

## ESSAYS

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## Essays

### How Do You Watch a Revolution? Notes from the 21st Century

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#### Abstract

Focusing on the events of the Arab Spring, this essay considers the visual language of the protest within geopolitical contexts characterized by violent repression and state monopoly on information media. The author looks at the ways new technologies – namely mobile phones and social media – are used to produce and disseminate counter-documentation that actively challenges states of invisibility and conditions of deformation. The regime of visibility and visibility of the protestors' statements are analysed in their relation to existing systems of power and to the channels of distribution of information through an examination of the material conditions of their production and reception, and through an attempt at retracing their erratic and multiple trajectories – from YouTube's unsanctioned and unchecked collections, to international news broadcasts, to their re-presentation in public screenings and in works of art.

#### Keywords

Arab Spring • citizen journalism • digital networked technologies • emancipated modes of spectatorship • information production reception circulation • poor images • visual language of protests

Mère Courage est pour nous une substance ductile:  
elle ne voit rien, mas nous, nous voyons par elle.  
(Roland Barthes, *Mère Courage aveugle*, 1964)

There is an age-old binary conviction that sees aesthetics and action as two opposed and antithetical spheres. This intellectual tradition, which, in all its nuances and contradictions, can be traced back to the writings of Guy Debord on the society of the spectacle,<sup>1</sup> and to a certain French tradition associated with Jean Baudrillard and his theories on simulacra and simulations (e.g. Baudrillard, 2003[1972]) states that the aestheticization and spectacularization of politics, including political protest, are to be avoided because they divert attention away from the practical goals of political action. In a recent reiteration of this warning, Marc Augé (2015: 48) has claimed: ‘protesters, when they manage to make themselves heard, are themselves imprisoned in the world of images created by the prodigious expansion of the media and electronic communications.’ Whereas there is certainly some truth in this statement, and part of this paradoxical condition of imprisonment in the web-wide world of free circulation will emerge later on, it is too drastic and hasty in its separation of the ‘actual’ world of protests (action) from the ‘virtual’ world of images. The strategic and *operative* role that digital, networked visual technologies played in the wave of mass demonstrations that swept the globe in 2011, and in particular in the heterogeneous events that fall under the heading of Arab Spring,<sup>2</sup> compels us to rethink such a clear-cut opposition, considering how images and representative strategies have become both an integral part of a highly mediatized struggle and one of the main platforms through which action is elicited and self-organized. Action and representation are not temporally separated moments, but rather increasingly entangled entities. Image-production, both practically and theoretically, has come to be understood as one of the extended and crucial arenas of revolutionary action, and the dangerous proximity of the image-makers to the field of action proper has made distinctions blurry and porous up to the fatal threshold where the virtuality of image-production turns into the tragic actuality of the producers’ annihilation.

The role of the internet in the Arab Spring uprisings has often been ideologically over celebrated in the West to the point of crediting the tool with triggering the movements, obscuring, in such a way, the material driving reasons of unbearable life conditions caused by a mixture of political autocracy and neoliberal economies, often supported by neocolonial interests.<sup>3</sup> Without falling into such one-sided neo-Orientalist, patronizing narratives of technological determinism, one must acknowledge, however, that the dynamic of political self-empowerment in the countries invested by the Arab Spring developed mainly via and through new media channels. Given the states’ strict control over the media and the public space, the internet did offer an invaluable platform to articulate and express dissensus, and, on a more practical level, to coordinate the protests. If this meant that media activists had to convert action into image, it was just to convert it back into action again.

Taking her cue from both the visual aspect of the protest and the visual component of new media, Lina Khatib (2012: 1, emphasis in original) has suggested that ‘politics in the Middle East is now *seen*’ – that is, played

out on the field of the visible through aesthetic practices perceivable both at local and international level. If we accept this position, we should ask, however, *how* politics was/is seen. It is important, therefore, to analyse the articulation of the visual language of the protest, tracing the material conditions of both its production and reception. Such investigation, hopefully, will serve to unpack and unsettle some preconceived assumptions on the emancipatory and democratic potential of networked digital media, and on the intricate relations between mediation and immediacy, embodiment and disembodiment, proximity and distance. The headings of the four sections composing the article play with the spatial locutions *here*, *there*, *elsewhere*, and *everywhere*, in order to stress the locally and geographically based production and reception of information, an element often forgotten or neglected in the analysis of the seemingly groundless and immediate experience of digital information.<sup>4</sup>

The first two sections will focus on the production and circulation of visual information as such, investigating the phenomenon of citizen journalism. The last sections will look at two exemplary cases taken respectively from cultural activism and contemporary art, where the trends of neutralization or attention deficit that threaten digital information are reversed through diverse practices of reiteration and different repetition. With the institution of moments of collective watching in the experience of Tahrir Cinema, organized by Egyptian media collective Mosireen in 2011, and with the application of deconstructive analysis to the activists' videos in Rabih Mroué's lecture performance *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), instances of (self-)reflection and (self-)criticality are injected into the reading of these images so that new truly emancipated modes of spectatorship might emerge.

### **(T)here: Visual Struggles and Dangerous Proximities**

The development of new visual technologies in concomitance with the unfolding of a certain historical event determines the way in which the event is recorded in the present and will therefore be *imagined* in the future, and recalled in collective imagination. So, for instance, our memory of the Gulf War is inextricably linked to the technocratic, machine-like vision of the cameras beamed on smart bombs: a visual paradigm that paradoxically suggests both excessive proximity and virtual detachment through the perspective of an unmanned weapon. The war in Iraq, instead, is associated with the emergence of embedded journalism, with news reporters attached to military units involved in war operations. The indisputable biased and subjective nature of reportages taken from an embedded position is counterbalanced by an unprecedented vicinity to the event of conflict.

Handheld, grainy, and pixelated, the images of the Arab Spring have a distinctive visual character that reflects the material conditions of their production: the poor technologies used and the situation of danger in which they were made. This documentary production shares with embedded

journalism the same hallmarks of subjectivity and embeddedness, yet differs on a very important point: citizen journalism breaks away from the old dichotomies of producer/consumer, transmitter/receiver and entrusts the production of (counter-)information directly to the participants. Rather than the vertical zoom and the surgical precision of the all-encompassing perspective of the smart bomb, we are left with the horizontal point of view of the subaltern, of the individual enmeshed in the mists of the event. It is in this sense that, following filmmaker and visual artist Hito Steyerl's (2012) definition, we can clearly consider these images as *poor images*: images that are poor both in terms of their technical quality and scarce informative value, and in the sense that they are the poor people's – the oppressed's – means of (self-)representation.

We have become acquainted with an imagery that is mainly composed of hasty recordings taken on the run with mobile phone cameras. The low-fi, badly framed and heavily pixelated videos show often out-of-focus images of mass demonstrations and mobs occupying public squares, and barely legible successions of remote shots, gunfire, bomb bursts. Digitally compressed to save storage space and bandwidth, these videos are often uploaded on the spot, relying on a deficient digital infrastructure. This results in further glitches, gaps and inconsistencies that compromise the videos' informative and communicative value. The scarce legibility of the images and their low evidential content clash with the dramatic urgency with which they were taken. In their documentary quality, we detect a contradictory tension: their proximity to the event and the feeling of unmediated-ness and unfiltered realism deriving from it, results in an almost abstract expressionism. In an article entitled *Documentary Uncertainty*, Steyerl (2007: 300) has described this effect as 'documentary abstraction'. She says that one of the deeper characteristics of many contemporary documentary pictures is that 'the more immediate they become, the less there is to see.' In other words, 'the closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes.' The almost abstract patches of pixels communicate a crude sense of reality, exactly because of their rawness and indiscernibility – they convey the chaos of an experience lived from within. These images produce a new regime of visibility, that is, a new way of seeing, by combining a unique impression of immediacy and proximity with an almost complete illegibility; a form of (re-)presentation that owes its effect of realism precisely to its abstractedness and affective expressionism.<sup>5</sup>

If the images of the Arab Spring make us see clashes and events of revolutionary conflict in a different way, that is, from a different perspective or the perspective from below in so doing, they also reveal an otherwise and previously invisible political subject: the oppressed, which finds its epitome in the figure of the young, tech-savvy activist. We may say that this political subject is not simply represented but actually produced through his or her own self-representation. The productive, rather than merely symbolic, nature of these images is evident in the event of political manifestations. Although they boast an undeniable physical and embodied component – one need think only of the large gatherings of people in public

spaces – manifestations were coordinated with digital platforms in mind, and with the aim of creating images that would circulate widely through social media. Without this self-representation and broad dissemination, it would seem as if the protest had not taken place.<sup>6</sup>

This production of a new political subject is achieved through an active challenging of a regime of visibility, that is by making visible what is invisible within a determined system of power relations. French philosopher Jacques Rancière has defined the expression of dissent in aesthetic terms, as that practice that is able to challenge, unsettle, and eventually expand the field of the sensible – to subvert, as it were, the sensible order defined by the operation of policing. ‘Politics’, Rancière (2004: 12–13) claims, ‘revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time’. A political act of dissent, therefore, should aim to appropriate, negotiate and eventually redistribute the shared sensible, by making visible the invisible and uttering the unsayable. Such a struggle for visibility works along two main lines: the affirmative emergence of a new political subject is coupled with the negative unveiling of manipulations and restrictions on the freedom of expression imposed by the regimes in power.

Reporting on political and military repression is not a safe job, and the one reporting runs the risk of becoming a victim of the repression being documented. There is a real danger of being arrested, humiliated, tortured and killed. Any civilian holding a mobile phone equipped with a camera becomes a potential target to be chased and shot by the pawns of the regime. In Syria, for instance, a context that from the start was marked by the brutal repression of the Bashar Al’Assad regime, civil reporters work under risky circumstances, often putting their own lives in jeopardy. Many demonstrators were shot while brandishing harmless phone cameras against their killers’ lethal rifles. The videos in which the protestors die on camera, recording the extreme moments of their own deaths, have become tragically famous.<sup>7</sup> The annihilation of the image-maker proves that Syrian authorities recognize the central role of image-making in the struggle. On the other hand, it shows how the divide between acting and representing, participating and looking, has been physically eroded. Watching through the camera viewfinder has become the quintessential contemporary revolutionary act.

### ***Everywhere!* Circulation, Distribution, and Over-Visibility**

When uploaded online, downloaded in dislocated spatial situations, or broadcast by official information channels, activists’ videos are stripped from the immediate, instrumental intentions for which they were made and they enter new frames of signification. Whereas, on a local level, in the Arab countries invested by the uprisings, a clear-cut opposition existed between two regimes of information – the state-owned media on one side, and the media platforms set up by citizen journalists on the other – the line separating professional journalism from amateur sources has become vague

and confused on the international and global scale. As Samuel Cottle (2011: 652) noted during the Arab Spring:

New social media and mainstream media often appear to have performed in tandem, with social media variously acting as a watchdog of state-controlled national media, alerting international news media to growing opposition and dissent events and providing raw images for wider dissemination. International news media in turn, including Al Jazeera, have distributed the flood of disturbing scenes and reports of the uprisings now easily accessed via Google's YouTube and boomeranged them back into the countries concerned.

This accurate description gives us an instant sense of the dense and entangled web of relations existing between independent sources and official media outlets. In this hypermediated space, characterized by the interpenetration of different media and by the interconnection of local and international networks, information is refracted and reverberated at an accelerated speed, making tracing its origins difficult. With a growing number of sources from the private to the commercial and the corporate feeding in the same uncharted and unsanctioned pool of the web 2.0, the task of verifying authorship and authenticity turns into an impossible endeavour most of the time. Threatened by the persecution of oppressive regimes, bloggers and citizen journalists prefer to keep their identity anonymous and their documents untraceable. The interpretation of the images, therefore, relies exclusively on poor captions and often meagre contextual information. This notwithstanding, unreliable and ambiguous sources are in demand among mainstream media and broadcast in disregard of the traditional credentials of journalistic information. The verifiability of the sources and long-established standards of proved veracity are often brushed aside in favour of the sense of immediacy that first-hand accounts are able to offer.

Dina Matar (2014: 167) has rightly pointed out that, in order to consider the politics of the image in the age of new media, 'we need to think how the image is received and negotiated, how it is disseminated, reproduced, circulated, and embedded in personal and collective memories of history.' In order to do so, we cannot transcend from what she calls the historically and geographically – and nationally – situated epistemologies that informed particular readings. This is to say that, in spite of the apparent unmediatedness of raw footage and the quasi-simultaneity of networked, real-time digital communication, the 'here' of the event remains distant from the 'elsewhere' of its reception. The feeling of 'everywhereness' that interconnectivity and networked technologies produce – a feeling that seemed to be confirmed by the almost synchronous eruption of uprisings across the Arab world – contrasts with the inevitably different readings that these images elicit, or are submitted to, in different hermeneutic contexts.

To assess the results of the battle over visibility, one should therefore consider how images expanding regimes of visibility in the here are



appropriated and re-articulated into the diverse contexts of the elsewhere: how they are dispersed, diluted, or turned into spectacle. The integration of previously excluded and invisible subjects into social visibility does not lead to their automatic political emancipation – revealing the inadequacy of some of Rancière's assumptions. That is to say, visibility is not always synonymous with vision; in other words, to say that something is visible does not mean that it is seen. Despite all its undeniable emancipatory affordances, the web remains an ambiguous place characterized by saturation of information, a state of over-visibility and noise, and regulated through an economy of novelty and difference which feeds on spectacle and distraction, not to mention its use as a tool of control and self-surveillance. The vicious circle in which the empowerment of visibility turns into the disempowerment of over-visibility has been described by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (2012) in an account of the contradictory effects of media activism in the infosphere:

Media-activism is taken in a paradoxical situation. It is crucial for the creation of social consciousness and the denunciation of fake ideologies of power, and the critical dismantling of power's discursive machines. But simultaneously – as it necessitates online activity and mediation of social relations – media-activism is adding noise to the overcrowded infosphere and further virtualizing social relations and attention.

There is a critical point here, and it has to do with regimes of spectatorship and modes of consumption of information. Images of the revolution might well be turned into pure spectacle or a soon-to-be-forgotten headline of the day. To counter these tendencies, it is necessary not just to 'make visible', but also 'to give to see', that is, to build truly emancipatory models of spectatorship. In the following paragraphs, I will draw on two very different examples – one from cultural activism and the other from the art world – to speculate on what an emancipated spectatorial situation might look like.

### **(T)here: Re-play! Emancipated Spectators and Dialogical Spaces**

The image comes second, but it fuels the resistance ...

It is an anti-image. It is imagination.

(Mosireen, Revolution Tryptich, 2014)

Mosireen is a not-for-profit media collective born in Cairo during the Arab Spring. Refusing to rely on state-controlled or corporate media, Mosireen has tapped directly into the energies of the spontaneous explosion of citizen journalism and cultural activism in the country, supplying invaluable infrastructural support. One of the principal aims of the project has been that of providing ordinary people with the skills, equipment, and know-how to counteract the propaganda of state media. This inclusive, grass-rooted



practice places Mosireen in the same tradition of such famous antecedents as Dziga Vertov's *Kinoki* or the French collectives of militant film-makers emerging in the wake of the May 1968 events. Through the coordination of an infrastructural platform and active engagement on the field, Mosireen played a central role in the visual struggles in revolutionary Egypt.

Working simultaneously as facilitators, producers, distributors and archivists, Mosireen was interested from the start not only in productive processes but also in conditions of consumption and spectatorship. Along with the curation of an online platform and blog where videos are uploaded and globally disseminated to reach international publics, it has cultivated a local audience by favouring dialogue and exchange through face-to-face interaction. This insistence on the physical dimension of the distribution of information functions as an antidote against the dispersion of information, and atomization and virtualization of social relationships mentioned by Berardi. The main practical outcome of such a goal materialized in the project *Tahrir Cinema*, a series of open-air public screenings that took place on Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution in 2011, and were later repeated by the public near the presidential palace in 2012 (Figure 1). These cinema screenings featured revolutionary films of protests, strikes, sit-ins and clashes that took place in Egypt, produced by the same Egyptian citizen journalists. Videos and films loosely circulating in the free-floating territory of the internet were given an unprecedented exposure within the collective format of a cinematic viewing. Experiences lived during the day were re-projected at night, sometimes onto the same site. Into a curious praxis of analytical dissociation, day demonstrators turned into nightly spectators of their own actions. As a highly engaged mode of spectatorship, the screenings prompted political discussions where practical matters of strategy were discussed alongside more abstract ideas on the future of post-revolutionary Egypt. Without enforcing any dogmatic or preconceived view, they opened a space for self-criticality and self-reflection.

The importance of the *Tahrir Cinema* experience lies in its ability to introduce a mode of spectatorship that combines the active participation in production with an equally engaged involvement in the process of reception. The public and collective dimension of the screenings opens a socializing space and gives a physical mooring in what Andreas Huyssen (1995: 7) has defined as a 'world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non synchronicity and informed overload'. Besides the physical spatiality, a crucial element in the construction of this mooring consists of the re-injection of the fourth dimension of time: an aspect largely lacking in online consumption. The Greek term *kairos* seems appropriate to describe the temporal condition created by *Tahrir Cinema*.<sup>8</sup> Differing from the word *chronos* that refers to the chronological and linear unfolding of time, *kairos* is a time in between, a qualitative rather than quantitative notion. In this pocket of time set aside, so to speak, from the natural succession of presents, retrospective reflections can take place and memories might form, while past experiences are rewinded and re-played on screen. Taking time for re-watching allows for the development of mnemonic practices foreclosed in the amnesic spaces



Figure 1 Mosireen Collective, Tahrir Cinema, 2011. CC Image: Sherief Gaber.

of online information and makes possible the fabrication of a collective memory of the historical event.

If, on a local level, Mosireen has played a specifically political function with a precise activist agenda, internationally, its film and video productions have been subsumed under the patronage of contemporary art and exhibited in art galleries alongside more properly artistic pieces.<sup>9</sup> This displacement is one example of the well-known flirtation of art with activism and politics. Such appropriations and transpositions come with their contradictory effects taken amidst sensibilization and neutralization, provocation and (an) aesthetization, which I do not have space to pursue here. As a matter of fact, this exchange shows us the porous inter-penetrability of the fields of activist politics, media and contemporary art, where activists adopt aesthetic practices while artists deploy activist motifs and communicative strategies. The change of context for Mosireen Collective's films – from Tahrir Square open cinema to the closed space of a White Cube gallery – inevitably entails

shifts in their consumption. However, in order to assess the modes in which the images of the revolution might be looked at in the context of an art institution, I would like to turn my attention now to a piece that was made precisely with contemporary art audiences in mind.

### ***Here and Elsewhere: Dissecting Images and Other Retrospective Reflections***

Another change of scene, another elsewhere. On the Staatstheater stage, dramatically spotlit, a man sits at a desk in front of his Macbook. On the huge screen at his back, the images of the Syrian revolution are projected: raw footage and YouTube clips mainly culled from the internet and posted by civilians. The man is the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué, and the context is the 2012 edition of documenta (13), curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (Figure 2).

In the lecture performance, *The Pixelated Revolution*, Mroué plays the role of the selector, commentator and interpreter of the images of the Arab Spring uprisings by weaving them into a narrative of his own device. Trying to make sense of the abundance of visual information, he is on the look-out for patterns, repetitions, formal fissures, stylistic features and aesthetic paradigms. He seems somehow unsatisfied with the information that floats on the surface of these images of war and tries to go deeper to unearth their profound operating mechanisms. The analysis of the activists' videos that he performs is not very dissimilar from the one I have tried to offer here – so that including a discussion of the work in this essay curiously nests an analysis within an analysis. For this reason, I will not attempt to deconstruct Mroué's brilliant deconstruction, but I will focus rather on the ways in which he engages the viewer and invites new modes of spectatorship.

Throughout the performance, Mroué continually asks how the images of the revolution were made and how we see them. He surveys their material conditions of production vis à vis the ways in which the images of the regime were made. He suggestively offers the theory of a war 'of bipod versus tripod', in which the shaky, pixelated images of the revolution shot on the move with mobile phones are contrasted to the clear sharpness and stillness of videos taken using tripods and high-resolution cameras. His dissection of the aesthetic of violence does not end there, but pushes on in an odd comparative analysis where the amateur videos of the protests are discussed alongside cinematographic examples. A YouTube clip showing a tank is matched with an extract from Elia Suleiman's film *The Time That Remains* (2009), presenting a similar scene. A survey of the stylistic qualities of the protesters' videos inspires a comparison with the aesthetic of Dogme 95. The Danish film collective was founded by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995 with the aim of purifying filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, post-production modifications and other technical gimmicks. The bare, raw and chaste style in the case of Dogme 95 is the product of a deliberate artistic choice, while in the case of

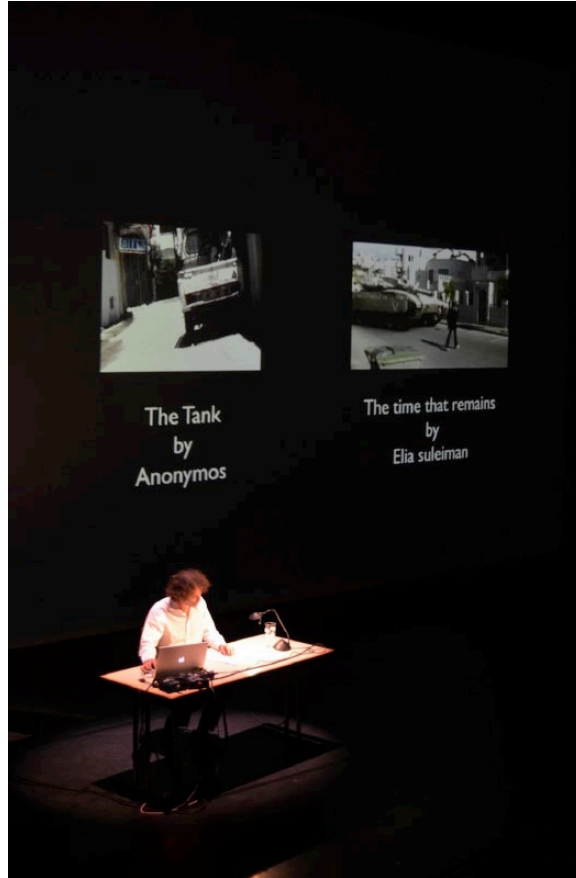


Figure 2 Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, lecture performance, 2012. © Photo: Olaf Pascheit, Hamburg.

the protesters' videos it is the result of a forced situation of danger. If this way of displaying and commenting on raw footage of real protests alongside fictional cinematographic productions could look like an almost Baudrillardian gesture of resignation in front of the bankruptcy of the real and the procession of simulacra, Mroué's sustained engagement with the videos of Syrian reporters recording their own death proves this assumption to be wrong. The undeniable reality of violence and death is not dissolved in formalist deconstructions and comparative analysis; if anything, it emerges heightened through an uncompromising gaze that does not turn away but delves even deeper in the chaos of the image. The artist challenges the spectator position: What do we see? How do we see it? Mroué suggests that the camera has become an optical prosthesis, an extension of the eye. In these unprecedented visual testimonies, the identification with the point of view of the victim becomes total, yet it is still mediated through a technical device and experienced at a temporal and



Figure 3 Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, lecture performance, 2012 (still from the video lecture). Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg.

geographical remove from the event. These images frustrate any attempt to extract precise and accurate information. Mroué enlarges the frames with the sniper's face to such an extreme that all we can see is a featureless clot of pixels, a useless piece of evidence (Figure 3).

Looking critically at the footage of the revolution and deconstructing it through filmmaking methods, in a sort of showing and telling exercise, Mroué performs a production of meaning that magnifies and illuminates the events of fragmented realities. His desk turns into an editing table of sorts, and on the screen viewers can see the results of a transparent process of montage. Cinematographic montage, as we know, produces meaning by linking two images together, one after the other, so that a third image – namely meaning – can emerge in the viewers' minds. In a very Brechtian way, Mroué believes that the final hermeneutic responsibility is placed on the viewer; it is the viewer who has the fundamental role of reading and decoding the images. Through the disjunctive accumulation of different regimes of visibility and discursiveness, the artist allows for this kind of active spectatorship to emerge. He is not concerned so much with the task of making visible, but rather with the ethical–political imperative of 'giving us to see'. In other words, he gives us the time and instruments to look into these images, while revealing the chaos embedded in the new regime of visibility, its obscurities and failures.

If, in the case of Mosireen's screenings, what was important for the creation of an engaged spectatorship was the carving out of a 'time in between', a



*kairos*, Mroué's performance creates instead a 'space in between', a point midway between distance and proximity. That is to say, the artist offers alternative perspectives on events that are either too distant to be understood or too close to be considered differently. He is able to bridge the here and the elsewhere without conflating them, keeping them as two separate entities.

## Looking, Interpreting, Transforming

Writing from today's post-revolutionary perspective, at a time when many of the revolutionary movements in the Arab world have either exhausted their momentum without producing the hoped-for results or, as in Syria, been dramatically drowned by the catastrophic emergence of extra-national conflicts, it seems important to look at the visual legacy of the Arab Spring, a task motivated not least by the extensive reuse and recycling of this material in current contemporary art practices. What the Arab Spring left behind is a bewildering mass of visual information, often bereft of clear frameworks of reference and origin: an archive that is both historical documentation and resistance material.<sup>10</sup> These images produced with an activist, instrumental and present-oriented intention start to live a life of their own when uploaded online, moving erratically from social media and YouTube playlists to international channels of information and White Cube galleries. Their impact and agency are refracted, dispersed, diluted or, conversely, heightened and enhanced in these perambulatory trajectories.

In this essay, I have perhaps done nothing more than reiterate the entrenched paradigm of the double life of a documentary image, split between the present tense of its immediate and instrumental existence and the aesthetic-historical moment in which its meaning becomes unstable. However, it was crucial to stress the importance played by the viewer and the moment of viewing in the politics of the image, and therefore to point out the necessity to establish emancipated modes of spectatorship. This emancipated spectatorship, if it wants to understand something of the complexities of the world it is looking at, requires an attentive gaze willing to engage fully in the images, even in their lacunae, shadows and blind spots. This way of seeing requires an inquiring attitude able to decipher power relations and uneven distribution of means of representation, enforced states of invisibility and repression, as they are encoded formally into an illegible clot of pixels. If we turn back to the oppositional confrontation of actions and images from which we set forth, we shall conclude that not only producing, but also looking at an image is a form of action, whose ethos and consequences might be highly political. 'Looking', or at least a certain way of looking, is in itself and by itself a form of political action as long as it makes a real effort to understand and interpret the world. According to Rancière (2007), emancipation starts when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting, when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies the distribution of the visible that determines domination and subjection; ultimately it begins when we understand that 'interpreting the world' is already a means of transforming it.

If the media activists engaged in the Arab Spring, through their actions, have produced almost illegible snippets and partial glimpses of events that they could not fully grasp, we as readers and final receivers of these testimonies are left with a crucial hermeneutic responsibility. As the spectators of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, we must see through the actors' eyes and construct from fuzzy pixels the bricks for a possible change.

## Notes

1. According to Guy Debord (2008[1967]), the conversion of action into spectacle is the main way in which political dissensus is neutralized and social relationships are reified.
2. *Arab Spring* is a rather unsatisfactory label that co-opts under the same umbrella events that had different modulations, ways of unfolding and epilogues in the diverse national countries interested: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Sometimes the same expression is used to refer to major protests that broke out in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Sudan, and the minor protests that occurred in Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Western Sahara and Palestine. Besides the term's geopolitical indifference, we should also bear in mind that this term emerged in and was largely popularized by Western media, where it served certain ideological narratives (for a critical take on the narrative of the Arab Spring, see Buali, 2014). Although conscious of its limitations, in this article, I will use this expression throughout, for reasons of convenience. In terms of geopolitical focus, however, a major space of analysis will be dedicated to the Egyptian and Syrian case, from which I will draw most of my examples.
3. For instance, *The New York Times* gave endless credit to the internet and satellite television for exposing the Arab world to Western liberal democracies, thus 'fuelling the anger at repressive governments' (Slackman, 18 March 2011).
4. The use of these spatial locutions is also an obvious hint to Jean-Luc Godard and Anne Marie Melville's (1976) film *Ici et Ailleurs* (Here and Elsewhere), which explored the politics of the image and its conditions of circulation in the 1970s, in the context of the Palestinian struggle and the movements of Third Worldism. The film was made using footage from *Jusqu'à la victoire*, a 1970 pro-Palestinian film made by Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin as part of the Dziga Vertov Group. The events of Black September 1970 compelled Godard to review the use and meaning of these images.
5. This new regime of visibility can be seen as a form of 'documentarism' opposed to 'documentality'. 'Documentality' is a term coined by Hito Steyerl (2003) to describe the 'permeation of a specific documentary production of truth with superordinated political, social and epistemological formations'. As such, documentality becomes a powerful instrument through which a given government exercises its power. However, 'the power of the document is based on the fact that it is also intended to be able to prove what is unpredictable within these power relations ... and thus create a possibility for change.'
6. This comes as a reversal of Baudrillard's position according to which the Gulf War did not take place, formulated from the standpoint of the West, on the basis that it came to be known only through the masquerade of propaganda imagery. Conversely, the Arab Spring movements have been experienced through the protagonists' self-representations and were produced *while* represented, or were produced *through* representation.



7. For a discussion of these videos as image-event in *e-flux*, see Rich (2011) and the responses to his essay by Kornheisl and Llorens (2011).
8. Maier-Rothe et al. (2014) use the notion of *kairos* to define the experience of Tahrir Cinema in the collectively written essay 'Citizens reporting and the fabrication of collective memory'. The paper was written after the conference 'Citizens Reporting: A Collective Memory', which took place in Berlin in August 2012. The meaning of *kairos* is complex and usually refers to a time span that cannot be measured: the 'now', opportune or 'supreme' time.
9. Mosireen's videos have been shown in, among other places: *Cairo, Open City*; Photography Museum Braunschweig, September – December 2012; *Recording Against Regimes: Video Art and Films Generated by Political Changes in Poland in the 1980s, Germany in the 1990s; Egypt Now!*, Darb1718, Cairo, March 2013; and *No One Lives Here*, Royal College, London, March 2013.
10. On the digital archiving of the Egyptian revolution, see the incredible work made by artist Lara Baladi, co-founder of Tahrir Cinema and Tahrir radio and member of the collective Mosireen, for the project VOX POPULI (<http://www.tahrirarchives.com/>) and Filming Revolution(<http://www.filmingrevolution.org/>).

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