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Beyond the 'Arab Spring'.
New Media, Art and Counter-Information
in Post-Revolutionary North Africa

Abstract: The 'Arab Spring' possesses an unexplored discoursive dimension made of stratified stereotypical approaches and assumptions linked to the 'Arab' world and its horizons of political agency. In the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, in a period of renewed censorship and instability, multiple actors coming from citizen journalism and activist/artistic backgrounds collaborate in experimenting post-revolutionary counter-power.

The drive to re-appropriate the revolutionary narrative and give continuity to its legacy in the 'transitional'/post-dictatorship period is marked by an all pervading intertwining of art and counter-information, in collectives focusing on media (such as the Egyptian Mosreen), street art (such as the Tunisian Ahl al Kahf), journalism (Inkyfada) or theatre (Corps Citoyen) projects, as well as for the emerging independent video-makers (such as Ridha Tlili). My article intends to interrogate their interaction with the dominant representation of the uprisings.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, Tunisia, Egypt, revolution, resistance, new media*

Introduction

In the context of the waves of dissent that marked the year 2011 at a global level, the so-called 'Arab Spring' and its representations carry a double potentiality.[1] They can present yet another 'revolution of the Other', mediated by an Orientalist reading of the events on behalf of the Western cultural industry or, on the contrary, they can open up an active process of listening to the 'Arab' collective practices of resistance.[2]

The term 'Arab Spring' is commonly used to indicate a series of regional anti-governmental protests which seems to have little in common. The term is thus used to refer to a number of heterogeneous events involving different nations (lumped together on the basis of a vaguely linguistic criterion): Tunisia and Egypt ('successful revolutions'), Libya and Syria ('revolutions' turned into civil wars), as well as Yemen, Bahrein, Jordan and Morocco (the 'revolutions' forgotten by Western and regional media).[3] What is implied is that all countries involved in the so-called Arab Spring share some common features. In order to deconstruct this simplified point of view and suggest an alternative reading, this article will mainly focus on the case of the Tunisian revolution, which inaugurated the series of regional uprisings (after the mass protests started on 18th December 2010) while also taking inspiration from the critical practice and theory promoted by Egyptian thinkers. Political events such as the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings should thus

[1] As this essay goes to press, I find myself to have to account for how, on the 18th of March and the 26th of June 2015, two tragic attacks on European civilians in Tunisia seem to have irreversibly shaken the hope for a peaceful democratic transition of the country, strongly influencing a rising pessimism around the outcomes of the so-called 2011 'Jasmine revolution'. This radicalization somehow seems to me to be the consequence of a dismissal of the revolutionary demands, hence the importance of not flattening the debate on the revolution under the 'threat of terrorism'. Despite the enforcement of the police state, security cannot be expected unless social justice becomes a priority. Meriem Bribri, a Tunisian activist working with the Support Committee for the Martyrs and the Wounded of the Revolution describes the post-revolutionary situation, which, in her opinion, has nurtured the radicalization of many young Tunisians after 2011: "There was no evolution at a socio-economical level and the power has remained highly centralized with the same neoliberal modalities which exclude a national and popular development" (Meriem Bribri, "Tunisia. Nessuna sicurezza senza giustizia sociale", *OsservatorioIraq.it,* 6 July 2015. My translation, http://osservatorioiraq.it/voci-dal-campo/tunisia-nessuna-sicurezza-senza-giustizia-sociale?cookie-not-accepted=1).

[2] From the Western viewpoint the revolution has been enacted by the exemplary other of the post-9/11 era, namely the 'Arab'. From the local, Tunisian viewpoint, the disregarded agent of the revolution is an equally criminalized category, namely the 'underclass' (constituted of the unemployed and underemployed inhabiting the poor cities of Tunisia and the peripheries of its richest urban centres). Tunisian undocumented migrants and 'terrorists' also originate from this category.

[3] Augusto Valeriani, "La Primavera Araba e il web come forma culturale" (2012), http://barbapreta.wordpress.com, accessed 12 September 2013.

be able to influence "the categories through which we view such changes", since "new subjectivities and new singularities demand new frameworks, both of understanding and of solidarity".[4]

Therefore, this article aims to expose the rhetoric of the revolution behind the 'Arab Spring', making visible the hegemonic discourse around it and the way particular spaces of cultural production have countered it. The argument of this article is that specific areas of cultural production (mostly experimental art and counter-information connected to new media) can be considered the starting point for a post-revolutionary counter-power, concerned with both writing its own contemporary history (thus challenging both local and global dominant narratives) while fostering "alternative ways of imagining and organizing our societies".[5] Because of their dissident nature, these spaces have traditionally and are still heavily fighting state censorship and control before and after the revolutionary transformation.

With the outburst of the uprisings and the temporary suspension of censorship, Tunisia and Egypt have both seen an explosive evolution of informal and citizen-based journalism. Yet after the electoral victory of Islam-inspired parties in both countries (after the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions), censorship returned under a different form and radical freedom of expression often seemed to be limited by new criteria. This is why art, although often contested by radical Islamic supporters, appeared to be a privileged refuge zone for those wishing to express dissent, but also exercise civic imagination, beyond the threat of religious and state persecution.[6]

New media emerged, thus, as an environment of resistance to a hegemonic discourse, but, most importantly, as the ground where the memory of the revolution and its continuity in current practices was being played out. This research understands new media in a broad sense, referring to cultural practices and products related to IT platforms, interactivity and citizen journalism, but also looking at the interaction between traditional artistic means and new media, such as the merging of theatre and video-art and experimental forms of expression, such as mixed techniques of street art (collage/painting/stencils).

Rather than a tool, then, new media has become a "new public sphere", one saturated with information, around which the main goal of resistant practices becomes that of deconstructing stereotypes and determining an "empathic perception of the presence of the other" while activating "networks of solidarity outside the sphere of the economy and of representative democracy".[7]

The 'Arab Spring' and the New Media

After the emergence of Islamic parties and armed struggle groups the 'Arab Spring' term has been perceived with an increased nostalgia and skepticism, even when referred to the so-called "successful revolutions" in Egypt and Tunisia. Its usage

[4] Anthony Alessandrini, "Foucault, Fanon, Intellectuals, Revolutions", *Jadaliyya,* http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17154/foucault-fanon-intellectuals-revolutions, accessed 1 April 2014.

[5] Philip Rizk, Shuruq Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk", *Tabula Gaza*, 18 June 2013, http://tabulagaza.blogspot.it/2013/06/interview-with-philip-rizk-by-shuruq.html.

[6] As in the cases of religious protests against galleries illustrated by Anthony Downey, "For the Common Good? Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia", in Anthony Downey, ed., *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 53-69.

[7] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "The Paradox of Media Activism: The Net is not a Tool, It's an Environment", in Downey, *Uncommon Grounds* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 39-46.

(based on Western precedents such as the 'Spring of Peoples' in 1848 or the anti-Sovietic 'Spring of Prague' in 1968) suggested an unexpected 'Arab Awakening' to democracy, opposed to the post-9/11 paradigm largely focused on depicting the so-called 'Arab' peoples as 'naturally' authoritarian.[8]

Often disregarding the history of contestation and the social motivations of the peoples animating the 'Arab Spring', Western writers initially focused on providing a journalistic description of the different mobilizations in the Middle East (perceived as a quasi-homogeneous whole, while privileging, at the same time, the technological aspect as a democratizing facilitator).[9] Scholars with a certain proximity to the Middle East and North African context provided deeper readings of the events, in terms of their political specificity and relevance for the relationship between Western and non-Western political imaginaries.[10]

Alongside these orientations, a series of thinkers from Arab countries have engaged in critically questioning the dominant narrative of the 'Arab Spring' (such as the already mentioned Rabab El-Mahdi, and Philip Rizk,), by situating themselves in a post-Orientalist and post-Leftist theoretical ground.[11] These positions were also supported by independent political and artistic collectives such as Mosireen in Egypt and *Ahl Al Kahf* in Tunisia.[12] This article will mainly focus on the Tunisian post-revolutionary setting, except for a reflection on the Egyptian Mosireen collective, because of the high relevance of their practical and theoretical interventions. These accounts pose a strong critique of the narrative construction of the 'Arab Spring' simplified as a youth-led, social media centered revolution against local dictatorships, eventually dubbed as 'failed' after the electoral victory of Islam-inspired parties (Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) and the outburst of military violence (in Egypt) and terroristic attacks, later on in Tunisia.[13]

According to this critique the focus on the youth and social media "lumps together the contradictory and often conflictual interests of 'yuppies' with those of the unemployed, who live under the poverty line" and who have constituted the mis-represented radical actors of the uprisings.[14] Despite the toppling down of the dictator and the electoral victory of the Islamists, the Tunisian revolution is neither perceived as ended nor failed, rather as an "ongoing process" or a "revolutionary becoming", aimed at confronting social inequality and state violence, beyond the mere ousting of a dictator.[15]

I will privilege these interpretations of the events because they are produced by what (employing a Gramscian term) could be called a new form of "organic intellectuals" or artists, engaged in keeping their ears on the ground, listening, "spending time with the people that make up this revolution", but mostly "questioning their ideological packages for the sake of reality on the ground", as opposed to the more disengaged views of Western observers.[16]

These critiques express a different narrative of the Tunisian revolution, one enacted by the large category of unemployed or underemployed citizens, whose

[8] Rabab El Mahdi, "Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising", *Jadaliyya,* 11 April 2011, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising, accessed 11 April 2011.

[9] Lin Noueihed, Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring* (Yale: Yale U. P., 2012), Fawaz Gerges, ed., *The New Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2014); Robert Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere* (London: Verso, 2012).

[10] Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (California: University of California Press, 2013); Samir Amin, *The People's Spring: The Future of the Arab Revolutions* (Oxford: Fahamu Press, 2012).

[11] Others have engaged in collective critical works on the 'Arab Spring' such as Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer and Ziad Abu-Rish, eds., *The Dawn of the Arab Spring: End of an Old Order?* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

[12] The work of the Mosireen collective is available on their official website mosireen.org/. The *Ahl Al Kahf* collective have made some of their work public on their official Facebook profile, available here: https://www.facebook.com/pages/أهل-الكهف-ahl-alkahf/115175015229496?sk=info&tab=page_info.

[13] *The Economist,* "The Arab Spring. Has It failed?", accessed 13 July 2013.

[14] Rabab El Mahdi, "Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising", *Jadaliyya,* 11 April 2011.; Philip Rizk, "2011 Is Not 1968: An Open Letter from Egypt", *Roar Magazine,* 25 January 2014.

[15] Leila Dahkli, "A Betrayed Revolution? On the Tunisian Uprising and the Democratic Transition", *Jadaliyya,* 5 March 2013. See also the *Ahl Al Kahf* collective in a 2013 interview available at http://www.workandwords.net/uploads/files/Ahl_Al-Khaf_interview_FRANCAIS.pdf.

[16] Rizk and Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk".

17 Eric Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia", Institut de Recherches et d'Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman, 2010. Working paper. https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826.

18 Nawaat is an independent journalism project started in 2004, available at http://nawaat.org/portail/. Lina Ben Mhenni is the most famous Tunisian blogger. Her blog is available at http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk.

19 Rizk and Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk".

desperation had already exploded in the previous uprising of the Gafsa mining basin in 2008.[17] The push for change came from the poor cities and the urban peripheries of Tunisia, articulated by an apolitical, non-ideological category, yet demanding a radical redistribution of the country's wealth with its cry for "bread, freedom and dignity!". My analysis will seek to sketch the modalities employed by new media and art in delineating critical cultural practices able to enhance the radical content of the revolution and promote it in the unstable post-revolutionary society, despite ongoing forms of censorship.

The new media landscape taken into consideration was publicly born on January 14th 2011, when the Tunisian president Al-Zibidine Ben Ali announced the demise of his policy of Internet censorship (colloquially labeled "Erreur 404"), a few hours before fleeing the country for Saudi Arabia. Before this date, mediactivism in Tunisia was massively hindered and repressed. For this reason the few who engaged in it before the revolution generally shared a certain political awareness and a significant will to take risks (as in the case of the citizen journalism practiced by platforms such as Nawaat or bloggers such as Lina Ben Mhenni).[18]

It can be said that just like the revolution represented a rebirth of mass politics after (at least) 23 years of active efforts of depoliticization by the state, in the same way citizen journalism represented the rebirth of information after decades of debilitating censorship. The first concern of Tunisians who now had the chance to bypass the media controlled by the regime after the fall of censorship was to employ their social media profiles and blogs to expose the brutality of state oppression, thus producing an initial focus on police brutality, torture, repression of protestors and state corruption.

My argument is that new media is one of the environments that certain media and art techno-collectives partially inhabited when developing their resistance to the dominant narratives on the Tunisian revolution. At the same time they have, in this way, produced and disseminated "imaginations for resistance", thus "playing a part in the contestation over the narrative of a global battle over how we want to live our lives".[19]

The activity of these collectives marks the possibility of post-revolutionary counter-power in as much as they provide an independent alternative to both the local state discourse (which institutionalizes the memory of the revolution and its struggles) as well as the dominant global one (which dismisses the revolution as failed). In doing so, they focus on specific concerns and feelings which animate the Tunisian society and are often disregarded by hegemonic discourses. Especially after the fear of terrorism has monopolized the debate (as has happened in the summer of 2015), considering approaches which provide a critical understanding of the revolution while also fostering resistant cultural practices is more relevant than ever.

The following brief examples have been chosen because they each reveal ignored aspects of how the revolution has been lived and perceived by the

Tunisians. At the same time they show through their practices how media and art can contribute to intensify the struggle against oppression: be it by countering dominant narratives or unequal and repressive states (whether pre- or post-revolutionary).

Furthermore, the new media environment (for what concerns both information and art) is also relevant in terms of gendered participation, since it blurs the boundaries of the public space (both media- and politics-wise) that many Tunisian girls and women feel excluded from. What is produced, in this way, is a new space of debate, fueled by numerous women bloggers, activists, actresses, artists, and journalists. When considering the girls' and women's production of new media connected discourses, however, we also have to consider a few elements. Firstly, that the usage of Internet communication technologies (ICT) which goes beyond the maintenance of social media profiles – involving more complex skills such as journalistic writing, acting, editing – is still limited to middle-class categories, which have had the chance to attain education. This doesn't mean that girls and women of the lower social classes have not participated in the revolution of 2011 and the ongoing democratic transition. In fact, "for decades [women] have been active members in trade unions, political opposition parties and more informal networks and organizations that were all instrumental in the recent political developments".[20]

Therefore, new media connected information and art just integrate the modalities girls and women had employed so far in order to bring about social change: from direct action and support groups for the unemployed, the martyrs and the dispersed migrants to new articulations of feminist sensibilities through art and media related activism.

Philosophers and Ants: "To create is to resist"

In 2011, not too far away from the Republic Square in the Tunisian capital, several boys and girls start vivaciously decorating an old wall in bright white and red stencils, producing mysterious iconographic portraits, short cryptic quotes and an apparent invasion of ants coming out of a hole. The recent revolution apparently suspended censorship and authoritarian control, nevertheless this creative appropriation of a public wall appears highly audacious. A policeman stops and interrogates the artists, afraid they might be drawing something subversive. Just "philosophers and ants", they answer.

The young men and women are members of the *Tunisian Ahl al Kahf* ('the underground people') artistic-political collective. The 'philosophers' depicted above the stream of ants are the controversial Moroccan novelist, Mohamed Choukri, Antonio Negri, Edward Said and Gilles Deleuze. Their quotes in Arabic symbolically mark the strivings of the young artists in the immediate aftermath of the revolution: "I'm writing in order to be banned" (Choukri), "Power can always be broken somewhere" (Negri), "Intellectuals have to witness the badness of using

[20] Nadje Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communications,* 5, 2012, 26-31.

history" (Said), but mostly "To create is to resist" (Deleuze).

My understanding is that the *plethora* of cultural practices contesting the hegemonic Arab Spring discourse as well as the institutionalisation of the revolution on behalf of the local governments is a little bit like *Ahl al Kahf*'s invasion of ants: underground, parasitic and continuous. Whereas the hole in the wall, which allows the ants to storm in the picture, could be read as a metaphor of the initial opening up of the public sphere, most visibly through citizen journalism, a temporary fault in the monolithic censorship system of both Tunisia and Egypt, in the process of currently re-articulating itself. In this sense, the following examples will be exploring the expressive possibilities granted by the relative liberation of the public sphere and the ways Tunisian and Egyptian techno-collectives have fostered new expressive sensibilities.

An impressive and critical employment of new media in Tunisia is Inkyfada, a digital journalism platform written in French launched in June 2014 and animated by young journalists, developers and graphic designers (some previously involved in larger independent information projects such as Nawaat).[21] A project of the Tunisian NGO Alkhatt, Inkyfada is very concerned with reflecting on the newly acquired freedom of speech and with establishing creative connections between traditional investigative journalism and new media. Such a project reveals the thematic area of interest of a rising generation of journalists in the post-revolutionary period. Among the first published articles, many deal with different aspects connected to the phenomenon of terrorism (terrorist attacks chronology and maps, anti-terrorist law, media and terrorism), while others attempt to frame the post-revolutionary burden of waste collection, against the backdrop of a State apparently failing to maintain order. Inspired by the ideals of human rights and civil engagement, Inkyfada's journalists express a widespread sense of concern, connected to the post-revolutionary identity of the state and the potentiality of its efficient organization. Most importantly, it represents an important opportunity of experimentation since its production is mostly focused on deep investigations carried on by teams of different professionals working on both the contents as well as the best digital form of dissemination.

Such highly participative and relatively small intellectual environments – where women journalists and designers represent at least half of any team – allow for the articulation of an independent critical debate on themes which have never been discussed in previously state-censored media and are more difficult to develop on larger news-focused platforms. Inkyfada thus becomes a safe space where to critically approach delicate issues such as sexuality, post-revolutionary torture, smuggling and attempting to make sense of the phenomenon of Tunisian terrorism, free of any pressure from local or global agencies. Such platforms allow for a successful challenge to hegemonic discourses on the Tunisian society, while disseminating a highly analytical and critical thought (even beyond the Tunisian borders thanks to the employment of the French language).

[21] Http://inkyfada.com/, accessed 1 October 2014. Some of its creators were previously involved in the Nawaat journalism project http://nawaat.org/portail/.

In this sense, contemporary theatre appears to reach even a larger audience, thanks to the employment of performance-centered practices and the integration of videos. Like in the case of the show produced by the *Corps Citoyen* ('citizen body') collective, *Mouvma – Us, who are still 25 years old,* released on 4th July 2014.[22] What the 'three comedians and citizens' (Aymen Mejri, Rabii Brahim and Soussen Babba) enact on the stage is "not a story but pieces of collective experiences of a revolt which has created a new relationship with life, a different understanding of the world, but, most of all, the need of a continuous interrogation".[23] The anonymous videos, which punctuate the images and affects of the Tunisian revolutionary experience, like a privileged locus of memory inscription, are omnipresent on the stage, projected on the actors' bodies and repeatedly enacted by their gestures. The theatre show exposes the unseen affective landscape produced by the revolutionary experience: the euphoria and explosive energy pervading the synchronized bodies in front of the forces of order, electrified by the fear of death and the necessity to shout their rage, but also the solitary dimension of anxiety and depression, connected to frustrated revolutionary expectations.

Corps Citoyen plays on the border between collective struggle, which they enact thanks to the videos projected on their bodies, and solitary suffering – the same one that sparked the initial uprisings and is now kept under control by a feeling of 'happiness' imposed from above. Beyond the eulogic presentation of the revolutionary youth, they engage with the latent, hidden aspects of the revolutionary experience, namely depression and suicide, nurtured by a post-revolutionary frustration and poverty. What the young artists suggest is that after the revolution a certain pressure was practiced by the new establishment on acting 'happy' and putting an end to all revolutionary claims or any form of complaint, which they expected to disappear with the toppling down of the dictatorship.

The young actress and actors of *Corps Citoyen*, directed by the Italian Anna Serlenga, use their bodies to narrate the revolutionary drama with its passage from fear to liberation and the eventual articulations of post-revolutionary depression and anxiety. On the theatre scene, the performers of *Corps Citoyen* connect the pre-revolutionary self-immolations of the young unemployed with the post-revolutionary ones of the same people, after having experienced the climax of mass mobilization. The actors employ very intense affective tools in order to expose a controversial though largely shared conviction. Namely that even after what is perceived as the end of the revolution, the social solidarity must propel an ongoing struggle for a dignified life for everyone, otherwise the spectre of suicide will return.

Another collective, the Egyptian Mosireen, is also engaged in deconstructing the mainstream representation of the revolution and fostering solidarity for a further transformation. *Mosireen* (literally 'we are determined') is an independent video collective that believes in the visual medium as a site of action rather than a representational tool. Many of its young highly skilled members have political or

[22] Their Facebook profile is availabe at http://www.facebook.com/corpscitoyen?fref=nf.

[23] From the synopsis, available at http://www.tekiano.com/2014/07/02/lmouvma-nous-qui-avons-25-ansr-1er-projet-theatral-du-collectif-lcorps-citoyenr-07-juillet/, accessed 1 October 2014.

[24] Their activities and works are available at http://mosireen.org/, accessed 1 October 2014.

[25] Omar Kholeif, "Re-examining the Social Impulse: Politics, Media and Art after the Arab Uprisings", in Downey, ed., *Uncommon Grounds*, 222.

[26] Philip and Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk".

[27] The Maspero massacre regards an episode occurred in October 2011, when the army crushed a demonstration carried on by Egyptian Christian Copts, aimed at denouncing the indifference of media to Copts' persecution by protesting in front of Cairo's Maspero television building. The intervention of the army caused 28 casualties and injured more than 200 Egyptians. Sarah Carr, "A firsthand account: Marching from Shubra to deaths at Maspero", *Almasry Alyoum,* 9 October 2011.

[28] Philip and Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk".

[29] Ibid.

[30] From the *Ahl al Kahf: founder Manifesto* (11 November 2012), https://www.facebook.com/notes/أهلالكهف-ahl-alkahf/, accessed 1 October 2014. The name alludes to the 'People of the Cave' myth contained in all monotheist sacred texts, about young people escaping from a dictatorial regime and falling asleep in a cave for hundreds of years. With this name the artists are suggesting – among other things – that they possess an autonomous temporality.

artistic backgrounds.[24] Since October 2011 the collective has produced more than 250 short documentaries and has built a vast open archive of material on the Egyptian revolution. Many of its members, like Ahmed Hosni and Philip Rizk, have majorly contributed to challenge the 'narrative of dominance' surrounding the Arab Spring, not only with their audio-visual practices, but also with theoretical reflections. Mosireen is undoubtedly one of the most admirable subversive tools of the Middle East, also because it is situated outside of the market, state, and major NGOs circuits (while managing to self-fund itself). As Omar Kholeif has pointed out, Mosireen suggests "a representational revolution fostering a revolutionary culture in content and form".[25]

Mosireen only employs new media platforms as one of the spaces of dissemination, but most of its work takes place on the streets of Egypt. As the members of the collective explain, much of their work is "a form of counter-propaganda, whereby [they] intend to subvert the rhetoric of the authorities".[26] Video-making thus supports the exposure of brutal state violence (as in the case of the video of the Maspero massacre) and seeks to provoke people's rage around issues such as sexual state torture and denounce the dramatic consequences of Western-driven privatizations (with films such as *Out/In the Streets*), giving voice to those Egyptian citizens that the authorities have never listened to.[27] These shorter or longer materials, many of which expose video-makers to high risks, are then screened in reachable sites such as squares, parks, streets, fields (thanks to initiatives such as 'Tahrir Cinema' organized by the collective) and virally spread through any means from hard drives to CDs, USB keys or Bluetooth. The screenings (which occasionally involve performances) become an excuse for animated popular debates and collective discussions, in the attempt to overcome the "hermetic filmic practices". Mosireen challenges the ownership of images (by screening censored ones, producing and spreading its own) as well as that of skills – thanks to itinerant free workshops which teach activists across Egypt basic film-making and how "to disseminate videos for revolutionary purposes".[28] Most importantly, Mosireen are driven by the "responsibility to disseminate images of protest in an attempt to enhance the dissemination of imaginations for resistance" while fostering "alternative ways of imagining and organizing our societies".[29]

A similar dissident collective (although bearing many different features) has been active in post-revolutionary Tunis. With its members coming from both artistic and trade unions environments, the *Ahl al Kahf* collective (literally 'the people of the cavern'), self-proclaimed itself as a "multitude of terrorist networks that fulfill and spread aesthetic terrorism".[30] They are a group of heterogeneous artists, mostly practicing street art with subversive messages on the walls of the poor areas of Tunis and other cities. Intellectually inspired by thinkers such as Edward Said, Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri, their artistic methods are influenced by the Situationists, the Dadaists and very strongly by the practices of Ernest Pignon.

These artists have been intensely involved in the revolutionary practice; in fact, they have been born as a group during the first occupation of the Kasbah, a massive protest gathering the unemployed youth of the poor Tunisian areas. They have occasionally carried on their 'artistic terrorism', with additional means, such as video and radio. Their ephemeral works on the Tunisian walls promote art as a means of resistance to the dominant thought and often criticize the detachment of an institutionalized image of the revolution from the contingency of the ongoing struggles of the poor Tunisians.

Faithful to the strong background of Tunisian social movements, *Ahl al Kahf* have intensely rejected the punctual definition of the '14th of January revolution' concentrated on the day of Ben Ali's resignation, as opposed to a still unfolding duration, whose demands are inspired by the massive struggles of the past (for social justice, work, equality between regions and against state violence).

The independent film-maker Ridha Tlili aka Ayan Ken (from Sidi Bouzid) has broadly depicted the street art movement in Tunis with his documentary *Revolution under 5'* (2011) – initially just a collection of short videos on the street actions of the *Ahl al Kahf* artists right after the 14th of January.[31] In his works around the revolution, rather than about it (especially *Jiha, Revolution under 5'* and the latest *Controlling and Punishment)*, Tlili avoids the related 'prostitution' and the 'mythical spectacle' connected to it, enacting a conscious gesture of resistance to hegemonic representations: both Western Orientalist representation (the 'failed revolution') and the Tunisian institutionalizing one (according to which the revolution has been achieved and should be considered completed).[32]

The feeling of frustration for this forcedly ended revolution is broadly explored in *Revolution under 5'*. Mohammed Ltaif, one of the founders of the collective, thus states that:

> We had a revolutionary horizon, but the day we wanted to raise the stakes, imperialism or the empire or the so-called international community told us, directly or indirectly, "be with the Tunisian army, with Tunisian media, with the stupid intellectuals, with the artists and the Tunisian people who believe that the revolution ended with the departure of Ben Ali.[33]

Thinking beyond the 'departure of Ben Ali' in political terms means accounting for the movement, which put an end to Ben Ali's repressive rule, while supporting the ongoing struggles for social justice. In this sense, one of the main debates depicted by *Revolution under 5'* is the question of independence and autonomy of thought, connected to economic independence and freedom from censorship. What the artists denounce, shortly after the climax of the Tunisian revolution, is that censorship works in a different, but equally pervasive way. This is why anonymous actions during the night and the public space of the street offer perfect conditions for their art, since, as they explain, "all the other spaces are private,

[31] His project and trailers are available at http://www.ayanken.net, accessed 1 October 2014.

[32] "Films 'Jiha' et 'Thawra ghir draj' de Ridha Tlili: Deux ondes autour d'une révolution", *Nawaat,* 1 February 2012, http://nawaat.org/portail/2012/02/01, accessed 10 October 2014.

[33] Ridha Tlili, *Revolution under 5'* (Sidi Bouzid: Ayen Ken, 2011).

[34] Ibid.

controlled and have standards".[34]

Their critique inevitably invests the question of appropriation and ownership of images of resistance, as a dispositif of control connected to their proliferation and circulation in digital networks. According to the artists, the past regimes would sell images of resistance (like the Berbers opposing the Tunisian central state) to colonial France, whereas current images are directly sold to French associations by the journalists themselves, making it hard for Tunisians to have access to and interpret those images which have recorded the transformation of their society.[35]

[35] This is what the interviews with the artists reveal in Tlili's documentary, *Revolution under 5*.

[36] All female participants to the artistic actions have been anonymised by the director, suggesting an ongoing fear or retaliation and the vulnerability of gendered art and activism in Tunisia.

[37] Tlili, *Revolution under 5*.

Furthermore, Tlili engages in an interesting dialogue with one of the female artists of the group, who denounces the limited visibility of women in the Western and Tunisian accounts of the revolution.[36] When interviewed, the young woman sees street art as a reaction to the exclusion from other spheres (mostly media representation and politics) and declares "we have more freedom on the street where we can use everything that surrounds us".[37]

Animated by the duty of remembering the martyrs of the previous struggles (especially those occurred in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008) the artists position themselves in accordance with a very lucid class awareness.[38] *Ahl Al Kahf* points out that they have "contributed to the revolution by telling the people that revolution didn't complete its tasks".[39] Those who will complete the revolution, they claim, won't be the artists or the "elites who come out on special occasions to take pictures next to tanks", but, once again "the poor of Sidi Bouzid, Regueb, Thala, and Kasserine".[40]

[38] The protests that animated the Gafsa mining basin (in Central-Southern Tunisia) between January and June 2008 are also called the 'Gafsa Intifada' and considered the general rehearsal for the 2011 Tunisian revolution. They were a generalized reaction of the large under- and unemployed majority of the region, against the nepotistic hiring process of the Gafsa Phosphate Company, the only company employing the local labour force. The protest involved extensive riots and clashed with the police, including significant blocks of the production and commercial trasportation in three neighboring cities. The contestation lasted for six months, during which the cities were subjected to a siege by the military forces. Many protesters were arrested and detained. Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and Social Movement".

[39] Tlili, *Revolution under 5*.

[40] Ibid.

Notes for a Future Guerrilla against Representation

In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, whose narrative features have been pervasively distorted and weaponized by both Western actors and Tunisian government, counter-representation is a form of resistance indicating a new phase of struggle, one played on the epistemic ground and influencing future collective perception but also the recollection of past and present courageous practices of resistance.

In an environment marked by increasing censorship and political instability, the democratic outburst of new media and citizen journalism is struggling to maintain its initial freedom of expression, especially when choosing to question the explicit prescription of the 'official story'. For this reason, and aware of the difficulties Tunisian radical struggles are now encountering, I chose to indicate this collection of critical practices and products as a departure point for a post-revolutionary counter-power, since it seems that the intertwining of art and counter-information offers both the necessary freedom of expressions not only to deconstruct, but also to imagine an alternative to dictatorship, terrorism and neoliberalism. What is meant by counter-power is a series of practices of knowledge production articulated in spaces of relative expressive freedom and independence (such as

media-activism, street art, new media connected information and art), which can disseminate critical thought and provide a participatory approach towards contemporary instances of resistance (whether from the past or ongoing). These critical cultural practices have a double operativity: on the one hand, they question and challenge hegemonic global and local discourse on the revolutionary events, while on the other hand they imagine and invent a new series of critical practices, both artistic and political. It must be pointed out that these collective experiments regard the period between the fall of censorship (14th January 2011) and the progressive narrowing down of civil rights under the pressure of the threat of terrorism (radicalized in 2015). The more repressive the state will become in its war on terrorism, the more these expressive dissident spaces will be limited. From the point of view of their critical content, all these examples strongly question the dominant narratives, on multiple levels, claiming the revolution to be an *ongoing processus*, initiated with the 2008 rebellion in Southern Tunisia and evolved due to a social sufferance that hasn't yet been eased. The agent of the revolution is the underclass inhabiting the urban slums and the rural areas, and, despite their invisibility, women have always sustained the resistance and are still doing it. Unlike the techno-optimistic interpretations of the revolution, privileging the role of social media, they could be considered nothing more than an additional environment where the resistance has unfolded, rather than its agent.

On the other hand, the productive structure of all these cultural resistance practices mostly seems to derive from the inaugural moment of opening up of the public sphere (spring 2011), when censorship systems fell. Their creative production is almost always intended in a collective and participative form, both as a political choice and self-defence strategy against possible persecution. For the same reason, in some cases artists chose to remain anonymous in order to protect their freedom of expression.[41] These cultural artifacts mostly obey a fragmentary aesthetics, as opposed to a unitary narrative, and sometimes make up their own open source archives (like in the case of the Egyptian Mosireen collective).

Furthermore, the interventions of the collectives and artists merge theory with practice, always irreversibly altering the matter and subjects they are engaging with, be it the memory of the revolutionary events or the struggles of the disenfranchised in Tunisia and Egypt.

Finally, a central feature of the examined phenomena is that they have sparked out of the urgency to address certain aspects of the post-revolutionary period, the urgent need to remember, question or reflect. Therefore, they perform an autonomous space of expression, free from the impositions of the market, state politics, or interests of the major Western NGOs. For this reason, many of the examined initiatives rely partially or entirely on voluntary work and self-funding.

It appears as though, despite the resistance to the dominative narratives around them, these revolutions are always destined to fail (as Deleuze once said) thus resulting in a post-revolutionary blues currently characterizing Tunisia and Egypt.[42]

[41] Like in the case of the Tunisian cartoonist -Z- of the *Tunisie Debat* blog (www.debatunisie.com/), or the female street artists interviewed by Ridha Tlili.

[42] Gilles Deleuze, "G comme Gauche", in *L'abecedario di Gilles Deleuze* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2005).

Nevertheless, the revolutionary experience also carries a transformative potential that these technocollectives have creatively built upon. No matter how depressive the failure feels like, as Berardi and Wu Ming 4 recently observed (regarding the French revolution):

> Taking part to the revolutionary movement means understanding that your life is not written in the plans of power, but that it can be you writing it.
> ...
> Once you have acquired this awareness no one can take it away from you, no matter how the revolutionary event ends up. Having made the revolution means having made history as an actor not an extra, means having written one's own script. And this will stay with you forever as it will stay with whoever has lived such an event.[43]

[43] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "La storia come follia e come rappresentazione", reviewing Wu Ming's last book *L'armata dei sonnambuli,* http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?p=1904 5, accessed 10 October 2014.
A comment of Wu Ming 4 to Berardi's review is available at http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?p=1904 5, accessed 10 October 2014 (my translation).