by non-human agents, such as algorithms and AIs. However, humans play a crucial part in the game of gatekeeping digital data. 'Commercial content moderation' (CCM) is a whole field of digital labor performed in the shadows by workers bound by non-disclosure agreements that prevent them from shedding light on the backstage of their daily jobs, which consist of policing and cleaning up the web from the toxic waste of social media, such as hate speech, child pornography, and explicitly graphic content.²⁴

Digital utopias have long preached the horizontality, decentralization, and leaderless nature of the social web, crafting a fantasy of an unmediated, unfiltered communication flow exclusively managed by the users in the complete absence of 'gatekeepers'.²⁵ However, the wave of popular uprisings that erupted in the Middle East starting late 2010 with the self-immolation of Tunisia's Mohamed Bouazizi, known as the 'Arab Spring', and the sheer amount of visual media produced by all subjects involved, from protesters and regime officials to armed and jihadi groups, has brought to the surface the necessity of curating and sanitizing such material, thus revealing the ideological nature of thinking of the digital as a free, uncensored space.²⁶

23 See Enrico De Angelis, 'The Controversial Archive: Negotiating Horror Images in Syria', in this volume.

24 Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen: the Hidden Digital Labor of Commercial Content Moderation*, PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014.

25 This is a popular term in media studies referring to those, in broadcast media, who filter the information and present it to the general public, see Melvin and Margaret DeFleur, *Mass Communication Theories: Explaining Origins, Processes, and Effects*, Boston MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2010.

26 For a problematization of the definition of the 'Spring' and the ideology behind it, see Donatella Della

With ISIS' horror media spectacles being just the tip of the iceberg of an increasingly violent visual culture produced by organized armed groups as well as by isolated individuals, the urgency to police and repress the once idealized domain of digital expression has become apparent.

The visual culture originated from the Syrian conflict has inaugurated this trend, pushing Silicon Valley tech giants to act fast and start filtering and cleaning up the content generated in the area. This endeavor, however, has exposed the contradictions implicit in the nature of contemporary social networking sites, which are increasingly playing the editorial and gatekeeping role of a media company, rather than the much more aseptic function of crafting a digital environment for people to interact in, where the people themselves bear the whole responsibility for the content produced. This has always been the official justification brought up by tech giants when facing problematic situations such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, when the company abused the personal data of as many as 50 million Facebook users.²⁷ Defending Facebook in front of US Congress, CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared: 'I consider us to be a technology company because the primary thing that we do is have engineers who write code and build product and services for other people.'²⁸ Yet the reality of the day-to-day digital realm is quite far from this statement. As they staunchly deny any editorial role of content moderation and flagging, social networking platforms are in fact increasingly policing the web and deleting problematic items, afraid of retaliation and criticism, as in the case of the live-streaming of the Christchurch massacre.

While the moderation task is sometimes processed by non-human or post-human entities, such as algorithms and AIs, there is still a sheer amount of content that is too complex for machines to analyze. Operations involving sense-making and the understanding of the context of uploaded items are delegated to human workers who are also in many cases less expensive than automated processes. Recent works, such as Sarah T. Roberts' groundbreaking ethnographic research on CCM, or the documentary film *The Cleaners* (2018), have shed light onto this very dark side of the web, where underpaid digital labor mostly operating in the shadows from India, the Philippines, but also from rural Iowa and Germany, has to rule over the fate of global digital content in a matter of seconds, sometimes thousands of times a day.²⁹

Besides underlining the shifting nature of contemporary social networking sites from platforms for interaction to de facto media companies, this situation raises a number of crucial concerns.

Ratta, 'On the Narrative of the Arab D.I.Y. Revolutions and How it Fits into our Neoliberal Times', in Pete Bennet and Julian McDougall (eds) *Popular Culture and the Austerity Myth: Hard Times Today*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 139–55.

27 Sam Meredith, 'Here's Everything You Need to Know About the Cambridge Analytica Scandal', *CNBC*, 21 March 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/21/facebook-cambridge-analytica-scandal-everything-you-need-to-know.html>.

28 Meredith, 'Here's Everything You Need to Know'

29 See Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019; Sara T. Roberts, 'Social Media's Silent Filter', *The Atlantic*, 8 March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/03/commercial-content-moderation/518796/>.

Firstly, it transposes dynamics of factory exploitation that were typical of Fordist economies into the domain of immaterial production. Whether located in developing countries or in the suburbs of Western capitals, CCM workers are the new digital slaves, blatantly exploited by global platform capitalism, sometimes having to review as many as 800 pieces of distressing content – from child pornography to war executions – in a single shift for just a few dollars.³⁰ Even when hired by big corporations such as Facebook, they are treated as second-class employees, constantly reminded of their lower status and denied the perks and benefits that those working at tech companies usually receive.³¹ Secondly, the very nature of their job, the fact that they are ‘the cleaners’ of the garbage that is produced daily on the internet, exposes them to all sorts of traumas and disorders, for which they have to seek counseling and which might lead them to burnout and permanent damage, including committing suicide.³²

Thirdly, and more relevant to our discussion on the fate of the Syrian image, there are issues of cultural sensitivity at play in CCM, which combine with crucial features of the political economy of contemporary social networking sites, to determine the final pronouncement over what is allowed to stay in the digital domain and acquire the status of ‘memory’ for future generations, and what should be deleted and therefore forgotten forever. Lisa Parks highlights the dramatic importance of this cultural factor when reviewing the documentary *The Cleaners*, which focuses on a group of people working in CCM from Manila: ‘What does it mean, for instance, to have content parameters moderated by eighteen- or nineteen-year-old workers from conservative Christian cultures, some of whom, the film reveals, also happen to support the repressive policies of the Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte?’³³ What does it mean to rule over the fate of Syria’s evidence-images, produced in the belief that violence should be explicitly shown and exposed to the wider public?³⁴ Oftentimes these images are (and have been) deleted by workers who are not required to have any knowledge of or background in the conflict in Syria and the parties involved, with a handful of seconds to decide whether the footage should be kept or deleted, therefore most likely following the easy path of removing the content to conform to the community standards and terms of services of the hosting platform.

And yet other factors might come into play in ruling over the fate of the Syrian image, ones that are related to the politics of the hosting platforms rather than to their policy. One of the CCM workers interviewed by Roberts accounts for his decision of deleting a Syria-originated

30 See, for example, Sam Biddle, ‘Trauma Counselors Were Pressured to Divulge Confidential Information About Facebook Moderators, Internal Letter Claims’, *The Intercept*, 16 August 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/08/16/facebook-moderators-mental-health-accenture/?amp=1>; Brian Hanrahan, ‘At Facebook, the Content Police Are Faceless’, *Handelsblatt*, 14 May 2018, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/companies/controlling-filth-at-facebook-the-content-police-are-faceless/23582122.html?ticket=ST-25864056-iFyGy4kAaH5fixhA5w7c-ap1>.

31 See Biddle, ‘Trauma Counselors Were Pressured’.

32 Roberts, *Behind the Screen: The Hidden Digital Labor of Commercial Content Moderation*.

33 Lisa Parks, ‘Dirty Data: Content Moderation, Regulatory Outsourcing, and The Cleaners’, *Film Quarterly* (Fall 2019): 11–18.

34 Many of the workers interviewed by Roberts cited Syria-originated videos ‘as examples of the worst material they had to see on the job in terms of its level of violence and horror’; Roberts, ‘Social Media’s Silent Filter’.

video which, in his opinion, violated the company's code of conduct by being too explicitly gory. An order came from above, however, to allow the item to stay online. 'It was important to show the world, they decided, what was going on with Syria and to raise awareness about the situation there.'³⁵ Other videos originating from Mexico that, according to the same employee, presented the same level of gruesomeness, were permanently removed. The worker's conclusion was that, 'whether or not the policy group realized it [...] its decisions were in line with U.S. foreign policy: to support various factions in Syria, and to disavow any connection to or responsibility for the drug wars of Northern Mexico.'³⁶

Things are not as straightforward as they seem, though. There are well documented cases of Silicon Valley companies removing videos from Syria that were meant to document regime atrocities that, theoretically, would be at odds with U.S foreign politics supporting the opposition against Bashar al-Asad.³⁷ Yet there are many elements at play here: the foreign politics of a country hosting the most powerful tech companies, combined with corporate considerations driven by competition and other market-related factors, and decisions established by standardized algorithmic procedures or taken by humans within just a handful of seconds, for example.

The issues emerging from CCM and the process of ruling over the Syrian (and any) image are dramatically complex and politically charged. What the Syrian archive pushes into emergence is a dynamic at work on a global scale, which is too often operating in the shadows and should in fact be brought to the surface and properly analyzed. CCM remains one of the most ambiguous and shady places in the digital realm, and more ethnographic studies and research should be carried out to unveil the truly political role played by those insisting to be perceived by the general public as mere platforms, while in fact being powerful media editors. The Syrian image clearly shows that, in the battle for the control of the future, it will be crucial to unveil what is been cleaned, by whom, and for what purposes.

Open Access, the Commons, and Other Digital Tragedies

Digital utopias have built a narrative of the 'commons' being a space not subject to private ownership and the rules of the market; a sort of repository of immaterial goods whose preservation as an open-access environment will help protect knowledge and creativity from the past in order to build innovation for the future.³⁸ The 'sharing cultures' or 'participatory cultures' sprouting out from the social web would provide a human infrastructure for the commons to thrive and ensure that the latter coexist with the corporate side of the web paving the way to a sort of 'hybrid economy'.³⁹

35 Roberts, 'Social Media's Silent Filter'.

36 Roberts, 'Social Media's Silent Filter'.

37 Malachy Brown, 'YouTube Removes Videos Showing Atrocity in Syria', The New York Times, 22 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/world/middleeast/syria-youtube-videos-isis.html>.

38 To this extent, see the work of Lawrence Lessig, e.g. *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*, New York: Random House, 2001; *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

39 Lessig, *Remix*; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New

Images created in Syria in the post-revolutionary moment are the quintessential materialization of this fantasy of the commons. Visual media generated in the name of a collective 'we' have given life to what Peter Snowden calls the 'anarchive', where the terms 'archive' and 'anarchy' are there to signal a non-authoritative and anti-authorial repository.⁴⁰ This repository stores and preserves the Syrian image, yet it does so in an anarchic fashion, in a logic that does not comply with market ideas of distribution and consumption, nor with rules dictated by the surveilling authority of the state. The only authority that the anarchive recognizes is the 'authority of anyone to speak to and for it', a sort of 'distributed leadership', a diffused power whose strength lies in a politically savvy collectivity.⁴¹

But what happens to the anarchive when this revolutionary collectivity is disrupted by a violent repression and the descent of the uprising into a civil war? Where do the commons go, to whom do they belong? The violent turn of the Syrian uprising does not only signify the development of the struggle on the ground in the form of a militarized conflict. It also implies a shift at the level of the digital frontline, where the collectively understood space of the commons becomes disputed, with individual subjects claiming back ownership and authorship over what was once produced in the name of the 'we'. Commodification takes over the commons, as commons become commodities to be distributed and sold on a global market fetishizing the Syrian image.

Not only has the idea of the revolutionary commons been disrupted, it has also been appropriated by armed terrorist groups, such as ISIS, that are indifferent to issues of intellectual property and reject the idea of individual recognition, cultivating instead collective ownership and diffused authorship. Don DeLillo once noticed that 'the artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated. . . Only the terrorist stands outside.'⁴² Today ISIS materializes the very idea of 'the anonymous, grassroots, amateur, web 2.0 terrorist as "auteur" with its incredibly spectacular production of a visual culture of terror.'⁴³ ISIS has succeeded in creating completely new forms and formats of violence that are performed on its victims on the ground, but also reproduced virally through networked technologies. And, in spite of the joint efforts of Silicon Valley tech companies and Western governments engaging in policing and removing ISIS-made media, the group seems to have managed to resurrect and thrive in the domain of the open web. Paradoxically, the Internet Archive – the brainchild of the 'Californian ideology' materializing its fantasies of openness and public access at all costs⁴⁴ – now serves as an uncensored and uncontrolled repository of what is left of the digital commons, and as a space where ISIS' compelling visual creations can still circulate freely without being removed or redacted.

The tragedy of the digital commons also pervades the question of the archive. If the only alternative to proprietary social networking sites, in order to store and access digital material,

York University Press, 2006.

40 Snowden, *The Revolution Will Be Uploaded*, p. 25.

41 Snowden, *The Revolution Will Be Uploaded*, p. 121.

42 Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, New York: Penguin, 1991, p. 157.

43 Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 7; On ISIS media see also Chapter 7 in the same publication.

44 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology', *Mute* 1.3 (1995).

is to build an open-source platform, a common and shared immaterial space, then what about access? Politically engaged collectives, such as Egypt's Mosireen, have raised this question of access when designing their online archives.⁴⁵ As Bidayyat's Ali Atassi remarks in this volume, leaving the digital archive open and accessible to all exposes its makers to the likely possibility that the footage is appropriated by conservative groups or pro-regime thugs and used to build a counter-narrative. However, locking up the archive would also imply preventing the population of a war-torn country like Syria from accessing its own past, the digital being the only domain where the memory of destroyed areas and raided cities can be stored and preserved.

The question of open access is not an easy one to solve. Most importantly, it is no longer a Syria-related question. Last January, IBM released a collection of nearly one million photos taken from the photo-sharing platform Flickr and distributed under Creative Commons licenses, the latter giving more flexibility than traditional copyright in terms of sharing, manipulating, and reusing original items, sometimes also allowing commercial use. An NBC News investigation highlighted that these photos and the textual descriptions attached to them (which included details such as facial geometry, pose, or skin tone) have likely been used to train facial recognition algorithms that might enhance surveillance and repression.⁴⁶ IBM had previously sold facial recognition technology to the New York City police department that allowed searching particular skin tones or hair colors, and released video analytics products that detected people according to their ethnicity.⁴⁷ Joy Buolamwini, an MIT researcher and founder of the Algorithmic Justice League, has shed light on the potentially racial and ethnic oriented bias of algorithms designed for facial recognition, a technology that is increasingly used for surveillance and pre-emptive crime purposes.⁴⁸ Currently, a coalition of more than 85 racial justice and civil rights groups has lobbied tech companies to cease selling facial recognition technology to governments, as it 'exacerbates "historical and existing bias" that harms communities already "over-policed and over-surveilled"'.⁴⁹

The IBM case has thrown into sharp relief the contradictions implicit within concepts such as open access and free sharing that are deemed inherently progressive by digital utopias. The idea of being able to share freely and under legal conditions established by the author of an original work, rather than by lobbies or market rules, together with the possibility for the wider public to access such a space created by the 'sharing economies', lies at the foundation of the digital commons.⁵⁰ However, neither ideas consider that the nature of the internet has

45 See Mosireen's essay, '858: No Archive is Innocent', in this volume.

46 Olivia Solon, 'Facial Recognition's "Dirty Little Secret": Millions of Online Photos Scraped Without Consent', *NBC News*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/facial-recognition-s-dirty-little-secret-millions-online-photos-scraped-n981921>.

47 Solon, 'Facial Recognition's "Dirty Little Secret"'.

48 Richard Feloni, 'An MIT Researcher Who Analyzed Facial Recognition Software Found Eliminating Bias in AI Is a Matter of Priorities', *Business Insider*, 23 January 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/biases-ethics-facial-recognition-ai-mit-joy-buolamwini-2019-1?IR=T>.

49 Solon, 'Facial Recognition's "Dirty Little Secret"'.

50 This is the basic idea behind Creative Commons, www.creativecommons.org; Lessig, *Remix*.

increasingly become privatized and colonized by corporate capitalism. The commons have been turned into a 'privately held public sphere' managed by Silicon Valley platform capitalism and submitted to 'the norms of private property'.⁵¹ Syrians have been deceived precisely by this: they thought they would generate image-evidences, i.e. proof denouncing human rights abuses. They thought themselves to be acting within the domain of freedom of speech, to be contributing to a healthy, democratic dialogue that would foster justice and progress. Yet, they were unwillingly contributing to the building of an opaque and ambiguous space that, while being understood by them as a commons, was in fact a corporate environment subject to rules set up by private actors.

As much as the Syrians were naively building their archive of evidence-images within the space of what they thought was a digital commons, many citizens of neoliberal democracies have also been deceived by the sharing economies. 'None of the people I photographed had any idea their images were being used in this way', is the bitter comment of someone who innocently uploaded his pictures on Flickr using a permissive Creative Commons license, in the belief that this act would have helped build an open-access and free digital commons, while in fact it ended up contributing to the IBM facial recognition training dataset.⁵² And it did so lawfully, as Creative Commons is expressly designed to allow frictionless sharing on the web. Creative Commons' CEO Ryan Merkley commented at the time of the IBM scandal:

We are aware that fair use allows all types of content to be used freely [...] but there are also real concerns that data can be used for negative activities or negative outcomes. CC licenses were designed to address a specific constraint, which they do very well: unlocking restrictive copyright. But copyright is not a good tool to protect individual privacy, to address research ethics in AI development, or to regulate the use of surveillance tools employed online.⁵³

Creative Commons' licensed images have also ended up in another facial recognition database created by Microsoft, by scraping visuals off the web that were distributed to be re-used for academic purposes. The database, known as MS Celeb, contained 10 million faces, and was used to train facial recognition systems globally, including those of military research projects and commercial ventures originating from countries under authoritarian regimes such as China.⁵⁴ The existence of MS Celeb was revealed by Adam Harvey, a Berlin-based artist and researcher working closely with the Syrian Archive project in the field of visual justice.⁵⁵ And that's not by chance.

51 Molly Sauter, *The Coming Swarm: DDOs Actions, Hactivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet*, New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 94-5.

52 Solon, 'Facial Recognition's "Dirty Little Secret"'.

53 Ryan Merkley, 'Use and Fair Use: Statement on Shared Images in Facial Recognition AI', *Creative Commons*, 13 March 2019, <https://creativecommons.org/2019/03/13/statement-on-shared-images-in-facial-recognition-ai/>.

54 Madhumita Murgia, 'Microsoft Quietly Deletes Largest Public Facial Recognition Data Sets', *Financial Times*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/7d3e0d6a-87a0-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>.

55 Adam Harvey and Hadi Al Khatib, 'Accelerating Human Rights Investigations with Computer Vision', re:publica 18 conference, Berlin, May 2-4, <https://18.re-publica.com/en/session/accelerating-human->

There seems to be, in fact, a common element that connects a violent situation such as Syria with the apparently pacified western neoliberal democracies. The contradictions and fragility of the digital commons that first emerged in the exceptional context of the 2011 uprising that turned into civil war, have later fully unfolded on a global scale, becoming a sort of pattern. The tragedy of the digital commons is that they are no longer commons, and they will no longer be. Neither because of the exceptional situation of a civil war, in which building an undisputed, shared space, even if only immaterial, is unlikely; nor because of a flaw of the infrastructure that should contribute to the making of such commons, but precisely because of the features of the technological infrastructure supporting the sharing economy, which is private and commercially oriented *by design*.

It's the inner structure of the sharing platforms we use today, from YouTube to Instagram and the likes, that is inherently pushing the commons towards commodification and has hijacked the very definition of 'sharing'. Sharing economies are no longer what the founder of Creative Commons, Lawrence Lessig, so brilliantly conceptualized a decade ago, i.e. non-monetary exchanges and economies that run alongside ideas of solidarity. Today, sharing economies are made by Airbnb and the like, who have managed to inject monetary transactions and incorporate the idea of commodification even in the once innocent and absolutely free domain of hospitality.

Conclusion

The Syrian image remains a highly disputed territory. Its authorship, ownership, preservation, storage, and the very access to it, are being questioned. Yet the dynamics that it has brought to surface are not just related to Syria, but rather to the nature of today's global 'communicative capitalism'.⁵⁶ When thinking that such issues have become problematic because of the peculiar situation of Syria being a crisis zone, we are misled. When believing that Syria does not concern us living in comfort zones, we make a big mistake, as the features of the visual political economy emerging from there are, in fact, global patterns silently ruling over our domestic environment and infiltrating apparently innocuous day-to-day situations, in which surveillance, repression, and control happen in visual forms that we are still struggling to understand and manage.

The fate of the Syrian image highlights that the nature of today's archive goes far beyond being a collection of evidentiary forms, although this is a very crucial function that it should cover. Future discussions should necessarily include issues of ownership, authorship, storage, preservation, access, and the crucial question of the algorithmic gaze, which determines the visual as much as humans do. We have to take the Syrian lesson and bring it to our neoliberal democracies, take out the explicitly violent element and apply it to our mundane domesticity. Syria is no longer (only) about Syria.

rights-investigations-computer-vision.

56 Jodi Dean, 'Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics', *Cultural Politics* 1.1 (2005): 51-74, <https://commonconf.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/proofs-of-tech-fetish.pdf>.

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09. THE 'FLÂNEUR', THE ARCHAEOLOGIST, AND THE MISSING IMAGES: DOING RESEARCH WITH/ON ONLINE VIDEOS

ULRIKE LUNE RIBONI

The uprisings in the countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East that initiated in 2011 resulted in hundreds of thousands of still images and videos, uploaded online every day by thousands of anonymous people. Together with the mobilization in the streets, riots, clashes, and sit-ins, the shared visual production constituted a collective enterprise and a stake in the struggle. Understanding the terms of this struggle and the forms of this collective visual monument as it was erected from day to day in Tunisia has been the subject of my thesis work.¹ In it, I have questioned the types of situations that were recorded and shared online, their formal characteristics, the specificities of the sharing practices, the intentions that choices may reveal, and by extension the construction of (collective) meaning and the social tensions that these practices designate.

Working on images shared online and not on the ones that were shot but maybe never uploaded, implies working on the internet platform that hosted them. The construction of the research corpus was therefore the most complex step of this project and required more than two years of work, demanding methodological as well as theoretical choices. Research is contingent on its material conditions of production and, in many universities around the world, the latest technical developments are not accessible. French research is unfortunately produced with very few technical resources as public and private investments are insufficient. But if chronic underfunding is to be denounced, what we lack more than computer software is time. My proposal is to strive for de-growth (in French: *décroissance*) or a slow science perspective on the analysis of 'big video data' or, rather, to not consider it big data at all.

Vernacular videos on the internet appear to be free of any indexation and ties, and to spread and spill without control, constituting what looks like a bottomless archive.² The researcher might seem released from the structure of institutional archives, but the videos are actually organized, through opaque hierarchies designed by unknown algorithms and submitted to an endless circulation that is difficult to follow without adapted tracking software. They become elusive, forcing the researcher into 'a diving, an immersion, even a drowning [...]', as says the historian Arlette Farge.³ The very nature of the objects I have studied has necessitated a specific methodology. The videos are indeed produced and uploaded online anonymously

1 Ulrike Lune Riboni, 'Juste un peu de video', La vidéo partagée comme langage vernaculaire de la contestation: Tunisie 2008-2014, PhD diss., Université Paris 8, France, 2016.

2 Tom Sherman, 'Vernacular video', in Sabine Niederer and Geert Lovink (eds) *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008, pp. 161-168.
Peter Snowdon, 'The Revolution Will be Uploaded: Vernacular Video and the Arab Spring', *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6 (2014): 401-429.

3 Arlette Farge, *Le goût de l'archive*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1997, p. 10.

and contain few intentional traces such as, for example, editing. How then to interrogate these images? How to constitute a corpus without knowing the limits and extent of the online 'collection'? How to dive without drowning? We could answer like Lev Manovich does, by using powerful software capable of collecting and analyzing 'one million images'.⁴ But such a method, as I will show, would miss the goal. Of course, creating a coherent corpus of digital videos produced and shared during the insurgency weeks in January 2011 in Tunisia, without any specific software to do so⁵, has been a complicated venture. But I eventually found some ways to float, or maybe navigate in the 'ocean of sounds and images'.⁶

The Internet Is not an Archive

'The Internet is not an archive'.⁷ But 'YouTube might [...] be an archive [...] an ideal form of archive,' argues Rick Prelinger.⁸ Indeed, YouTube appears as a 'complete collection', where everything can be found, which is open to users' contributions, thus destroying 'the mystique of archives as rarefied and impenetrable containers'.⁹ The accessibility of YouTube also contrasts with traditional archives: no access has to be asked for, nor any specific software downloaded. But when doing scientific research YouTube should be considered not only for what you can *find* there, but for how you can *search* it.

Social networks like YouTube or Facebook do not offer suitable tools for researching contents, especially if the research is on a specific geographic area and time period. Generalist search engines like Google partly allow us to circumvent these restrictions, but research remains based on textual recognition of the words associated with the content and so obviously provides unsatisfactory results when it comes to visual content. Indeed, a search can only relate to the textual environment of the image. For a video on YouTube, there are three textual resources that are defined by the users: the title of the video, the description, and the associated tags. Since description and tags are optional, indexing a video on YouTube is sometimes based on its title only. When description and tags do exist, they are not necessarily descriptive and often imprecise. The descriptors are therefore very thin and rarely relevant to the content, when looked at from the researcher's perspective.

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- 4 Jeremy Douglass, Lev Manovich, Tara Zepel, 'How to Compare One Million Images?', Software Studies Initiative Project, 2011, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/how-to-compare>.
 - 5 The research work depends on the working environment in which it is carried out. In France, the access to softwares and technical tools developed for research are extremely limited within public research, particularly in social sciences. Our thesis work carried out between 2011 and 2016 was therefore marked by this lack of funds. The reflection developed here, however, attempts to consider how this lack can be an asset.
 - 6 Gunnar Iversen, 'An Ocean of Sound and Image: YouTube in the Context of Supermodernity', in Pelle Snickars, Patrick Vondereau (eds) *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2010, p. 347.
 - 7 Geert Lovink, *Social Media Abyss, Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 166.
 - 8 Rick Prelinger, 'The Appearance of Archives', in Pelle Snickars, Patrick Vondereau (eds) *The YouTube reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2010, p. 268.
 - 9 Rick Prelinger, 'The Appearance of Archives', p. 270.

The scale is also a factor of difficulty. YouTube offered about 32,000 results for the keywords ‘Tunisia Protest’ and 123,000 for ‘Egypt Protest’ in 2014.¹⁰ Since these numbers are based on textual data, they can only be considered as indicative and it is simply impossible to accurately assess the number of videos uploaded over a given period from one of these countries. Still, it is clear that the number of videos posted during these events runs up to tens of thousands. In this swarm of images, it is impossible to circumscribe, evaluate, or define the beginning or the end; it makes the researcher’s work delicate.

Lev Manovich describes the problems of apprehension, which arise from the visualization of online ‘collections’ made up of tens of thousands of elements: ‘Given the size of many digital media collections, simply seeing what’s inside them is impossible (even before we begin formulating questions and hypotheses and selecting samples for closer analysis).’¹¹ As my colleagues Fabien Granjon and Christophe Magis have pointed out, the risk is to respond with a quest for exhaustion, considering the internet collections as a ‘whole’:

If digital tools “make it possible to study all the data as a whole”¹², the whole in question too often resembles an abstract totality gathering data that are difficult to refer to as concrete [...] realities. It is thus not certain that the knowledge of the whole using “big data + data mining” is also knowledge of a social subject and one often flirts with what one could call “data fetishism”.¹³

Digital tools like the ones used by Lev Manovich for photo collections on Flickr, give precisely the illusion that exhaustion can be reached, but to what social reality does this exhaustion refer? To avoid ‘data fetishism’ and to renounce exhaustion we need to take up a point of view on data, to remember what we make of it, how we search and how we find.¹⁴ It also means that we have to reconsider the people(s) in the ‘people generated content’.

Context is Context, even on the Internet

Understanding a social phenomenon can’t be done without context: social, political, and economic context, but also the technical conditions of production in a delimited space and timeframe. It means considering how vernacular images produced around the globe can’t be compared that easily. In our case, even if we can draw a timeline connecting the Iranian uprising in 2009, and the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, and Syrian uprisings from 2010-2011, that shows how video uses were similar in their purposes and intentions and were connected

10 On 27 February 2014.

11 Lev Manovich, ‘Media Visualization: Visual Techniques for Exploring Large Media Collections’, 2011, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/media-visualization-visual-techniques-for-exploring-large-media-collections>.

12 Bruno Bachimont, ‘Le nominalisme et la culture: questions posées par les enjeux du numérique’, in Bernard Stiegler (ed.) *Digital Studies: Organologie des savoirs et technologies de la connaissance*, Paris: IRI/FYP, 2014, p. 70.

13 Christophe Magis and Fabien Granjon, ‘Vers une “nouvelle anthropologie” critique?’, *Journal des anthropologues* (2015): 297.

14 Magis and Granjon, ‘Vers une “nouvelle anthropologie” critique?’: 297.

to each other, taking on board the specific national and local context is still unavoidable. The aim is precisely to find out which uses or characteristics are internationally shared and which are contextually specific.

Therefore, I have taken into account the conditions of producing and uploading video content in the specific time and place my research focused on, being Tunisia in 2010-2011, and have so identified the technical constraints: the level of equipment, the possibilities of individual access to the internet, but also censorship and the different forms it adopted during the period. Thus, I measured the commitment that uploading videos online represents for most of the Tunisian users who do not have personal computers and are forced to go to cybercafés where the bandwidth is low and the upload may take hours. I found out which websites were accessible and which were not, and what kind of technical knowledge was necessary for shooting and uploading, but also for remixing. In that way I gained an idea of what kinds of social categories were concerned. As Rick Prelinger writes, 'though streaming files could be captured and saved by expert users, to most people streaming video was the most ephemeral of all media, incapable of being downloaded, edited, annotated, referenced, indexed or remixed'.¹⁵ Although this quotation is ten years old and users now do not need to be 'experts' in order to know how to download and remix videos, we can still conclude that video platforms are not designed for downloading and remixing, and downloading, remixing, and re-uploading are actions reserved for advanced internet users. The same can be said about using proxies for connecting to the internet. This leads to three conclusions: firstly, that shooting and sharing videos can not have been afforded to every Tunisian, especially in 2010-2011; secondly, that people under restrained technical conditions develop skills and technical knowledge as a mode of survival; and thirdly, the risks that people ran by undertaking these practices, reveals that they were experienced as a necessity.

Considering context also allows us to identify significant territorial disparities in technical equipment levels, which coincided with the geographical spreading of revolution. Without access to YouTube, Facebook, and other websites' servers, it is hard to get a clear view on this territorial and temporal distribution, but we can still make interesting inferences: the territories with the lowest access to equipment were the most marginalized, the ones from where the revolt began, but also the ones from where most of the images came from. This observation led me to a hypothesis that continues to propel my research: filming a social movement, a riot, a revolution, means participating in a collective gesture of documentation; it is not only about registering 'events', but also about people, ways of being together, of feeling together, of feeling part of a whole, maybe being part of a *people*.¹⁶ And this need for being 'part of' or being *considered* part of, is linked to the need for recognition.¹⁷ Therefore, it seems that shared image practices are often more invested in by individuals suffering social marginalization.

15 Prelinger, 'The Appearance of Archives', p. 269.

16 Judith Butler, "'Nous, le peuple": réflexions sur la liberté de reunion', in Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari & Jacques Rancière (eds) *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple?*, Paris: La Fabrique, 2013.

17 Daniela Huber, Lorenzo Kamel, 'Arab Spring: The Role of the Peripheries', *Mediterranean Politics* 20:2 (2015): 127-141.



Fig. 1: Snapshots. A man telling his family story of poverty and toil.

Such considerations could be synthesized as follows. Firstly, observing a media practice involves considering the technical skills and expertise required, always remembering the determination of social distribution¹⁸ and that there are also internet non-users.¹⁹ Secondly, considering that the practice is not only about skills, but also about needs, and so social conditions have to be taken into account, not for the competences they allow but for the social needs they bring with them. Finally, considering context is considering history, and although I cannot develop this topic here, I believe that connecting contemporary representational issues to historical representation experiences can be illuminating, especially in post-colonial societies.

Searching

Constrained by the impossibility of ‘visualizing [...] before starting to formulate questions and hypotheses’,²⁰ I chose to adopt an inductive approach. The process had two stages: the establishment of an initial corpus and the conducting of exploratory interviews, both

18 Dominique Pasquier, *L’Internet des familles modestes. Enquête dans la France rurale*, Paris: Presses des Mines, 2018.

19 Fabien Granjon, ‘Le “non-usage” de l’internet: reconnaissance, mépris et idéologie’, *Questions de communication* 18 (2010): 37-62.

20 Lev Manovich, ‘Media Visualization: Visual Techniques for Exploring Large Media Collections’.

of which were then expanded. The first phase, which I called ‘reasoned wandering’, was intended to view a large number of videos first on YouTube and then on Facebook. The first filter therefore concerns the choice of the platform I explored. Because video content was uploaded on various platforms due to censorship, I chose to work on YouTube and Facebook, having observed that most content was relayed there, in particular by members of the Tunisian diaspora or Tunisians with access to the internet or advanced technical skills.²¹ This ‘wandering’ on YouTube was guided by keyword searches in French, English, and Arabic, and by paying attention to the suggestions of the platforms explored. The aim of this first exploration was to identify recurrences or ‘observable regularities’ in filmed situations and in ways of filming.²² On the basis of the recurrences identified, I was able, in the second phase, to direct the search towards specific topics, locations, and forms in an attempt to confirm or invalidate the norms or conventions of use that I identified. The research made a qualitative leap that was allowed by the fieldwork carried out for several months in Tunisia, and that permitted the observation of the Facebook pages of Tunisians I encountered and interviewed. I observed and discussed filming and sharing practices.

‘Reasoned Wandering’

For the insurgency period of December 2010 and January 2011, I established general search keywords such as ‘revolution’, ‘riot’, or ‘manifestation’. I then directed these keywords towards specific ‘episodes’ such as the massacres of Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb on January 8 and 9, 2011 or the events of the ‘Kasbah 1 and 2’ in January and February 2011. The descriptors employed varied enormously from one user to another. Moreover, a video from Thala that would not use the word ‘Thala’ in the text descriptors and that would have been put online in February, would be almost undetectable. As said, these constraints thus partly condition the terms of the research: the videos that can be identified as related to an event, a date, or a particular place are those that are identified as such by their authors and/or broadcasters. The text descriptors therefore become objects of research. Indeed, because the contents are named and described by their authors and/or broadcasters themselves, unlike the audiovisual archive hierarchized by an archivist, these texts likely testify intentions as much as the images themselves.

My ‘wandering’ was also driven by the videos recommended by the hosting platforms. In the case of YouTube, this includes the suggestions of videos appearing in the column on the right-hand side of the page. Taking into account these suggestions implies complying with the algorithm of the platform and agreeing to be ‘wandered’ from one video to another according to rules that remain opaque.²³ The suggestion column is built according to the terms of the search, the videos selected by the user, and algorithmic preferences. Considering these

21 I tried to trace the circulation of some videos and explored, in this way, other sites too, like Dailymotion and other platforms for sharing contents that were used by the Tunisians when YouTube was no longer accessible.

22 Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1965.

23 YouTube’s algorithm seems to have some strange bias pointed out by many newspapers lately, see for example: Kevin Roose, ‘The making of a YouTube radical’, *The New York Times*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>.

suggestions and at the same time trying not to be trapped by their logic is a difficult exercise. It implies mapping one's circulation and regularly cleaning one's traces by starting over again. It also requires significant vigilance as an Algerian or Moroccan-produced video with no link to the Tunisian situation can appear among Tunisian ones, for example. Learning from wandering in the end meant identifying users (the independent ones and the organizations) and identifying videos, for example by following and pursuing some that I found several times across different accounts or platforms.

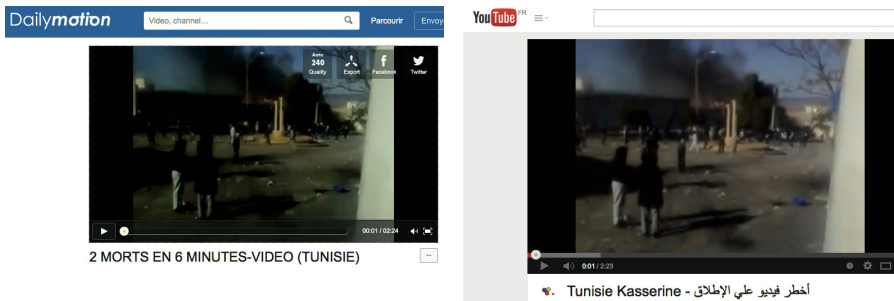


Fig. 2: Snapshots. Versions of the same videos found after multiple hours of 'wandering'

Targeted Research: What I Find Is what I'm Looking for

From 'reasoned wandering' to targeted research, several problems arose that I have tried to take into account rather than bypass. After a primary analysis of hundreds of videos, some shooting modes (filming from above the scene, raising a hand, climbing on a promontory, from behind a window, a door, turning the camera phone onto oneself...), figures (crowds, lonely speakers, mothers, wounded bodies), and situations (music and chants, clashes, waiting moments, talks and speeches, testimonies) were searched more accurately. Searching for specific objects can, however, be a bias in itself. Indeed, in a database whose hierarchies and organization are based on an algorithm that is unknown to us, *we find only what we are looking for*. Therefore, looking for specific videos necessarily reveals content that may remain invisible to another YouTube user.

Let me go back in time a bit to clarify my point. Studying the pre-uprising period for example, I noticed interesting uses of football game videos that reveal the sharing of illegal practices (clashes with the police, use of fumigants that were banned from stadiums etc.). In what appeared to be a very harmless video practice – documenting football games in videos that were probably shared and viewed only by football lovers (but that still means a lot of people) – subversive gestures were shared. I noticed it by chance and then sought out these very specific videos for hours. But do football lovers search this way? Would any Tunisian searching for clash videos find these? How to consider such a find? It is difficult to determine the influence of this content or to figure out the predominance of recording and sharing one type of situation over another. The researcher must beware of hasty conclusions: the forms and situations that emerge may have *been emerged* by the research itself.

However, like the archaeologist who cannot dig the entirety of the soil of a territory, the researcher on YouTube cannot account for all strata and sedimentations, yet it is still possible to designate movements, regularities, and 'patterns', which can, in turn, reveal social practices. The video platforms as such began to be a kind of territory in which I could identify certain architectural traces that lead to constructions or collapses. The stadium videos described above, for example, were made before 2011 and work as a kind of graffiti on a wall that reveal underground opinions, practices, and activities that are about to hatch. Bringing to light rare or poorly viewed content is a way to consider the margins of the most visible practices, margins that could be extremely relevant.



Fig. 3: Snapshots. A woman shouting alone in the street, addressing insults and threats to the government and praising the courage of the people.

Margins, Absences, Missing Images

In this way I was able to determine 'patterns', such as videos in which filmmakers turn the camera onto themselves or videos that capture what I have called 'isolated people', people shouting alone in the streets or giving improvised speeches to the crowd.²⁴ These recurrences in production and content are the thread of my work. The contextual perspective then offered the possibility of grasping the implication of certain uses that, when solely considered in comparison to others, would have been misinterpreted. The gesture of turning the camera onto oneself, for example, is implemented in a context of strong repression in which anonymity is a necessity and free speech is constrained and threatened.²⁵ What would have been considered a practice of 'self-representation', when compared to selfies, cannot be thought of in the same way in a context where people are threatened and fear for their lives. This practice is more of a signature for anonymously released images and a silent affirmation that the makers fear no more, that they claim to be mobilized. Although numerically marginal, the gesture turned out to be particularly significant. This is an important point: an automated

24 Ulrike Lune Riboni, '*Juste un peu de video*'.

25 It is interesting to note that all videos of this type we found in 2011-2012 are no longer available online. More generally, a huge part of the videos is gone now. It seems that the remaining ones on YouTube or Dailymotion are those with the most accurate titles and description, probably uploaded or shared by more 'advanced users'. But the dynamics of content disappearance could be an investigation in itself.

analysis of millions of images generally excludes the contents, practices, or objects that are numerically marginal. Such a computer-assisted method can serve the approach defended by Manovich and the types of questions he asks, but in this case, the margins of practices are of interest as a means of grasping social uses. This is the case firstly, because rarity is valuable, as in any economic system, and an unconventional recording may have had more impact than a more widespread one; secondly, because such a video potentially reveals a turning point for its author; and finally, because it might have been a precursor to other practices that are wrongly considered as 'new'.



Fig. 4: Snapshots. Video-makers turning the camera to their faces.

Like this gesture of turning the camera upon oneself, what I call 'recurrent absences' would probably also have been ignored by a quantitative approach: practices or places that *did not* appear to be pictured or shared. For example, self-immolations have marked the events, from 2008 up to today, and well beyond the sole case of Mohammed Bouazizi. Dozens of young people and adults have set their bodies on fire in desperate and fighting gestures. These gestures have only extremely rarely been *turned into images*. Why? If the hypotheses remain difficult to verify, we can argue that self-immolations may be an 'image-making' in themselves, visually too powerful to allow or require additional imaging.²⁶ The same goes for the interiors of homes, which are rarely filmed or shared.²⁷ In fact, the images shared during the insurrectional weeks are mainly of the public spaces where the confrontation with institutions played out. Home interiors were sometimes filmed documenting mourning scenes, paradoxically revealing that mourning was no longer a private experience but a public and collective one. These rarities appear to be full of meaning, and I have tried to think of them in the same way as we are used to do with widespread practices.

26 Ulrike Lune Riboni, 'Juste un peu de video'.

27 This shows an interesting difference with the Syrian context, where the interiors were used as protest places such as in the 'home sit-in' videos, as observed by Cécile Boëx and Donatella Della Ratta in Cécile Boëx, 'La grammaire iconographique de la révolte en Syrie!: Usages, techniques et supports, *Cultures & Conflits* No.91-92, (2013): 65-80; Donatella della Rata, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*, London: Pluto Press, 2018.



Fig. 5: Snapshots. Mourning scenes inside homes.

Conclusion

Content on the internet is distributed in neither a neutral nor necessarily biased way. The storage and broadcasting platforms do not differ so much from the following definition of an archive: 'an archive must be considered as a set of textual data, in the broad sense of the term, that both document, preserve and transmit the discourse of a social actor (an institution, a

social group, a community or even a person) on a domain, an object or even a time period'.²⁸ What most clearly distinguishes online contents from an archive are access and the technical possibilities of research on offer, and the subjectivity and variables of the textual descriptors. Working on online videos implies taking into account the subjectivity of the users as much as the researcher's online activities, and to accurately consider the context. A good knowledge of the field, of the technical as well as socio-political context of the production of the contents, seems to me therefore to determine the comprehension of such contemporary image practices. Online research should benefit from and rely on offline research, in order to avoid detaching certain practices from the sociological realities that give rise to them.

Computer-assisted analysis, however, can be useful for understanding complex phenomena. Access to the servers of YouTube or Facebook would indeed answer many questions, as would the ability to trace the circulation of content. However, we have to be careful not to believe that the number of people 'affected' by certain content is sufficient to determine its scope, or its mobilizing efficiency, just as the number of visualizations for example does not say anything about who looks at them and for how long. The development of image recognition also brings interesting advances while at the same time posing new problems. For example, researchers at Stanford University, in collaboration with Google, have developed an automatic image description program that can generate captions.²⁹ As noted by André Gunthert, these developments are not devoid of ethical problems, as these tools are rarely developed for scientific purposes, and also engender methodological problems:

In all visual recognition projects, the image is considered a container, like a sentence that would simply be broken down to make it translatable. But this approach, which corresponds to the most widespread understanding of the image, does not take into account the reality of our practices, which rely decisively on elements of context in order to understand a visual document. [...] the meaning of an image is built less from the information contained within the frame than through the indications provided by its uses and formats.³⁰

The eye of the machine will definitely have to struggle to reach the level of understanding of the human eye. But, in waiting for technological solutions that are adapted and accessible to the entire scientific community, we must remember that the internet is neither a whole nor a hole, that what is there is also what is not – the images that were not shot and the ones that were not shared (online) – and that searching is still only half of our work.

28 Peter Stockinger, Steffen Lalande and Abdelkrim Beloued, 'Le tournant sémiotique dans les archives audiovisuelles. Vision globale et éléments conceptuels de mise en œuvre', *Les Cahiers du numérique* 11 (2015): 14.

29 Samy Bengio, Dumitru Erhan, Alexander Toshev, Oriol Vinyals, 'Show and Tell: A Neural Image Caption Generator', CVPR Conference, Boston, 7-12 June 2015, http://openaccess.thecvf.com/content_cvpr_2015/papers/Vinyals_Show_and_Tell_CV_PR_paper.pdf.

30 André Gunthert, 'Quand les images parleront', *L'image sociale blog*, 12 December 2014, <http://imagesociale.fr/826>.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: MrTounsiHorr, *Tunisie Tunisia Drama Family Sidi-Bouزيد Kasserine Gafsa.mp4*, 11 January 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW720yW1-l8>.

Fig. 3: Sidi Bouزيد News, *وينك يا ليلي الحجامه 23* October 2011, <http://vimeo.com/30984016>.

Fig. 4: Kantoula3, *Youtube Tunis évènement*, 18 January 2011, *Youtube video*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El3dJ_6TZYE *Facebook video*, 19 January 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=371663282960742>

Fig. 5: Med BMN, *شهداء Tunisie al kram 12-13/1/2011*, 28 December 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Be1_OBCoOuE MrTounsiHorr, *Tunisie Mère Martyre Kasserine Genocide 10 January 2011*, Daylimotion video, 11 January 2011, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgimae_tunisie-mere-martyre-kasserine-genocide-10-january-2011_news

10. THE VANISHED IMAGE¹

LULU SHAMIYYA

Part I

Voice:

Bassel is a *geek*.

We meet one day, by chance at the zeroonezero café.

I am in a chatroom, so is he.

We sit in front of each other, alone with our computers.

An American friend has e-introduced us but we e-meet screen to screen in the zeroonezero café by chance.

Bassel is a *geek*, he doesn't speak but performs magic on the computer.

If he's in the mood he jokes. Talks about sex, swears.

Bassel's home is the computer, he only understands that world.

Once he went to China for two weeks.

I said: tell me about China.

He said: what do you want to know? I only saw the computer, and some whores. But they fuck well...

Bassel and I are always together. He installed Ubuntu for me and initiated me into open source.

We go to

1 This text is part of a multimedia work written by Lulu Shamiyya and live performed with visual artist Marco G Ferrari and musicians Ludovica Manzo, Luca Venitucci, Giacomo Ancillotto, Igor Legari. A tribute to the late Syrian activist Bassel Safadi Khartabil, executed by the Syrian regime in 2015, The Vanished Image was performed in several festivals across Italy. A video excerpt from the performance can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/289289838>

geek fests

barcamps

twestival

tech meetings

net conferences

unconferences

PechaKuchas.

We post/tag/tweet/upload/pass endless hours on the internet zeroonezerooooooooooooooooooooo.

The word 'Arab blogger' is fashionable. *The New York Times* writes articles, *Repubblica* writes articles, even better if a woman: 'The veiled Arab blogger'...

I bring him to a meeting of 'Arab bloggers' and Bassel says: what the fuck are these people? If you're a blogger do it seriously or better sell potatoes... you think you can seriously talk about politics here, in this fuck damn Middle East?

A year later, and Bassel is the idol of 'Arab bloggers'. He no longer lives inside his computer, but in a filthy prison in the suburbs of Damascus. If his wife wants to visit him, she has to walk through the crossfire, the regime, the rebels, other rebels, regime, rebels, free army, Nusra, ISIS, ISIL, sons of the prophet, free sons of the prophet, prophet of free sons, prophet freed from sons, free but not liberated sons of the prophet, liberated but not free sons...

Bassel is a zeroonezero bit. He is the #hashtag of himself. His face is in all the newspapers, on all the world's sites, on all the screens in the solar system...

poor little Syrians, trampled, violated, raped, cut open, swallowed by the mouthful by the whole world

poor-poor-poor things

small-small-small pixels of blood 24 frames per second devoured on smartphones and tablets, constantly refreshed so as not to lose the high definition of horror

Knowledge is the greatest asset.

I know, you know.

I do, you do.

You do not know, so you do not do.

I want you to know, so you *will* do.

Seven years have passed by....

Two million, four hundred thousand, five hundred and twenty two videos.

Ten million five hundred and forty three zero zero zero hashtags.

One billion and twenty thousand three hundred billion million *likes*, *shares*.

The world knows.

The world does nothing.

The world shares zerooneonezerozerooneonezerooneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

You too Bassel, now, you are a bit zeroonezeroonzeroonzerooneeeeeeeeeee that travels at the speed of light from Beijing to Silicon Valley, from Norway to Berlin in the classrooms of universities in cool gatherings in the fight for human rights in squares in the social centers in TVs in international prizes...

You can travel without a passport, not giving a shit, reproduce yourself, copy and paste yourself, share yourself, tag yourself, upload yourself, become the avatar of yourself...

...you finally have your freedom, Bassel: the freedom zeroonezerooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

Part II

Voice 1: The image is an act and not a thing, Sartre says.

Voice 2: Sometimes you don't want to see the image, Godard says.

The image is difficult.

Voice 1: Film at any cost. Film to inform. Film to see and to be seen.

The image is difficult, it's true, Jean-Luc.

Voice 2: Resist, little Syrian, resist, and film for us.

Voice 1: ...guerrilla warfare by hundreds of thousands of mobile phones... our great pixelated revolution...

Voice 2 (as in a Greek chorus): Our Lady of the camera, pray for us.

Voice 1: (a kick in the mouth, the beautiful mouth of the little Syrian who films, blood on all sides,

'Are you the one who shot that stuff? I saw you, don't give me that bullshit'.

The Tubescreen knows everything, sees everything.

Kicks. Blood. Flying teeth.

And now let's move on to electricity...)

Voice 2: Lady of the camera, pray for us.

Voice 1: The whole of the Syrian people film: the young people demonstrating on the streets film...

Voice 2: *This* is a smartphone, megapixel and how! to grab all the *freedom*!

Voice 1: ...torturers in prisons film...

Voice 2: (millions, hundreds of millions of clips invade the Tubescreens of the entire world. Foreground, middleground, background, out of focus, reverse angle, point-of-view shot, high-angle shot, low-angle shot, close-up, one shot, long take.)

Voice 1: ... the armed rebels film, the dictator's soldiers film.

Voice 2: ..and it's not just that today a film can be made of other people's images, because *there is no image of other people*.

Voice 1: (we film, we transfer, we upload, we share ...

we share, we upload, we transfer, we film.

The nights, the days, the days, the nights.)

Voice 2: Tell me, Bassel...

take one: first martyr,

take two: second martyr,

take millions of millions of

martyrs.

Voice 1: I'm looking for the image.

I walk the streets, fly in the streets,

chasing the image.

I look for it in those faces, I ask myself why, I ask you why, why are you here?

Voice 2: He doesn't look for the image, he *makes* the image...

...invincible, unbreakable, flashing like lightning.

Voice 1: I stop, I look at her, I admire her...

Swooping down to make the image,

the race of those like Bassel who ran to catch you, to capture you....

Voice 2: ... damned, cursed, infernal images!

Voice 1: ...there is some left, there's a residue, it is stranded among the pixels of death and says:

Voice 2: *I am the race before death, I was there, I am there.*

Voice 1: ...the race before death, the race before life becomes death... the race...

Voice 2:

Lady of the camera, pray for us.

An homage to Bassel Khartabil Safadi (1981-2015), executed by the Syrian regime for filming freedom, and to the thousands of young Syrians who, like him, died for the Image.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Hadi Al Khatib is the founder and director of The Syrian Archive, an organization made up of human rights advocates, archivists, technologists, and open source investigators. They are dedicated to preserving, memorializing, and adding value to publicly available information related to human rights violations committed by all sides during the Syrian conflict. The Syrian Archive verifies and enhances digital content, establishes verified databases for reporting and advocacy purposes, and acts as an evidence tool for legally implementing justice and accountability efforts as concept and practice.

Mohammad Ali Atassi is a journalist, producer, and documentary filmmaker born in Damascus, Syria. Atassi obtained a diploma in civil engineering from Damascus University in 1992 and a DEA in history from the Sorbonne Paris 4 in 1996. Since 2000, he has been writing for various Arab and international newspapers on political and cultural topics. Since 2001, he has directed two short documentary films and two feature documentaries and produced several short and documentary films. His films have been shown in numerous festivals worldwide and have gained several awards. He is the founder and the director of Bidayyat for Audio-Visual Arts in Beirut.

Mitra Azar is an eclectic-nomadic video-squatter and ARTthropologist with a background in aesthetic philosophy. For the last ten years, he has been investigating crisis areas in some of the most controversial places on the planet, building an archive of site-specific works through the lens of visual art, filmmaking, and performance. He is currently a PhD candidate at Aarhus University and a member of the Geneve2020 (Institute of Research and Innovation, Pompidou Centre) and Ways of Machine Seeing (Cambridge Digital Humanities Network) think tanks. His theoretical and practice-based work has been featured at the Venice Biennial, Cambridge University, NYU, the Museum of the Moving Image New York, Spectacle Cinema, the Hong Kong School of Creative Media, Goldsmiths University London, the Havana Biennial, The Influencers, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Transmediale Festival, Macba [Sonia] Podcast, Berlinale Film Festival, and more.

Enrico De Angelis researches new media and the public sphere in Syria and Egypt, along with grassroots media, political communication, and journalism in the MENA region. He is one of the co-founders of the Syrian media platform SyriaUntold and currently works as a media researcher at Free Press Unlimited. He has held teaching positions at the American University of Cairo, Roberto Ruffilli Faculty and the Political Science Faculty at the University of Bologna, and has served as a consultant for organizations such as UNESCO, International Media Support, Hivos, Deutsche Welle, and Canal France International.

Donatella Della Ratta is a scholar, writer, performer, and curator specializing in digital media and networked technologies, with a focus on the Arab world. She holds a PhD from the University of Copenhagen and is a former affiliate of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. She managed the Arabic-speaking community for the

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Kay Dickinson is Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University, Montréal. She is the author of *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (BFI, 2016) and *Arab Film and Video Manifestos: Forty-Five Years of the Moving Image Amid Revolution* (Palgrave, 2018). She is also a member of the Regards syriens and Regards palestiniens screening collectives in Montréal.

Sune Haugbolle is Professor in Global Studies at Roskilde University and has published widely on political culture and history of the modern Middle East, including *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Rhetoric of the Image: Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East* (edited with Christiane Gruber, Indiana University Press, 2013). He leads the research project *Entangled Histories of Palestine and the Global New Left*.

Ulrike Lune Riboni is a teacher and researcher at the Center for Studies in Media, Technology and Internationalization (CEMTI) at Paris VIII University. Her research focuses on the contemporary uses of digital images, especially video, in social movements and collective mobilizations. She has undertaken a five-year research project on the uses of vernacular videos during the Tunisian revolutionary process and has published several articles on the topic. She now works on so-called 'riot porn' and develops more general reflections on the concepts of voyeurism, the vernacular, and visibility/visuality.

Lulu Shamiyya is a pseudonym of a writer and performer who has left her heart in Damascus, Syria.

Soursar_mosireen is a member of the Mosireen video collective that formed in Cairo in 2011.

Mark R. Westmoreland coordinates the Visual Ethnography specialization at Leiden University. He previously served as co-editor of *Visual Anthropology Review* before co-founding the *Writing with Light* journal for anthropological photo-essays. His work engages both scholarly and practice-based approaches at the intersection between art, ethnography, and politics. He has written extensively on the interface between sensory embodiment and media aesthetics in ongoing legacies of contentious politics, including the crucial role experimental documentary practices play in addressing recurrent political violence in Lebanon, and the activist mode of resistance-by-recording in mass street protests in Egypt.

Theory on Demand #35

The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows

As the revolutions across the Arab world that came to a head in 2011 devolved into civil war and military coup, representation and history acquired a renewed and contested urgency. The capacities of the internet have enabled sharing and archiving in an unprecedented fashion. Yet, at the same time, these facilities institute a globally dispersed reinforcement and recalibration of power, turning memory and knowledge into commodified and copyrighted goods. In *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, activists, artists, filmmakers, producers, and scholars examine which images of struggle have been created, bought, sold, repurposed, denounced, and expunged. As a whole, these cultural productions constitute an archive whose formats are as diverse as digital repositories looked after by activists, found footage art documentaries, Facebook archive pages, art exhibits, doctoral research projects, and 'controversial' or 'violent' protest videos that are abruptly removed from YouTube at the click of a mouse by sub-contracted employees thousands of kilometers from where they were uploaded. The Arab Archive investigates the local, regional, and international forces that determine what materials, and therefore which pasts, we can access and remember, and, conversely, which pasts get erased and forgotten.

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