

when seeing is belonging: the photography of tahrir



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Photographs of Cairo's Midan Tahrir taken on the "Friday of Victory," a week after a popular uprising forced President Hosni Mubarak to relinquish power, represent a better tomorrow—the birth of a new Egypt. These images portray Liberation Square as an oasis of peace and justice, a paradise regained, an icon of freedom and renewed Egyptian identity. Have these photos of Tahrir Square replaced pictures of the pyramids as the ultimate Egyptian cliché?

In August 1990, herds of Kuwaitis sought refuge in Egypt. These tourists-in-spite-of-themselves flocked to the pyramids every day. My debut in photography coincided with this, Saddam Hussein's first invasion of Kuwait. I too was there on the Giza plateau, photographing the pyramids. That winter, Operation Desert Storm became the first war to be broadcast live on television. The perversity of how this invasion was represented

re-affirmed Guy Debord's theory in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation."¹ The dark image in the convex screen was filled with occasional explosions in the night sky of an obscure city, CNN's big fat logo ever-present in the lower left corner. As this "clean, bloodless" war was broadcast minute by minute to the world, in an instantaneous mediation of unfolding events, America's overwhelming military response and its new, elaborate surveillance technologies became subject to much criticism and analysis. Jean Baudrillard, in his controversial and often-cited text on that period, went as far as to suggest, "The Gulf War did not exist". And indeed, the images that saturated our TV screens were perceived as surreal by many and inspired a whole new market of video games where soldiers, tinged by the green glow of infrared, crawl through the night.



A decade later, in 2001, the “casualty-free” representation of the Gulf War achieved in 1991 by CNN was turned on its head by a new generation of documentary photographers and filmmakers. ‘9/11’ was the first, major historical event to be documented by thousands of people with digital cameras, more thoroughly and effectively, as it happened, than by the mainstream media. They recorded the horror of people jumping out of buildings, people covered in ashes running through the debris and carrying the wounded—trying to escape hell. But beyond recording, those who witnessed and photographed the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York contributed to the breaking of a long established monopoly on the representation of reality. Citizen journalism was born.

In a little corner shop in London, the image of a plane exploding into the twin towers flashed on TV. While gathering my groceries, I asked the shopkeeper sitting under the screen what this was. She glanced at it fleetingly over her shoulder and said, with a shrug, “It must be a film.” Never in the history of cinema had a scene of this amplitude been shot. Action movies have been trying, and failing, to catch up ever since. Reality has surpassed fiction. So the Gulf War turned warfare, for many, into a computer game. In the Wikipedia entry for “Gulf War” for example, a header reads: “‘Operation Desert Storm’ redirects here. For the video game, see Operation: Desert Storm (video game).” But ten years later, the photo and film amateurs documenting the collapse of the one hundred and ten story towers in lower Manhattan re-humanised reality.

The first step toward the democratisation of photography was George Eastman’s invention of the Kodak camera. In 1888, with the slogan “You press the button, we do the rest”, Eastman transformed a cumbersome and complicated procedure into something easy and obtainable. Photography, until then affordable only by an elite, became even more accessible after 1975, when another Eastman Kodak engineer, Steven Sasson, came up with another major invention: the digital camera. By 2001, a majority of people in the West had one. Snapping photos was no longer the hobby of amateurs but a fully integrated aspect of most people’s daily lives.

In the following decade, as cameras made their way into mobile phones (smart or not), webcams were embedded in laptop and desktop screens and people uploaded millions of images to social media sites, the global democratisation of photography took on a new dimension. With the emergence of social media, mass media lost even more ground on the distribution of information. Social media, in which the user could participate in the process of selecting and distributing information and make images instantaneously available worldwide, overshadowed traditional visual media. It competed with mainstream media, thus further sharing the power by shifting the hands holding it. “The power of letters and the power of pictures distribute themselves and evaporate into the social media such that

it becomes possible for everyone to act instead of simply being represented”, observed the influential media artist, theorist and ZKM | Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe director Peter Weibel in a recent article, ‘Power to the people: Images by the people’.² The shift was felt worldwide. When Israel attacked Lebanon in 2006, Lebanese online activists and bloggers attracted enough of the world’s attention to put international pressure on Israel and help stop the war. Short-lived but devastatingly destructive, this war lasted long enough to spark the beginning of a new trend of online political activism in the whole Arab region.

On 25 January 2011, I was at home in Cairo with a few friends. None of us knew, beyond the unusual, eerie silence in the street, how unprecedented the protests were. To distract ourselves from the growing tension outside, we played a game of Memory, illustrated with black and white photographs from the archive of the Arab Image Foundation.³ As I played with these past images from the Arab world, little did I know that the history of the region, of Arab photography and of photography at large was about to take a quantum leap.

Photographing in Egypt was prohibited in many areas during the Mubarak era; I was arrested no fewer than seven times over fifteen years for taking pictures in various parts of the country. Fear-mongering propaganda made people paranoid, feeding an ever-present and general suspicion of the camera, and by extension, of the ‘Other’. Complicit as societies become under dictatorship, Egyptians had for generations bowed to routine police humiliation in broad daylight, and worse brutality in the darkness of their torture chambers. Very few images of these crimes had gone public. The 2008 Mahalla protests by textile mill workers revived the notion that we had a right to see and be seen. Egyptian activist Hossam el-Hamalawy⁴, blogged then, “the revolution will be flickrised”, pointing to the need to document and disseminate the regime’s repressive procedures. Seeing would mean believing and revolting for those blinded by the national media, which persistently concealed the reality of the power in place for thirty years.

This was never truer than in Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the 2011 revolution. Here, and in the whole region during the Arab uprisings, the act of photographing became not only an act of seeing and recording, it was fully participatory. At the core of the Egyptian uprising, photographing was a political act, equal in importance to demonstrating, constituting civil disobedience and defiance. In the midst of the emergency, all theories on the subjectivity of photography suddenly became irrelevant. During the eighteen days, people in the square took photos because they felt the social responsibility to do so. Photography became objective; photography showed the truth—yes, a Truth made of as many truths as there were protesters in the square, but nonetheless one that urgently had to be revealed at this turning point in history. The camera became a non-



violent weapon aimed directly at the State, denouncing it. Photographing implied taking a stand against the regime; it was a way of reconquering territory and ultimately the country. Photographing meant belonging.

In his classic BBC series *Ways of Seeing*⁵, John Berger tells us, “The images come to you. You do not go to them. The days of pilgrimage are over.” Commenting on our experience of images in the digital age, Slavoj Žižek argued that “what goes on today is not ‘virtual reality’ but the ‘reality of the virtual’”. A media revolution also took place in Tahrir, when the reality of the streets reached the reality on our screens. The images coming to us through our screens, finally, were “reality”.

Thousands of people moved, photographed and stood together in solidarity against totalitarianism. Protesters held above their heads signs and slogans by day, and the blue glowing lights of mobile phones, iPads and even laptops, by night. While signifying the demand for social justice and freedom, these devices were not only emanating a light of hope reminiscent of the dancing flames during the protests of the 1960s; they were simultaneously absorbing the ambient light, thus recording from every possible angle, in every possible quality and format, life in Tahrir.

Around the world—except in China, where the government banned the word “Egypt” from its Google search engine—images of Tahrir spilled into living spaces. Transcending computers, television screens and other virtual channels, the images inexorably spread the energy of the square. As Žižek said when interviewed about the Arab revolutions, “It was a genuine universal event, immediately understandable... It is every true universality, the universality of struggle.”⁷ Unlike during other conflicts that had provoked a media shift, namely the Gulf War and ‘9/11’, people all over the world identified with the protesters in the square. Tahrir became everyone’s revolution. Arab uprisings and Occupy movements followed in a chain reaction. Was image-making impacting the world and shaking its order by helping people rethink their relationship with political power?

The mainstream international media grabbed the event and sucked everything it could out of it. While it supported the crowds in Tahrir, it also diminished the revolution’s momentum by referring to it in the past tense after the eighteen days and moving on to other news, thus confirming McLuhan’s theory that “you can actually dissipate a situation by giving it maximum coverage”. At this point, ordinary people had embraced the power of online images to such an extent that television news, often way behind the news on the ground, started broadcasting videos shot by amateurs or activists that had already gone viral on the web. Never, since the invention of the camera, had a historical event been so widely documented, with more videos and photos than there were protesters in the square.

The new economy brought about by digital photography has exponentially amplified photography’s intrinsic factory-like quality, which is both its greatest promise and its greatest threat. On the one hand, anyone who owns a camera can produce limitless images for free. On the other hand, the abundance of rapidly distributed images is accompanied by a lack of critical distance; for example, images altered in Photoshop are mostly taken at face value. This contributes to a general desensitisation to reality. Vilém Flusser, in his 1984 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, rightly warns us of the dangers of this hyper-democratisation of photography in the digital age: “Anyone who takes snaps has to adhere to the instructions for use—becoming simpler and simpler—that are programmed to control the output end of the camera. This is democracy in the post-industrial society. Therefore people taking snaps are unable to decode photographs: they think photographs are an automatic reflection of the world.”

During the Arab uprisings, a great number of shaky and blurry mobile phone videos shot in Syria, Libya and Bahrain, uploaded every day onto the Internet, were not “decodable”. Many battle scenes, highly pixelated and graphic, resembled each other, yet, nothing in them was clearly definable or, in itself, recognisable. Only the titles revealed the videos’ content. Viewers easily disengaged from following or attempting to understand how these uprisings were evolving and if they did, once again they referred to and relied on the mainstream media, thus handing the power back all over again.



How long will the most extensive, multi-vocal documentary ever made—the extraordinary and unedited portrait of Egyptians in Midan Tahrir one finds online—survive in the ephemeral virtual archive? With most of the images of the eighteen days vanishing into a bottomless pit thanks to Google’s PageRank algorithm, will the vision of a possible new world people glimpsed in the Square die along with its digital traces?

Although the endless proliferation of images in Tahrir was produced for our own national consumption rather than that of a Western audience, images from the Midan almost instantly turned old clichés of Egypt on their heads. The angry Arab terrorist became a dignified peace warrior. “Egypt! Help us. One World, One pain”, read banners in the protests that erupted in Wisconsin in the USA, three weeks after the Egyptian uprising. The once “dirty Arab” had transformed into a politically and socially conscious citizen. President Barack Obama even declared in a television speech he gave after the ‘Battle of the Camel’ (2 February, 2011) in the midst of the eighteen days: “We should raise our children to be like Egyptian youth.”

In French, the word cliché means “photograph”; for the rest of the world it refers only to a stereotype that, while familiar, conceals more truths than it reveals. The most enduring Orientalist Egyptian cliché of them all, the Giza Pyramids, has been upstaged by the bird’s eye picture of a million people in Tahrir. Images of people circumambulating the tents in the centre of the square resonated, at times, with images of people walking around the Kaaba in Mecca. For about a year after the revolution started, Tahrir itself was a pilgrimage site for revolution tourists.

One of the oldest debates in photography is about its relationship with death: “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality”, writes Susan Sontag in *On Photography*⁸. “One can’t possess reality. One can possess (and be possessed by) images—as... one can’t possess the present but one can possess the past.” The fear of death and the fear that the vision born in Tahrir would vanish soon after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down may have been another reason why people took images incessantly while they were there. Ultimately, photographing in Tahrir was an act of faith. As if recording the ecstatic reality of the present would remind us, in the future, of the Square’s utopian promise, and help us to keep hope when the real battle would start.

Page 64: Paul Noble, *Family is Infinity (or, Hard Labour)*, 2010
(from Guy Mannes-Abbott’s book *In Ramallah, Running*, Black Dog Publishing, 2012)
Photo courtesy the artist and Gagolian Gallery, London

Page 65: Lara Baladi, The “Friday of Victory” after Hosni Mubarak’s fall,
Tahrir Square, 18 February, 2011 Photo Lara Baladi

Opposite top: Protesters during a speech in Tahrir Square, 8 April, 2011 Photo Mosa’ab Elshamy
Opposite bottom: Lasers project “It is not a coup” onto the facade of the Mogamma building, Tahrir Square,
after Mohammed Morsi’s ouster early July, 2013 Photographer unknown

Above: 3 July 2013 NASA photograph photoshopped image circulating on facebook July 2013

After 25 January, 2011, the Square continued to be the centre of protests, a synonym for political power and the barometer for the revolution's failure or success. Images of the square became part of our daily visual consumption routine. At times Tahrir appeared to be a parody of itself; at times the centre of renewed hope.

Whether it was the revolutionaries, the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis who took Tahrir Square, owning the square meant owning the revolution and by extension, Egypt. As the battle for the square worsened, Tahrir came to represent a divided nation. Rifts between Egyptians intensified during and after the first presidential campaign that followed Mubarak's toppling, in which Brotherhood figure Mohamed Morsi won under dubious circumstances and with a surprisingly small mandate. In the midst of economic free fall, he issued a constitutional decree granting himself virtually unchecked power. Egyptians took to the streets again, having lost all trust in his promises to support the revolution and Egypt's interests at large. Only six months into his rule, Egyptians were more bitterly divided than they'd ever been.

In May 2013, a group of young Egyptians launched a national petition calling for early presidential elections. The movement *Tamarod*, known in English as the "rebel" campaign (but meaning "mutiny" in Arabic), invited Egyptians to occupy Tahrir and the premises outside the presidential palace on 30 June, the day when the petition would be submitted to the Egyptian Supreme Court. *Tamarod* collected twenty-two million signatures, an enormous number in a country with an electorate of fifty-one million, and comparable to the twenty-six million who voted in the second round of the presidential campaign. On 30 June, Tahrir Square filled with more protesters than it ever had. As all the squares in Cairo were occupied with people demanding the removal of President Morsi, a NASA photograph of Egypt from the sky – showing the Nile illuminated, with a Photoshopped caption, "Egypt lights the way for the world revolution" – circulated on social media. The photo was an apt illustration of the experience of the overwhelming majority of Egyptians who, if only for a moment, united in a common goal and spirit. The intensity of the euphoria experienced on the ground burst once more onto every TV screen.

But this disturbed the West's political agendas and assumptions, particularly those of the USA. While Obama had bent over backwards to support President Morsi, his administration refused to call the president's toppling a coup or in order legally to continue to give the annual \$US1.5 billion in aid that Egypt's army had become used to. Nevertheless, their support of the Brotherhood meant that this time around, Tahrir's banners were dominated by anti-Obama slogans. Egypt was now defying the very core of the democratic process. Messages like the following circulated on people's Facebook walls:

Know that almost every democracy in the world has now been dragged into this public debate about what is democratic legitimacy... Yes, Egyptians have questioned [the] ballot box legitimacy, and YES, we asked our army to intervene when we found our political opponents bringing out their militias.

Since the uprising on 30 June 2013, the removal of President Morsi on 3 July and the following massacre of his supporters outside the Republican Guards Club on 8 July, the role of the army has, yet again, been brought into question. However, in the early days, many Egyptians used social media to voice their anger that Western media portrayed what had happened as a "coup" rather than seeing it as military intervention in support of and responding to mass mobilisation against the divisive and very undemocratic rule of President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the days immediately following this new turn of events in Egyptian politics, twenty-two *Al Jazeera* journalists resigned, accusing the Qatar-based network of airing lies and misleading viewers. Reporting for *Al Arabiya*, Nada Altuwajiri⁹ characterised these resignations as "criticism over the channel's editorial line, the way it covered events in Egypt, and allegations that journalists were instructed to favor the Brotherhood". Meanwhile, CNN's broadcasts reminded us of its biased coverage of the Gulf War; the network's coverage reflected its own narrative rather than the reality on the ground. CNN not only naively confused images of pro-Morsi with anti-Morsi demonstrations, but was also bluntly oblivious to the voices of the majority of the Egyptian people expressing their will. CNN's crew was thrown out of Tahrir Square, along with many other foreign journalists, because protesters refused to be misrepresented – from the start, this revolution has been about self-determination in media as in society. Nevertheless, the Egyptian army regained control over the national media and gave President Morsi an ultimatum to resign. He refused. The army arrested him and he is now undergoing what many people would call a show trial. As time passes and the intentions of the army remain unclear, the regime stranglehold on the media is fully re-established.

On 30 June, the power of the image was handed back to the people, for the people. Someone even tweeted that a meteorite should fall on Tahrir. Did this message imply that Tahrir should officially be the sacred pilgrimage site for a redefined Egypt? At the time it felt for a moment as if Tahrir could become the Mecca of a rebirthing Arab world, one in the process of seeking a new political practice and redefining democracy in ways the West has yet to imagine. With a little more distance, the last revolt looks more like a popular movement co-opted into a full-scale counter-revolution – yet one more stage on Egypt's long and painful road to representative politics.

When Napoleon Bonaparte addressed his army before the Battle of the Pyramids, he said, "Soldiers! Forty centuries behold you!" Tahrir, by dethroning the pyramids, brought Egypt back to the present.

A different version of this text was originally published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Cairo, Open City: New Testimonies from an Ongoing Revolution*, Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, and then updated for *Creative Time Reports* (<http://creativetimereports.org/2013/09/16/lara-baladi-photography-of-tahrir-square/>) following the events that took place in Egypt during the summer of 2013.

Notes

¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Paris: Buchet-Chastel (Original French) and Cambridge, Massachusetts Zone Books (English Translation), 1967

² <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/power-people-images-people/>

³ The Arab Image Foundation is a non-profit organisation established in Beirut in 1997 that collects, preserve and studies photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora; see <http://www.fai.org.lb/home.aspx>

⁴ Hossam el-Hamalawy is an Egyptian journalist, blogger, photographer and socialist activist. He is a member of the Revolutionary Socialists and the Center for Socialist Studies; see <http://www.arabawy.org/>

⁵ *Ways of Seeing*, 1972 BBC four-part television series that criticises traditional Western cultural aesthetics by raising questions about hidden ideologies in visual images

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Reality of the Virtual*; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnTQhIRcno>

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, #1 Arabian Revolution-0mU; see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v90k0JzUL_c

⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1977

⁹ See Nada Altuwajiri, "We aired lies: Al Jazeera staff quit over "misleading" Egypt coverage"; <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/2013/07/09/Al-Jazeera-employees-in-Egypt-quit-over-editorial-line-.html>