Resisting Revisionism: The Role of Documentary Films in Constructing Narratives of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Charles Sutherland

Number 38: February 2023

Jonathan Rashad © 2012

4

About the Author

Charles Sutherland is a master's student in Comparative Middle Eastern Politics and Societies at the University of Tübingen. He holds a bachelor's degree in Middle East Studies from Harvard University and has previously worked and lived in Amman and Cairo. Research interests include visual global politics, state development, media narratives, history of the SWANA region, and Arabic dialects.

Disclaimer

Introduction*

Cinema is a tool for the diffusion of ideas, a tool both shaped by political realities and involved in their production. Film serves to crystallise particular interpretations of subjective realities and imaginations, both reflecting elements of objective truths and presenting interpretations which in turn lend themselves to the construction of novel or transformed realities and imaginations. Research concerning these narratives is an important exercise in assessing the impact of the stories we tell about our past on our presently lived political realities, particularly in instances of highly contested realities existing in parallel.

With such an understanding of the fundamental role that cinema plays in the way that reality is interpreted and understood, I aim to uncover the narratives and aesthetics at play in the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the contemporary remembrance thereof as a contribution toward theory building in the study of art in politics and vice versa. Egypt has a storied history as the primary producer of cultural content in the Arab world, and its 2011 revolution is a much-studied case in the social sciences. The diversity of parties and interests involved in shaping the revolution and its aftermath presents a rich case through which to examine contested remembrance and thus the construction of alternative political realities.

Through the application of theories of aesthetics and narrative construction in politics, this study analyses six documentary films about the revolution to synthesise historically grounded narratives about what happened during the popular uprising. Documentary films in particular were chosen for this study due to their air of presenting objective and uncontestable historical truth. While these films are not without inherent narrative biases, they can be viewed as radical resistance to the revisionism and populism of the al-Sisi regime in the ten years since their recording.

This paper makes an argument about the use of narratives and aesthetics for knowledge production and the revealing or construction of reality. The above approaches make an argument for the role of aesthetics in creating narratives, and the role that narratives play in shaping events themselves, the impact that they have, and the way in which they are remembered. This paper aims to make a further logical step by analysing the protest aesthetics present in documentaries to

understand the role that such aesthetics and narratives have in the formation of long-term political impact through ways of collective remembrance.

I will focus on four common aesthetics as the basis of comparative analysis. The first deals with the representation of public space: for whom does public space exist? Who has the right to occupy it? Who defines public space? It is undeniable that the face of the public and its space faced drastic change over the course of the revolutions in Egypt. Anthropological studies of the aesthetics of public space in the revolutions argue that these revolutions are *about* the appropriation of real space, and therefore it logically follows those films about the revolution are so as well.[1] The films serve to reify the idea that "the spaces of protest became reconfigured as public spaces available to the emerging public".[2]

The second aesthetic theme for analysis is that of *al-sha'b*, or 'the people'. How are 'the people' defined? Who is included and excluded by this collective notion? Included within this basis of analysis is the shift from a collective, 'we the people' aesthetic to more partisan and ideologically based aesthetics as time progresses. The role of films as a text for studying this location of aesthetic and

narrative contestation is the preservation of the notion of the possibility of "transcending the familiar content and performative subtexts that set the contours of how these categories inhabit the public and private" for posterity.[3] In other words, this aesthetic record allows for the development of new frames of reference in which there is an Egyptian people capable of revolution.[4]

My third aesthetic locus of analysis concerns violence. Who exercises the right to violence? Against whom is violence directed? Is violence moral in certain circumstances? In terms of global protest aesthetics, the use of *non*violence serves to poke holes in the tyrannical aesthetic, which relies on notions of grandeur and inviolability to project absolute dominance. The other side of this coin answers with humour, satire, parody, caricature, and thus, nonviolence.[5] It is important to note that "the interpretation of the January revolution as non-violent fits within a frame of reference and an interpretive paradigm that cannot envisage militant struggle as legitimate within a global world order of neoliberal governance".[6] I hope to discern to what extent protesters are labelled as nonviolent when there is violence, who is blamed, called out, or victimised as important sites of narrative tension and

therefore essential aspects of the collective remembrance of revolution.

The final aesthetic locus I analyse concerns the collective memory of the events, namely their unprecedented nature of these revolutions and the accompanied confusion about the phenomena as they occurred. How is the idea of an unprecedented collective action and spirit nurtured and kept alive in the aesthetics and narratives of documentary film? The novelty of the revolutions represents "a different kind of politics, a different kind of social living and a different kind of order (which) are not to be limited or confined to a single place and time".[7] The films under study capture this volatility, contributing to the narrative and aesthetic contestation of the revolution. This amounts to no less than attempted narrative control over the idea of precedent, which is important for the collective remembrance of revolution over time.

Prior to delving into the empirical study of these films, I will briefly mention a few potential shortcomings of this study. Firstly, the constraints of budget and the remote availability of particular films prevent this study from exacting an exhaustive analysis of the full body of cinema pertaining to the revolutions in Egypt. This study relies only on the analysis of six Egyptian documentaries. In contrast, there exists at least an additional eight Egyptian documentaries and seven Egyptian dramatic representations concerning the Arab Spring that must be ignored by this study. Secondly, as with most arguments in the field of visual global politics, the obstacle of measuring the impact of aesthetics inhibits the establishment of a true causal link between the objects of study and present collective memory. Additionally, my analysis is inherently biased by my positionality as a foreigner observing from the outside. However, it is my hope to ultimately draw a more tangible connection between the production of film and the role that it plays in contemporary politics through collective remembrance of narrative.

The Aesthetic Approach

This paper is situated within two primary theoretical approaches to the role of art in politics, and conversely the role of politics in art with regard to the Arab Spring. Firstly, I apply an aesthetic approach to the study of politics, which rests on the centrality of aesthetic or representative practices in social phenomena in contrast to more typical approaches that seek to analyse what *is*

represented as reality. This approach allows for analysis of visual representation in general, and cinema in particular, to provide fruitful insight into politics.

The aesthetic approach to political analysis, as the name suggests, highlights the importance of holding space for the study of constructed reality within political science. As such, the approach breaks away from common analyses of politics that aim to present a political phenomenon "as-it-really-is".[8] Roland Bleiker, a prominent international relations scholar, and advocate for the 'aesthetic turn' in political science, argues that "an aesthetic approach... assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith… Aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics".[9] In other words, the focus of the aesthetic approach is on *forms* of representation rather than that which is represented.

In analysing film as a medium for gaining insight to political phenomena, there is an underlying assumption that "not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic; at their heart political ideologies, systems, and constitutions are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments".[10] This assumption allows for the incorporation of non-traditional media, such as art and film, to provide valuable insight into our understanding of political phenomena outside of traditional empirical observation. That is, we expand our observations of politics to include sensory and affective representations, which exist to "subvert the aesthetically embodied, materially constructed edifices of tyrannical, authoritarian or neoliberal regimes".[11]

In this regard, the aesthetic of protest exists in reaction to that of the hegemonic and oppressive. For example, Werbner, Webb, and Spellman-Poots discuss the new global protest aesthetic of tents, with their communal, temporary, of-the-people nature, in direct contrast to the imposing, massive neoclassical edifices favoured by governments to project durability, power, and dominance.[12] Tent cities in such spaces inscribed with regime-led nationalist meaning as Tahrir Square in Cairo or Change Square in Sana'a, in combination with graffiti and public art on the very infrastructure representing the regime, had profound effects. Werber, Webb, and Spellman-Poots go so far as to claim that "sacred civic space was reinscribed anew".[13]

The aesthetic approach leaves no doubt to how "images played a crucial role in converting ... dissatisfaction into political action" during the Arab Spring.[14] Much has been written about the role of satire, song, graffiti, poetry, and the *performance* of protest on a global stage during the Arab Spring. The role of images, for example, and particularly those in the beginning stages of collective mobilisation, made reference to a universal global protest aesthetic characterised by citizen and journalist-like contributions. These characteristics are powerful because of their apparent communication of reality *as is*, in addition to placing them within a particular and recognisable discourse. Hawkins writes: "the very generic nature of images helped to contextualise the events in the frame of an oppressed population struggling against an authoritarian regime" situating itself within a recognisable global discourse of 'freedom fighters' as opposed to 'thugs' or insurgents.[15]

This, in turn, changes "the ephemeral events of protest into concrete texts that could be read by a global audience".[16] While it is interesting to consider how these foreign goings on are made relatable to an international audience, this study is focused on the role that these representations play within national borders. For example, events occurring in Cairo could be considered foreign, opaque, and decontextualised to a citizen of the Sa'id as much as to a foreign audience.

The spread of such images offered "glimpses of a different imaginary which has been born of decades of precarity that marked the consolidation of the neoliberal sociopolitical and moral order".[17] At the time of the revolution, images not only served to document 'what happens' but also create and spread ideas of 'what could happen'. A new, collective understanding of the influence of the past in the present moment allows the collective imagination to break from this past, thus "enabling the emergence of a critical imaginary that assembles a different possibility of 'a people' and a polis".[18] In other words, the role of aesthetics in the Arab Spring was no less than a discursive creation of a newly constructed people.

This study argues that, as images have both during the revolutions and after, films also serve to propagate a constructed reality which is presented as what 'really' happened, or commentary thereon. While it is difficult to

determine direct links of causation between images, films as such, and social phenomena, this paper recognises the discursive agency they carry for causality. Hawkins likens the role and means of spread of the new aesthetic of protest to that of viral spread, "as it draws attention to the mechanisms by which the ideas, attitudes, emotions and behaviours spread and perhaps mutate over time".[19] This mutation over time is the crux of this study, which aims to contribute to the study of how the collective memory of time-specific instances of protest and revolution are recorded, propagated, and transformed over time.

The Narrative Approach

The second theoretical approach that informs my argument is the narrative construction approach, which presumes subjective unequivocality as a force which drives political phenomena as they occur and how they are remembered and politicised ex post facto.

The narrative approach of this paper is based on the theoretical framework in Nathan Greenberg's study, *How Information Warfare Shaped the Arab Spring*, which outlines the centrality of narrative construction to the course of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. To start, Greenberg defines the narrative simply as a concept which "seeks to impose meaning on an otherwise incongruent field of information."[20] In the context of revolution, narrative is the force which combines the goings on far afield with collective sentiment to situate and ascribe meaning to what is happening or what has happened. In other words, "Narrative travels over inter-waves and airwaves through conversation and contemplation. Narrative, as such, is the antithesis of reality. It is that which signals the absence of the thing it describes, giving form and enumeration to something fluid and past. In this way narrative craves historical change".[21]

What does it mean exactly for a narrative to exist in the absence of reality? The underlying assumption rests on a constructivist approach to social science, which asserts that reality is subjective to each individual. In any case, it is impossible for any individual to grasp every aspect of a particular reality. Thanks to a "desire to understand what we cannot see", narratives are constructed to fill in the gaps. Greenberg argues that this process is more potent in times of social upheaval, like the Arab Spring revolutions, in which "narrative appears like

a glowing pier in an ocean of collective darkness, lighting the way back to shore or, perhaps, further afield".[22]

Here we see that what is commonly understood as the 'reality' of events as they occurred is in fact not more than a mutually agreed upon *narrative* of what occurred based on the collective aggregation of different subjective interpretations of what happened. Narratives determine action, how such actions are perceived, and also which actions are further built upon them. This understanding of narrative then necessarily leaves its construction victim to duplicity and ideological manipulation in the "reformulation of reality". [23] Greenberg writes, "while events on the ground evolved in breathtaking and at times wholly incoherent fashion, the fastidiousness of narrative served to crystalise the inherent conceit of the myriad communications operatives seeking to leverage the future against the present and the present against the past".[24]

In other words, competition to obtain narrative hegemony over what is happening is essential for influencing the possibilities of what can happen next and how what happened is remembered.

Greenberg primarily employs this theoretical approach to describe and explain how narrative construction -- and the way that various parties parried to dominate such narratives -- fueled the revolutions themselves, leading to collective action and tangible political results. For example, the catalyst for the popular movements of the Arab Spring is widely attributed to the self-immolation of Bouazizi. Specifically in Tunisia, yet also across the region and the world, many people could see themselves or loved ones in a similar narrative of humiliation at the hands of an oppressive and self-interested regime. Greenberg argues that "at the time" nobody necessarily knew the "actual drivers and objectives" of the protests, and that Bouazizi's posthumous accreditation for instigating the Arab Spring is a narrative myth collectively affirmed as reality.[25]

This paper extrapolates Greenberg's argument concerning narrative construction *during* such phenomena and further argues that a narrative construction approach provides similar insights for the staying power of narratives, e.g., years after the events occurred. Particularly in light of contemporary conflict over the narration of

the events of 2011, this study aims to bring clarity to the disruptive and constructive power of narratives.

Thus, the theoretical basis for my analysis is a combination of the role of aesthetics and the role of narrative in the (re)formulation of reality. The section that follows with outline how these two approaches are used to derive insight from a particular artistic medium, film, and its role in the construction of retroactive attribution of aesthetic and narrative power.

Public Space

It is undeniable that the Arab Spring manifested a paradigm shift with regard to public space across the region. For many of 'the people' participating, this paradigm shift took the form of seeing public space as a platform to air their grievances and take political action for the first time. For the regimes that ruled over these people, public space was no longer firmly – or even tenuously – under the control of the state, shifting instead to a seemingly unavoidable and widely visible location of dissent. Through an aesthetically focused narrative analysis of the films under study, we can both observe this paradigm shift and, with the context of the decade since 2011, draw

conclusions about its implications for the collective memory and the future.

Tahrir Square is universally recognised as the central locus of revolutionary sentiment of the 2011 political revolution in Egypt, a symbolic weight which is mirrored in its characterisation in the films under study. Of particular note is the Oscar-nominated documentary "The Square", which firmly mythologises this particular locus of public space as a central actor in the revolution. Organisers interviewed in the documentary frequently refer to the square as a strategic battlefield, lamenting for example, that the "biggest mistake we made is leaving the square before power was in our hands.[26] The space is painted as both a symbol for power and also a very real location for having power. This attribution of actual power to the public space is affirmed by the actions of the regime, which imposed curfews and prioritised maintaining a semblance of control.[27]

Other documentaries attribute similar importance to Tahrir, highlighting its meaning and representation of liberty, which ultimately became a place of pilgrimage for the Egyptians who yearned for a new and better life.[28] In this regard, Tahrir Square

becomes narratively and aesthetically linked to the Egyptian people. It exacts its own power in constructing new aesthetics and narratives about the very meaning of being Egyptian, which is shown by activists proclaiming that everyone in the square is the same; or that "in the square, we realised the people are the power".[29]

This characterisation of and attribution of power to public space is not only limited to Tahrir Square. Indeed, so too do the streets and other public spaces become synonymous with the people and the future Egypt that they hope to build. Activists from "Uprising" describe and visualise the process of beginning the mass movement of people toward Tahrir in the major public spaces of most neighbourhoods in Cairo. They claim that people are literally fighting to exist in public, for the freedom to *be* in the street.[30] We see in the documentary how the street became the "perfect stage for demonstrating the power of 30,000 against 30 police".[31] This narration serves as a reminder that the protests did not and were not meant to solely claim Tahrir, but rather to (re)claim the whole city and all of Egypt for the people.

Even outside of Cairo, the aesthetic of the Tahrir protests and reclamation of public space is recorded in "I am the people". Initial revolutionary fervour from 25 January 2011 was not immediately mirrored outside of the capital. However, as the events of the revolution run their course, we witness how Tahrir is claimed as a *national* symbol, not exclusively reserved for Cairo and its environs. [32] Tahrir and the streets are transformed from abstract places to the central stage upon which the people act and speak their voice: "If we don't like the president, we have Tahrir Square, and every other square in the country".[33] Indeed, even the particular festival-like aesthetic of the 2011 protests is mirrored in 2013 Luxor, with fireworks, a large stage, and the prevalence of flags contributing to the atmosphere of civil discontent. [34] From this documentary, we glean nuance to the dominant narrative of Cairo, and Tahrir specifically, as the sole battleground for dignity, or the only space where change can or will be garnered. Instead, public spaces such as Tahrir are represented as being synonymous with the Egyptian people, from Cairo to Luxor and beyond.

The People

The question of who are 'the people' is central to understanding the aesthetic and narrative forces of the Arab Spring in Egypt,

a phenomenon recognised the world over as an unprecedented manifestation of the power of the people. As we see today, the will of 'the people' appears to have transformed, or rather, 'the people' who's will is represented has shifted. The documentaries of this study lay claim to representing the voice of the people yet demonstrate different understandings of such an entity. The people are on the one hand shown as a coherent entity in a moment of unequivocal expression of the general will, while on the other hand, the people are defined by entrenched sectarian and political divides. To a large extent, 'the people' are rather defined by who they are not than who they are.

At the outset of the protests in 2011, the primary demarcation of 'the people' is shown to be those who are not with the regime. In this moment, the people are one in their demand for a life of dignity. Egyptians of all backgrounds – Copts, Muslims, young, old, political, not political – came together to stand against the Mubarak regime.[35] 'The people' was everyone, a trope epitomised by the "We are all Khaled Said" movement. Like Bouazizi in Tunisia, Khaled Said's martyrdom thanks to brutal treatment at the hands of the state allowed nearly everyone at the time to relate personally, or to see in him

a relative, friend, or acquaintance also forced into a life of indignity by the state and its security forces.[36]

Documentary footage of this time is defined by an aesthetic of primordial community, a state of human nature where community is natural and safe. Protestors set up their own community, with medical tents, security checks, media centres, etc., with apparent spontaneity. There is a spirit of comradery and solidarity, a product of the realised power of the masses. Out of this contagious aesthetic of solidarity with 'the people' came a sense of bravery and action for the greater good. Participants are quoted as saying: "'if this is how people are treated, I'd rather die fighting it'";[37] "'At least I'll die with the cause'".[38] During scenes of violence and tear gas, the people are helping each other naturally without special operations training or coordination.[39] The unarmed people confront armed security professionals, and even snipers, in a collective attempt to redefine themselves as a new people, unaccepting and undeserving of such treatment.[40]

Along with this newly defined people came the idea of a 'silent majority', a narrative trope which is ultimately co-opted by the

regime yet still powerful at the outset of the revolution. With the growing realisation that the people and their numbers hold power, particularly in contrast to official state media narratives of the situation in the streets, the idea of the silent majority was able to bring the silent, the previously voiceless people, into the fold. This phenomenon is exemplified in "I am the People", which documents the events of 2011-2013 in Luxor, far removed from the epicentre of the revolution. At the outset, Luxor and 'the provinces' witness pro-regime counterdemonstrations.[41] Footage of graffiti introduces this narrative tension, with some walls in Luxor covered in calls for "immediate trials for those who betrayed Egypt", and others calling to "support the revolution".[42]

However, just one year on from the outset of the revolution, claims to representation of 'the people' and its silent majority can already be seen to be co-opted by the counterrevolutionary movement. Filmmaker Sherif Sadek highlights and captures the transformation of this narrative trope: upon his return to Cairo in 2012, he witnesses a large billboard calling for the 'silent majority' to stand in support of Egypt and the Revolution on 25 January. He asks where the 'silent majority' got enough money for such a sign, and his mother replies: "'Either the army, the old regime, or Qatar and Saudi'".[43] Through this moment, and other footage in the documentary, it is possible to discern that just one year out from the people's revolution, the Army was becoming synonymous with 'the people' in public discourse.

Elements of a divide among 'the people' emerged in the early divisions taking place shortly after the resignation of Mubarak. Under the collective aesthetic of the general will, tensions arise early on between secularists and religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, young leftist describe how the Muslim Brotherhood ruined a sit in.[44] In another documentary, Islamists are portrayed as being *against* the will of the people, with the implication that liberal activists are the sole legitimate representation of the people.[45] As events progress into 2013, these divides become ever more apparent, with secularists firmly positioning Islamists as opponents to the people and with statements like "fighting your own people is worse than the regime".[46]

A final element that must be mentioned with regard to 'the people' during Egypt's

revolutionary moment is that of class. While some of the documentaries under study ignore the dimension of class, rather portraying the liberal movement as one for and by all of the people, two documentaries in particular bring nuance to this discussion. Firstly, "I am the People", with its focus on rural farm life in Luxor, introduces how poverty and class factor into perceptions of the revolution. The main subject's wife is acutely aware of these class differences, saying "'you think we're like those people in live in apartments and eat with forks and knives, on plates?'". [47] Throughout the documentary, she remains sceptical that positive change will reach their life, where the true results of the revolution were just the chance to vote and the shortage and subsequent price increase of gas in the village.[48] While her husband, Farraj, is at first pleased by his apparent new rights and voice as one of the newly defined people, he too is constrained by his economic situation, too busy to participate and truly join his voice with the millions.[49]

This documentary discussion of class is also reflected in "From Queens to Cairo", which frankly remarks that 'the people' are poor and do not seem to have benefitted from the upper-class revolution. [50] The documentary discusses the role of slums in Cairo, and the use of marginalisation by the state as a divide and conquer tactic against the people.[51] This interrevolutionary footage and commentary is important, as it adds nuance to understanding how the revolution played out for all, and how the omission of class discussion by earlier, 'as it happened' documentaries are detrimental to capturing a full understanding of the Arab Spring in Egypt.

Violence and Nonviolence

In part, the 2011 revolution is remarkable the world over is its apparent success in exacting regime change through nonviolent means. This notion fits well within the liberal discourse that stresses the importance and essentiality of nonviolence in resisting oppression. However, the films under study present a more nuanced picture of the uprisings: "that was a war, not a revolution".[52] As a body of texts, the films engage in frank discussions and visual representations of blood, gore, and violence. After a graphic scene of a woman who describes witnessing someone's head burst under gunfire, covering her body in his blood and brain matter, the viewer is left with the feeling that "revolution is bloodshed".[53]

Narrative contestation is found at the root cause of the violence, a thread of tension which continues to the present day. The dominant narrative within the films under study leaves an affective understanding that the fundamental perpetrator of violence, in any of the scenes, was the state and its agents. For starters, there are myriad representations of the attempts at nonviolent resistance to the inherent violence of the system. "Before the Spring After the Fall" portrays a compelling narrative of artistic and musical resistance, as well as documenting the course of political resistance through party formation and electoral organising. In this case, musical resistance is met with a violent crackdown by the regime, and so too is nonviolent resistance to the manipulation of elections. Even in the face of nonviolent resistance, state security forces are presented unequivocally as *the* perpetrators of violence.[54]

Other documentaries highlight regime violence as a primary catalyst, if not the fundamental catalyst, of the people's movement in 2011. "The Square" for example focuses on the murder of Khaled Said and the ensuing proliferation of graphic images of his beaten body as the causal factor responsible for motivating Egyptians to take to the streets. "The Square" also focuses on the role of paid thugs and the army in violently clearing Tahrir Square of its peaceful, well-organised gathering, as well as the shocking images of security forces running tanks over protesters in front of the MASPERO media building. The affective takeaways from such visuals and narratives from the documentaries is explicitly highlighted in "Uprising", which leaves the viewer with the understanding that the people as a collective did not mind being beaten, for the value of freedom is greater than the fear of violence or death.

Of course, there is nuance to the dominant people's narrative across the documentaries – the 'people' were not passive participants against whom violence was perpetrated and engaged in violence themselves. A famous actor interviewed in "Uprising" quotes: "'If you touch us, we'll touch you'".[55] Such a quote acknowledges that 'the people' were not wholly innocent of engaging in violence and also that it was exploited as a tool to literally fight back against the regime. Amer the actor also shows the alternate narrative thread present at the time, describing how a fan approached him and said, "' "Mr. Amer, please, don't burn the shops,'" to which he replied "' who told you we were going to do

that? We just want Mubarak to leave'".[56] It is clear from this interaction that compelling enough evidence was provided to foster support for a narrative entirely opposite that of 'the people', wherein the protestors were represented as the primary cause of violence and destruction and the security forces fighting in the streets for peace.

The theme of violence and nonviolence is particularly ripe locus for the study of narrative contestation, as both sides manipulate narratives and images to politicise and ultimately control how the events of 2011 are remembered. This stem is rooted in the duplicity and confusion of real time events as Greenburg mentions, where narrative is deployed to make sense of what is happening as events unfold. For example, in the scenes from "The Square" where paid thugs clear Tahrir, there is visual and affective representation of the uncertainty of events and the actors involved. In this moment, captured on film, the revolution is not a foregone conclusion nor is there any narrative yet ascribed to the confusing violence.[57] This documentary makes sublet note of the narrative contestation, contrasting the peoples' narrative, as it were, with that of official army officers swearing to God that no Egyptian blood would ever be spilled. Also,

with regard to the violence of the MASPERO incident, the ensuing scenes of the documentary demonstrate how the regime tries to control this narrative with the use of secret police intimidating families into forgoing autopsies of bodies with tank marks and crushed bones that would implicate the security forces in unrestrained acts of violence.

The role of aesthetic representation of this trope of (non)violence is particularly important for the contemporary, given the more controversial contestation over narrating the role of (non)violence and its perpetrators in 2011. To an extent, these films can be read as a collection of video testimony which actively disperses the state narrative over the role of violence in the recent past, i.e., that the army as the state is the protector of the people. Additionally, the form of documentaries as a body of text serves as a subtle type of educational, instructional video which displays effective tactics for countering police violence. For instance, with no narrative or explicit verbal attestation, the viewer can witness techniques of resisting state violence such as using black spray paint on police van windows, throwing teargas back at police, or how to protect oneself from tear gas. In this way, the films also serve to

trace historically the threads of the state's counternarrative, an important task in challenging its veracity in the present situation.

Collective Memories

A major theme of international news coverage of the Arab Spring was, and stays to be, the novelty of such public political participation in countries otherwise disregarded as oppressive regimes with a politically apathetic populace. The unprecedented nature of the events and their aftermath lends itself to competition over collective interpretation and remembrance of the events. The documentary films under analysis both propagate this theme in their footage and discussion of those who took part in politics for the first time and generally felt that their voice mattered for the first time. However, with the inclusion of actors and activists who have engaged in contentious politics in Egypt prior to 2011 in some of the documentaries, a bird's eye metanalysis of the documentary narrative adds nuance to the mainstream narrative of exceptional resistance.

"We're smelling freedom in the air. We've never had that before".[58] This quote from a famous actor in Tahrir Square just before Mubarak's resignation resonates with the novel aesthetic and narrative of the Arab Spring. Never before have such masses seizing their power been seen in Egypt, and the emotion of the moment is captured by mobile phones from thousands of different angles. The explosion of collective emotion when Mubarak resigned was unprecedented in modern memory, as was such a widespread call for democracy. Even outside of the public squares of Cairo where the aesthetic of the masses was impossible to replicate, it had a similar impact. "I am the People" documents how the novelty of political fervour and the idea that one's voice could matter was not missed, even in rural Luxor.[59] This new aesthetic of protest reached the daily lives of nearly all Egyptians.

To most interviewed by documentary filmmakers, the revolution seemed an unplanned, spontaneous manifestation of the general will.[60] However, we also see nuance to this mainstream narrative through interviews with activists and organisers, such as the founders of the 2008 April 6 movement, who have dedicated years to mobilisation.[61] In reading these films as a body of text, it is possible to discern how important it is that the collective memory of the 2011 uprising is grounded in the historical

understanding of political organisation as a long-term strategy. This is exemplified in "Before the Spring, After the Fall", a film which originally aimed to tell the story of youth metal bands in Egypt and incidentally captured the events of 2011. A central theme of the film is resistance to societal norms, which is best seen through the film's discussion of Ayman Nour, his wife Gameela, and their sons who have a metal band. In the context of 2011, the documentary is careful to remind viewers that opposition to Mubarak was not a new or recent phenomenon. Nour founded the liberal El-Ghad party in 2001 and ran a popular campaign against Mubarak in 2005, a legacy of political resistance that his wife Gameela and his sons inherited and built upon. The film also documents how slogans generally attributed to the 25 January Revolution, such as *yaskut yaskut Hosni Mubarak,* have been in use since at least 2005.[62]

Another novel aspect of the 2011 movement was the potential for a new social contract between liberals and Islamists. This is an important location of narrative debate within the films, as some determine that from the beginning the Islamists were against the will of the people, while still others hold an optimistic affect, which is an important

nuance to preserve for posterity. For example, the Oscar-nominated film "The Square", primarily follows the account of liberal, English-speaking activists who claim that they never would have imagined standing in solidarity with all of the people in Tahrir, explicitly stating that, before, the Muslim Brotherhood was their greatest fear.[63] In light of the clear divide and conquer tactics used by the regime to prevent across-group solidarity, the capture of this narrative on documentary film is potentially most important, as it proves the possibility of cooperation for mutual benefit, and the existence of a time that is both a product of and precedent to the harsh divisions seen today.

The narrative of novelty in the Arab Spring is inescapable. However, it is important to note that due to this fact, the novelty of such popular uprisings cannot be claimed again in the future. In other words, by driving home the point that this movement was a first for Egypt, the collective memory of the future is oriented toward the always looming possibility of political change through mobilisation. This can be witnessed in the 2013 uprising against Morsi, and is exemplified by Farraj, the Luxor resident starring in "I am the People:" "If we don't

like the president, we have Tahrir Square, and every other square in the country. [64] Documentary capture of these catalytic moments is important because it shows that the feeling of novelty is complicated, sometimes pessimistic, and uncertain.[65] Yet the existence of such footage provides evidence of a prevailingly optimistic narrative as a counterweight to the counterrevolutionary narrative that now dominates discourse in Egypt.

Conclusion

The six films studied here are a particular yet cumulative aesthetic representation of the past which contributes to contemporary narrative contestation over the impact and remembrance of the events at hand. The recorded past events serve as an aesthetic representation of moments of narrative contestation, moments where many alternate futures were imagined and wholly possible. The presentation of objective truths combined with the subjective interpretations of events as they occurred in turn constructs alternate futures and pasts which inform contemporary politics. The films do not only provide insight into how narratives about the revolution were formed 'at that time', but themselves also serve to influence the possibilities of how what happened is

remembered and, therefore, of what can happen next.

These films construct both past and potential realities for viewers both in Egypt and abroad. This 'birds' eye' study of six different narrative angles provides insight into a constructed narrative about what the actual drivers and objectives of the protests were by contributing to the collective affirmation of these past realities. In these realities, public space exists for and is defined by the public, rather than an imposing monument to state power. All Egyptians share dreams and values of human dignity which transcend socially constructed differences of age, gender, or religion. The might of the people surpasses the oppression of the state and fighting back against state violence is not only a legitimate right but a civic obligation. That these potential realities and unprecedented past are presented *as reality* presents effective evidence that revolution and liberation is possible in contrast to a contemporary political narrative which seeks to coopt such potentialities under the watchful eye of the state. While the impact of a single film on its own is difficult to discern, it is clear from the analysis of such a genre as a whole that a certain importance and impact is all too real. The above

conclusions provide a strong argument for the further study of revolutionary film in a political science context. Apart from merely presenting historical narratives, these documentary films serve as a playbook for revolutionary action, an account of mistakes made which are not to be made again, and vivid aesthetic representations of a highly effective phenomenon. They propagate, further, and transform this affectation in the collective memory, preserving a popular narrative far from the reach of the state and its imagined revisionist reality.

Notes

[1] Sabea, Hanan. (2015). 'I Dreamed of Being a People': Egypt's Revolution, the People and Critical Imagination. In *The political aesthetics of global protest: the Arab Spring and beyond* (pp. 67–92). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 77

[2] Hawkins, S. (2015). Teargas, Flags and the Harlem Shake: Images of and for Revolution in Tunisia and the Dialectics of the Local in the Global. In *The political aesthetics of global protest: the Arab Spring and beyond* (pp. 31–51). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 33

[3] Sabea 2015 pp. 79

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Werbner, P., Webb, M., & Spellman-Poots, K. (2015). Introduction. In *The political aesthetics of global protest: the Arab Spring and beyond* (pp. 1–27). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 5

[6] Sabea 2015 pp. 69

[7] *Ibid.* pp. 85

[8] Bleiker, Roland. (2001). The aesthetic turn in international political theory. *Millenium, 30(3),* pp. 510

[9] *Ibid*

[10] Werbner, Webb, and Spellman-Poots 2015 pp. 1

[11] *Ibid*

[12] *Ibid*. pp. 3

[13] *Ibid*. pp. 4

[14] Hawkins pp. 34

[15] *Ibid.* pp. 35

[16] *Ibid.* pp. 34

[17] Werbner, Webb, and Spellman-Poots pp. 7

[18] *Ibid*

[19] Hawkins pp. 37

[20] Greenberg, Nathan. (2019). *How information warfare shaped the Arab Spring: the politics of narrative in Tunisia and Egypt*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 2

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.* pp. 7

[23] *Ibid.* pp. 6

[24] *Ibid.* pp. 13

[25] *Ibid.* pp. 20

[26] Noujaim, Jehane. (Director). (2013). *The Square* [Film]. https://www.netflix.com/title/70268449. (19:00).

[27] *Ibid.* (23:00)

[28] Stanton, Fredrik. (Director). (2012). *Uprising* [Film]. Zeitgeist Films. https://vimeo.com/43185760

[29] Noujaim 2013 (07:45)

[30] Stanton 2012

[31] *Ibid*. (22:30).

[32] Roussillon, Anna. (Director). (2011). *I am the People* [Film]. https://www.kanopy.com/product/i-am-people-struggle-democracy-egypt (21:40)

[33] Roussillon 2011 (44:50)

[34] *Ibid.* (1:36:00)

[35] Stanton 2012 (24:00)

[36] *Ibid.* (12:30)

[37] *Ibid.* (39:50)

[38] Rothstein, Jed. (Director). (2013). *Before the Spring, After the Fall* [Film]. https://vimeo.com/78765762 (54:00)

[39] Stanton 2012

[40] *Ibid*. (58:09)

[41] Roussillon 2011 (14:00)

[42] *Ibid.* (15:00)

[43] Sadek, Sherif. (Director). (2012). *From Queens to Cairo* [Film]. https://vimeo.com/69546112 (08:22)

[44] Noujaim 2013 (38:00)

[45] Rothstein 2013 (1:02:00)

[46] Noujaim 2013 (1:21:00)

[47] Roussillon 2011 (1:15:35)

[48] *Ibid.* (24:02)

[49] *Ibid.* (21:40)

[50] Sadek 2012 (31:40)

[51] *Ibid.* (40:00)

[52] Noujaim 2013 (57:15)

[53] Stanton 2012 (52:30)

[54] Rothstein 2013 (32:00)

[55] Stanton 2012 (44:00)

[56] *Ibid.* (35:15)

[57] Noujaim 2013 (25:00)

[58] *Ibid.* (1:00:00)

[59] Roussillon 2011 (32:35, 1:07:58)

[60] Stanton 2012 (27:30)

[61] *Ibid.* (8:45)

[62] Rothstein (14:35)

[63] Noujaim 2013 (14:30).

[64] Roussillon 2011 (44:50)

[65] Rothstein 2013 (44:00)