



Toward a Cinema of Revolution: 18 Days in Tahrir Square

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Abstract: It has been said that revolutions are always unthinkable before they occur and inevitable after. As such, much writing about the Egyptian revolution has attempted to retroactively predict it while missing the larger picture. However, pictures of Tahrir Square are hard to miss. As revolutionaries, regime, and military contested Tahrir through spectacular imagery, Al Jazeera broadcast the square live. Analysing these images of conflict, protest, and celebration in Tahrir with concepts from film and media theory reveals the revolution's promise and pitfalls, and frames the spectacle of Tahrir as a *cinema of revolution*. The initial novelty of Tahrir has faded, yet revolutionaries travel the country screening what is called 'Tahrir Cinema.' To combat the enduring power of these images SCAF has brutally repressed protesters' attempts to return and claimed, "Tahrir Square is not Egypt." A revolution fought, remembered, and contested through its images must be understood through them.

Introduction

For 18 days the world watched as Cairo's Tahrir Square filled with hundreds of thousands of protestors. Between January 25 and February 11, 2011 these countless thousands brought an end to the nearly 30-year reign of Egypt's President-for-life Hosni Mubarak. In the aftermath of Mubarak's dramatic ousting, analysts and commentators have scrambled to explain *why* Egyptian society turned on the grand dictator. I argue that instead more time should be spent on considering *how* he was ousted. Instead of retroactively predicting the Egyptian Revolution, I focus on examining how it occurred through the trove of primary documentation that the event left behind: its images.

Taking footage from Al Jazeera and other networks' highly-watched footage as well as photographs from large news agencies like Reuters and The New York Times, I use film and media theory to analyse these photographs and screen captures. Such an approach demonstrates the importance of spectacular imagery, mediated subjects, and makes clear the emergence of a coherent visual grammar of protest. I will attempt to follow the example of Brian Larkin, Charles Hirschkind, Lila Abu-Lughod and others who are part of a growing movement exploring the ethnography of media. With their guidance and selected images from the Square itself I hope to partially explain the power of the crowd in Tahrir Square, its forms of association, and the political implications for Egypt's future.

First, I will highlight how Tahrir Square was contested through spectacular imagery rather than brute force. Instead of the judging the progress of the revolution through the standard conception of protesters clashing with police for physical control of space we should instead look toward the spectacular contestation of images produced by all sides. Guy Debord's formulation of the spectacle as, "a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, 1994:7), allows me to argue that the dynamic bonds formed between the divergent groups of protesters in the Square were all organised around Tahrir's spectacular imagery. The protesters, the Mubarak regime, and the military all recognised this function of the Square and sought to project their own spectacular images to greater or lesser success. The media coverage and presence of cell phones and laptops, along with the use of social media acting as technologies of coordination, gave the protesters great control over these images and attracted the attention of a huge domestic and international viewing audience. These screens also enabled the crowd to watch the coverage of Tahrir in the Square itself, producing a new type of reflexive spectacle.

In the following section, "An Audience of Performers," I examine how this new type of spectacle required and produced mediated subjects comfortable with being both producers and consumers of spectacle. The images of protesters in Tahrir watching reaction shots of the Square highlight the reflexivity of the media coverage and the ability of these protesters to become an audience of performers.

In my third section, “The Cinema of Revolution,” I focus on the efforts of protesters to tie these images to the physical space of the Square, thus producing a *visually imagined community of revolution*. As Benedict Anderson writes, this visually imagined community produced an “image of communion” (Anderson, 2006: 6) in the minds of its constituents. In Tahrir protesters were able to see this image splashed across screens in the square itself bringing it out of the purely imaginary realm and into the realm of the visual. Employing film theory to parse the techniques and effects of this visually imagined community I argue that Tahrir Square can be partially understood as a *Cinema of Attractions*. Historically, the Cinema of Attractions featured non-narrative films organised according to the principles of spectacle, and stimulated the audience through their novelty and technical wizardry including explorations of space and time. The spectacular images of Tahrir and the feedback loop of coverage and revolution incorporated these techniques producing a *Cinema of Revolution*. The 18 days spent in Tahrir Square mark one of the first times protesters were able to use physical space, media coverage, and technologies of coordination such as new media and the screens of Tahrir to craft a successful political spectacle.

I will take up the question of what impact this reliance on political spectacle has had on a “post-revolutionary” Egypt in my conclusion. Many who took part in the revolution have little to show for it since those first 18 days (Sabry B, January 2013). Alliances have shifted and some who stood arm in arm fighting regime thugs now find themselves battling each other in Tahrir. Has the spectacle of the Square become a mere spectre? What are the implications when spectacular politics and violent clashes are used as a veto power against the constructive politics of compromise needed from all parties?

1. The Spectacle of Tahrir

“Spectacle is our way of making sense of the world” Duncombe (2007: 8)

Estimates of the crowd that celebrated Mubarak’s resignation in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on February 11, 2011, ran as high as 2 million. More restrained analysts estimated that the numbers were certainly near to the Square’s holding capacity of 250,000 people with

huge numbers clogging the surrounding streets (Bialik 2011). Egyptians came to the Square not simply to witness history, but to become a part of it. As the thousands chanted, cried, laughed, or watched in stunned silence, many of them trained their eyes on the makeshift screens — white sheets stretched between two poles, where projectors displayed Al Jazeera's live stream.

There, on a bit of fabric, the citizens of Tahrir saw something new. On a split screen with Mubarak's State TV broadcasted resignation speech boxed in one half and Tahrir Square in the other, the protesters realised they were at the centre of the world. These thousands had created a new revolutionary society in front of a huge domestic and international audience. By harnessing the power of that audience, the protesters made sure not only that the revolution was televised, but also that watching television became a revolutionary act. The thousands in Tahrir witnessing and performing a revolutionary spectacle created, by their very presence, a visually imagined community of revolution for the whole world to see.

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord claims that, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, 1994: 7). In Tahrir, this meant that the protesters were not merely watching the spectacle but also enmeshed within its web and actually producing it by their presence. This ability to unite the roles of performer and observer in front of the media, which streamed the event around the world, turned Tahrir Square itself into a sort of screen and made those watching it citizens of a new "society of the spectacle". In using the term screen I mean to emphasise that the central Square — unlike a television set, which is viewed passively with no input from the audience, or even a stage, which divides the roles of performers and audience — became a place where the roles of performer and audience were blurred. The protesters in Tahrir used the Square in the same way that a movie theatre's screen makes it possible to both project a movie and present it to a large audience simultaneously, thus linking the act of production and consumption.

To speak of the protesters as performers and audience is not to lessen the real dangers they faced. Instead the terms point out a key feature of the protests and the protesters. Following Thomas de Zengotita's argument in *Mediated*, these protesters should be seen as, "genuine postmodern performers" (De Zengotita, 2005: 145), who negotiated Tahrir Square and the media as "reflexive individuals performing their lives according to improvised scripts they cobble together as they go along" (De Zengotita, 2005: 92). The images streaming live from Tahrir were the work of huge numbers of mediated subjects dynamically employing the visual grammars they picked up from consuming movie, news, sports, and other media to create a visually striking revolutionary spectacle.

While the Egyptian Revolution has sometimes been called the "Facebook revolution," I am not interested in engaging in what Howard Rheingold calls in his book *Smart Mobs*, "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" (Rheingold, 2003: XXI). I will, however, look at the swarm of tiny screens on cell phones and computers employing text messaging and social networking as "technologies of coordination" (Rheingold, 2003: 29), that coalesced around the larger screen of Tahrir Square itself. The relation of viewers to the screens of their phones and computers, which Rheingold calls "immersive", also mirrors the way protesters experienced Tahrir Square as if they were not only, "perceiving an ever-changing audio-video advertaintanment, but [they were] also inside of it" (Rheingold, 2003: 2), experiencing a unique state where, "the spectator also becomes a producer" (Duncombe, 2007: 73).

Borrowing a phrase from peer to peer (p2p) file-sharing networks, Tahrir Square can be seen as a sort of adhocacy. Peer-to-peer programs, like the now defunct Napster, allowed users to self-organise and interact directly as both consumers and producers in a system that was, "self-organising, fully decentralised, and highly dynamic" (Rheingold, 2003:171). The form of the crowd in Tahrir, and its ad hoc nature, combined the talents of many to create a visual spectacle and helped define its reception and message. Marshall McLuhan famously declared "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964:7), Tahrir and other recent mass protests have helped prove that, "the crowd is a sort of

medium,” becoming “the site for the generation of expectations and the circulation of messages” (Rheingold, 2003:160).

The crowd expanded its power to attract attention through Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Square and the feedback cycle of protesters’ response to this coverage. Even for those thousands of miles away, Tahrir became a real physical space experienced simultaneously with the protesters. The Square’s function as a screen enabled this by allowing both the protesters and the viewing audience to see a reaction shot of themselves performing, and witnessing, the revolution. The screens of Tahrir, which showed these reaction shots, only heightened the spectacle and reality of the revolution. They drew attention inward and expanded the influence of Tahrir outward. Events in the Square became magnified by their appearance on the countless screens both inside the Square and around the world. That people were watching Tahrir became as important as the fact that people were occupying it. Those viewers ultimately directly influenced the events inside the Square.

Still, the protesters had to keep control of the revolution’s images to avoid falling for what Guy Debord terms, the pitfalls of spectacle that create, “false models of revolution fed to local revolutionaries” (Debord, 1994: 55). Tahrir was no false model, instead the Square exemplifies what Stephen Duncombe calls an ethical spectacle that “understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories,” and is able to “manufacture dissent” (Duncombe, 2007:9).

The protesters’ task in Tahrir would not be so easy, as they were not alone in attempting to control the physical and spectacular space of the Square. Since the first days of the Revolution, both the physical and the mediated sphere of spectacular imagery in Tahrir were sites of contestation between protesters, the military, and the regime. Contrary to the traditional model of revolutionary that focuses on the use of brute force and contestation over physical space, these groups sought to use Tahrir Square to screen their own spectacles. Agreeing to compete for control of the Square via spectacular imagery, the military and the regime largely eschewed “control over the means of physical coercion”

to instead focus on “the greater role played by control of means of interpretation” (Bottici and Challand, 2010:7), in order to manipulate the images and realities of Tahrir Square for their own ends.

Throughout those 18 days, images and videos of the Square highlight the use of spectacular imagery in Tahrir by all three of these groups. In addition to the above-mentioned example of the protesters’ triumph on February 11, the military’s decision to cultivate friendly relations with protesters, as well as the infamous Battle of the Camel on February 2, all demonstrate the attention paid to spectacle (Ahmed/Associated Press, 2011: Fig. 1). By reproducing the images and videos of these events, and utilising screen shots and descriptions to provide context, it is possible to produce a visual record of the revolution.

What are the implications when protesters, regime, and military all use spectacular images to achieve their ends? Some of the early images of the Revolution highlight the political nature of the Square’s spectacular imagery, from soldiers fraternizing with protesters to tanks sheltering protesters when pro-Mubarak forces got out of hand (Daily News Egypt, 2011: Figs. 2 and 3). Actions like these indicate the army’s savvy use of spectacle. While there was great ambiguity about the military’s role in the initial days of the revolution (Beaumont, 2011), once the protests reached a critical mass the military began to distance itself from the regime.

By abandoning Mubarak, the military was able to retain legitimacy and reconstitute the regime once the President had been swept away. The traditional perception in Egypt of the military as defender of the borders helped enable this operation (Haddad, 2011). The Army had not dirtied its hands with suppressing dissent in the way that the police and the mukhabarat had done. With public imaginations primed to the idea of the military as a defender of the public, the spectacular images of soldiers embracing protesters, sheltering them from pro-government forces, and even detaining escaped prisoners allowed Tahrir Square to embrace the military (Nelson/New York Times, 2011: Fig. 4).

Thus on February 10, hours before Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi went on State Television to address the people of Egypt and proclaim solidarity with the protesters, the newly constituted Supreme Council of the Armed Forces first sent representatives to Tahrir Square. A more direct acknowledgement of the military's desire to cultivate the spectacular and physical space of the square could not be found. Sami Anan, the military's Chief of Staff, and General Hassan al-Roueni both assured protesters their demands would be met and that they would be protected. The announcement drew cheers but also chants of "Civilian, Civilian, Civilian" (Michael, 2011). Perhaps Tahrir had begun to perceive the new order.

Mubarak also sought to use spectacle. On the evening of February 1 Mubarak appeared on state television and gave a speech that was carried on all the major Egyptian news networks (CSPAN, 2011). In his first televised appearance since January 28, when the numbers in Tahrir had ballooned into the hundreds of thousands, he appealed to the people of Egypt to come to terms with the regime. Mubarak made some concessions and claimed he would die on Egyptian soil. According to a reading of the speech by Mona el-Ghobashy given at the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern studies in 2012, the concessions and his emotional appeal divided the Egyptian public. Egyptians pitied, respected, or despised Mubarak and the crowd in Tahrir began to feel the first hint of a public backlash (el-Ghobashy, 2012).

Perhaps sensing weakness and wishing to exploit its perceived advantage, the regime decided to create another spectacle in Tahrir Square itself. The Battle of the Camel, as the events of February 2nd came to be known, consisted of four tourist sector workers and other hired thugs charging into the crowd protesters on horses and one camel. The result was a gaffe of the first order (Hondros/New York Times, 2011: Fig. 5). In the ensuing skirmish all sympathy for the regime vanished. The regime had totally lost control of its spectacular imagery. The use of horses and camels against protesters toting cell phones, computers, and cameras seemed surreal, with one Al Jazeera English correspondent

terming it “shocking, medieval, and surreal,” (Al Jazeera Video, 2011: Fig. 6). A move meant to intimidate and to reclaim the screen of Tahrir Square had backfired.¹

Out of the chaos, unexpected groups sprang to the forefront. Among those credited with regaining order and protecting the protesters in the Battle of the Camel were large numbers of die-hard soccer fans nicknamed Ultras. Fixtures at all Egyptian National team and club matches, Ultras had long experience in chanting slogans, sometimes political in nature, at football matches and were well versed in battling police (Dorsey, 2011). These fans also had some experience in spectacles similar to Tahrir. They often attracted as much attention through their wild and often violent antics as the soccer games themselves, and were therefore good examples of the new type of mediated subject. Their presence in Tahrir, and their active participation in the battle for its spectacular space show that the regime’s attempts to confine Ultras to the stadium had failed and that they and similar groups saw the Square as a new arena of public contestation.

February 11 marked the end of Mubarak’s nearly 30-year term as president. For those in Tahrir Square, it also proved that they could reshape the world around them through the spectacle of their presence. And, in a space so saturated with imagery, it is hardly surprising that the celebration of Mubarak’s resignation was the greatest spectacle of all. With hundreds of thousands of jubilant protesters cheering, singing, and celebrating, there was still one triumph left: watching themselves on television. For 18 days Tahrir Square had functioned as a screen. Due to the presence of international news media and the ability to disseminate images and updates through social media and texting, the protesters had become both producers and consumers of revolution. The ultimate demonstration of the power these masses wielded, and an example of a new type of spectacle, occurred when large makeshift screens were unfurled around the centre of Tahrir and Al Jazeera was projected onto them.

One of the most notable aspects of Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Egyptian Revolution was the way the network and other channels included reaction shots of the Square via split-

¹ The regime’s return to images of chaos seem to have touched off a knee jerk reaction of horror, a film technique described by Linda Williams as a *spasm*, from the crowd and all who watched it.

screen during dramatic moments (Waguih/Reuters, 2011: Fig. 7). In effect, Al Jazeera broadcast Tahrir to Tahrir. Photographs of the Square during and after Mubarak's resignation typically show the protesters' reactions to specific images broadcast on these screens. Expressions of joy, disbelief, and even tears are as common as the ever-present mobile phones used either to record or display the Square (Salem/Reuters, 2011: Figs. 8 and Martinez/Reuters, 2011: 9).² In one picture from the *Wall Street Journal*, a man in the foreground of the picture looks past the camera towards the screen while the projector's beam shines just over his head (Martin/Wall Street Journal, 2011: Fig. 10). The protesters themselves have become the main image.

Another *Wall Street Journal* photograph shows a man borne on the shoulders of other protesters holding a laptop playing Al Jazeera's feed of Tahrir Square (Martin/Wall Street Journal, 2011: Fig. 11). The result is an almost dizzying feedback loop. Is the man an image of the media or is the media an image of the man? Finally, one image from Reuters shows the stretched white fabric used to create Tahrir's screens. In front of an Al Jazeera feed showing a split screen of Hosni Mubarak's first attempt at a resignation speech on February 10, and the crowd in Tahrir, a mass of people stand indistinctly shoulder to shoulder with two arms clearly raised in triumph (Waguih/Reuters, 2011: Fig. 7). Protesters were both audience and performers; no better example of the two-way nature of Tahrir Square could be found.

The ability to see a reaction shot of the Square as the Revolution unfolded proved an astounding draw both for viewers and those in the Square. In fact, its power broke down the barriers between viewer and revolutionary. Dramatic confrontations, including the "medieval and surreal" Battle of the Camel created a "physically experienced sensation" in the spectators and turned them from mere voyeurs to exhibitionists who felt they were taking part in the revolution (Larkin, 2008: 186). For Egyptians and denizens of the Square, sympathy with the regime had vanished and the huge numbers in Tahrir refused to leave. For the viewers watching from afar, the spectacular images of Tahrir allowed

² Most protesters hold their phones at arms length while recording videos or taking pictures instead of holding them to their eyes. This gestural usage may point to the perception of these technologies as an extension of the protester's body rather than a mechanical/digital reproduction of what the eye sees.

the audience at home to feel as if it was in the Square as well. Such a sensation is similar to the moment described by film theorist Miriam Hansen when, “the spectator-within-the-film becomes himself a spectacle” (Hansen, 1992: 26). These reflexive spectacles created a strong identification with the besieged protesters among viewers around the world.

This ability to connect with an audience may be partially due to new technologies of coordination which made it feel as if the protesters were able to communicate directly with the audience and helped them avoid becoming mere objects of the camera’s gaze. The spectacle represented by the screens of phones, computers, and even white sheets, broke the media’s hold over the events, in effect creating a situation of many-to-many communication, as opposed to the traditional mode of one-to-many present in mass media. The importance of new media such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and texting are all examples of this different form. As Rheingold points out such technologies that give people the power to publish their own point of view, turn “mere consumers into powerful users” (Rheingold, 2003: 197).

What these powers could accomplish soon became obvious as the events and images of Tahrir helped end the nearly thirty-year rule of a tyrant while the whole world watched. At the heart of this triumph were the screens of Tahrir and the protesters both watching and performing on them. Here, the Revolution was being screened as a cinematic spectacle and though ‘all the world’s a stage’ Tahrir had become a multiplex. The act of watching Tahrir on a screen in Tahrir proclaimed the dawning of a new “society of the spectacle” and the end of Mubarak.

Part 2: An Audience of Performers

“The actor must show his subject and he must show himself, of course he shows his subject by showing himself and he shows himself by showing his subject”
(Brecht as cited in Benjamin, 1968: 153)

Is it possible to say what produced Tahrir’s society of the spectacle? Was it the media coverage, or the protesters, the physical space of the square, or the massive international

audience? By understanding spectacle as “a social relationship between people mediated by images” (Debord, 1994: 7), any discussion of the spectacle of Tahrir will require identifying the subjects that produced (and were produced by) this spectacle. Viewing spectacles like Tahrir Square as a medium leads us to questions about how the protestors themselves were mediated.

Tahrir’s spectacle was made possible by a new type of performer and audience, and, in fact, a whole new relation between the two. These subjects had to be reflexive mediated method actors skilled at what Stephen Duncombe calls, “being as playing a role” (Duncombe, 2007: 47). This type of subject, who is both consumer and producer, can break down the dichotomy of performer and audience. Just such an operation was necessary in Tahrir to enable the protestors to keep control over their images and avoid letting the coverage of Tahrir become detached from events on the ground

Yet did these crowds truly control the images of the square or were they mere followers? In his book *Performative Revolution*, Jeffrey Alexander (2011) proposes an auteurist theory of the revolution, which emphasises the importance of a few protestors in coordinating and channelling the efforts of the crowd. While Alexander focuses on media coverage and the performance during the Egyptian Revolution, he suggests that the uprising was led by a “carrier group” who, “projected the symbols and, after they made the connection with audiences, directed the revolutionary mise-en-scène” (Alexander, 2011: 32). Thus the Egyptian Revolution was, “directed, not by the mass of people, but by movement intellectuals who tried to work out the script and choreograph street actions in advance” (Alexander, 2011: 32). Alexander cites a volume he edited in 2006 and an earlier text on social movements to back up his idea of a “carrier group,” which seems close to the Marxist idea of a vanguard. This approach leaves Alexander open to representations of the revolution by groups of activists interested in promoting themselves as the architects of the revolution.

Turning to Howard Rheingold’s book *Smart Mobs*, one can immediately find an alternative theory of mass participation. Written before the advent of Facebook or Twitter made the workings of technology seemingly self-evident, Rheingold looks at the coming

wave of mobile web and imagines how we will be shaped by it. In observing the rise of peer-to-peer (p2p) file sharing sites, Rheingold notes that, “People don’t just participate in p2p —they believe in it.” This feeling drew from being engaged in, “what author Robert Wright calls, ‘non-zero-sumness’ — the unique human power and pleasure that comes from doing something that enriches everyone, a game where nobody has to lose for everyone to win” (Rheingold, 2003: 65). For the protesters in Tahrir Square, the revolution was an instance of “non-zero-sumness,” and coordination grew not from a script that only a small group could write, but from a sense of belonging to a society they both produced and consumed.

Even without a script or director, these masses showed that they knew how to produce spectacular imagery. Here, technologies of coordination and the way they are internalised by their consumers can help explain this decentralised crowd. In speaking of Steve Mann, the first cyborg, who viewed the world through video cameras implanted in a helmet, Rheingold writes, “cyborg wasn’t something Mann did; it was something he was” (Rheingold, 2003: 107). In the same way the stream of media coverage, television shows, and movies that we watch are not simply things we consume; they also consume us. Text messaging and social media do not exist outside of their users as tools, they have fundamentally altered the way many people view themselves and how they interact with those around them. In short, the protesters in Tahrir didn’t need a script to tell them what made good imagery they simply knew it when they saw it.

This dynamic interaction between people sharing a common repertoire of gestures and possessing similar subjectivities is the idea at the heart of Thomas de Zengotita’s book *Mediated*. As mediated subjects we, like the first cyborg, are seeing the world through video cameras, as well as laptops and cell phones. Zengotita highlights the “post-modern self-consciousness, mediated reflexivity,” that shapes our lives, and most especially those of a younger generation who have learned to “look for themselves — various possibilities of self-through media” (De Zengotita, 2005: 88-89). It is this process that created the mediated subjects who filled Tahrir Square and their act of coming to the giant screen of Tahrir made them into “genuine postmodern performers” (De Zengotita, 2005: 145).

During the revolution even entertainment became a political tool. In addition to the already mentioned Ultras, who possessed experience with spectacular organisation at soccer games, other unexpected groups in Egyptian society contributed their own understandings of spectacle. There is evidence that many of the youth who populate the video game cafes scattered across Cairo took part in the struggle in Tahrir. Repeated images of the phrase “Game Over Mubarak,” scrawled across statues and signs popped up during the first days of the revolution (Ramadan, 2011: Fig. 12). These youths, denied opportunities of employment, instead spend hours playing multiplayer games such as Halo, where they must use team tactics and control of physical space, skills that were well suited for the fight against the regime in Tahrir. They also produced a particular understanding of the spectacular. In writing on video games, Stephen Duncombe has highlighted the world, and appeal, of open-ended games as being one where, “the spectator also becomes a producer” (Duncombe, 2007: 73). This reflexivity is at the heart of de Zengotita’s notion of mediated subjects and is also a useful way of describing what was on view in Tahrir.

The world was ready to watch. As events unfolded in Egypt, traffic on Al Jazeera English’s website shot up 2,500 % in the first week alone. Over half of this new influx of viewers came from the United States (Gold, 2011).

Part 3: The Cinema of Revolution

“This is an exhibitionist Cinema, a Cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world to solicit the attention of its spectator” (Gunning in Strauven, 2006: 382)

Holding this audiences’ attention would be key to sustaining the new society of spectacle born in Tahrir Square. In order to understand this society it is necessary to view Tahrir as a visually imagined community. Benedict Anderson’s classic definition of the imagined political community of the nation is one where, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in

the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006:6). For Egyptians watching, and those in the Square itself, Tahrir undeniably served as the image of this communion.

In the context of the rise of nationalism explored by Anderson, this sense of communion was facilitated by the rise of print capitalism that allowed an ever-expanding audience to relate to themselves, and others, in completely new ways (Anderson, 2006: 36). However, different forces were at work in Tahrir. In seeking to update Anderson’s formulation to apply to a mediated and boundary-less world, other authors have sought to switch out print capitalism for terms such as “Arab television” (Pintak, 2009: 208).

Describing the new political imaginary born in Tahrir is more complicated than simply switching out a term from Anderson’s definition. While the print capitalism that bore the surge of 18th century nationalism was narrative-driven, the visually imagined community of Tahrir Square was organised according to the spectacle. Thus any consideration of how it looked and was organised must engage with visual concepts found in media and film theory. By looking at what sort of images this visually imagined community of revolution produced we can view the revolution as closer to a *Cinema of Attractions* than a tightly scripted narrative film.

The term, coined by Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault in 1985, refers to early films, which “primarily displayed a ‘view,’ presenting something that filmmakers thought would grab the audience’s attention,” meaning that they “dealt less with telling stories (let alone developing characters) and concentrated more on presenting what we have called ‘attractions’” (Gunning in Gaudreault, 2009: 19). While the term Cinema of Attractions could incorporate many divergent subject matters, it came to be defined mostly by the absence of a narrative. The lack of a narrative in its films means that the Cinema of Attraction was characterised by experiences of space and technical flourishes, along with new conceptions of time. In practice this meant that these films were mostly defined by spectacle. What “view” these spectacles presented varied. They might be full of the wonders of the incredible new mechanised age or feature camera tricks from

wizards like Georges Méliès that made the impossible conceivable. Whatever their subject matter, these films awed, astounded, and above all drew in the attention of the viewer.

Not only did the Cinema of Attractions differ in form from narrative film, but the very relationship between audience and film was also different. As Gunning writes, the Cinema of Attractions requires different “mental machinery” (Gunning, 1991: 12) to consume and produce than narrative films.

The constant moving from spectacle to spectacle required the active participation of the viewer. Just as the Cinema of Attractions only attracted audiences if it could consistently awe with its novelty, beauty, or technical prowess, so Tahrir only held power through its astonishing visuals and its irrefutable presence. Necessarily then, in a Cinema of Attractions, the “attractions foreground the role of the spectator,” and instead of merely seeing the audience as a remote voyeur, “the attraction directly addresses the spectator, acknowledging the viewer’s presence” (Gunning in Grievson, 2004: 44). Often in these early films this meant that, far from pretending the camera was not there, performers looked directly through the camera to the audience.

The power of Tahrir’s screens was that they not only allowed the performers of revolution to look through to the audience but also that they allowed the audience to return their gaze. Returning to the image of protesters watching themselves on Al Jazeera, arrayed in front of a makeshift screen (Waguih/Reuters, 2011: Fig. 7), it is hard not to see the Square as presenting a *Cinema of Revolution*, akin in its aesthetic characteristics and effect upon its audience to the Cinema of Attractions. By watching Al Jazeera in the Square the protesters were able to foreground the spectator and transform the passive action of watching television a revolutionary one.³

³ An avenue for further inquiry might explore whether this triumph necessitates a re-examining of the concept of the public sphere. Just as Miriam Hansen’s work on spectatorship in early film re-imagined Jurgen Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere, and posited a “new different kind of public sphere” (13 Hansen 1991) Tahrir Square may point to the creation of a technologically mediated counter-public similar to what has been described by Charles Hirschkind and others writing on the ethnography of media.

Nor was Egypt the only site of spectacular imagery and visually imagined revolution during the Arab Spring? Immediately apparent is the example of Bahrain. Vastly different from Egypt in size and political composition, the country nevertheless witnessed protesters' attempts to gather around the nationally significant space of Pearl Roundabout in Manama. Unfortunately for the protesters, Bahrain's location next to Saudi Arabia and other more powerful Gulf countries meant that the repressive response to their protest actions was far more severe than in Egypt. Media coverage faltered as well, due to the embedded nature of Al Jazeera, and its direct competitor Al Arabiya, in the states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, leaving the Bahraini protesters without constant media coverage. There would be still other hurdles for the protesters to face. On March 18, 2011, government forces evicted a month-long sit-in at the base of the 300-foot tall monument that crowned Pearl Roundabout, then demolished the monument (Firouz/Reuters, 2011: Fig. 13 and bahrainonline, 2011: 14) (*Al Jazeera*, 2011). Not only was this a spectacle of the regime's power but, having learned the lesson of Egypt, it was also a denial of the protesters' ability to use spectacular space to advance a visually imagined community of revolution. Overnight, the symbol of the revolt, and the best backdrop for media coverage, vanished. Bahrain's revolt would have to continue without a Tahrir.

Perhaps no longer secure in their ability to control peoples' perception through state television and their own spectacles, governments across the Middle East are growing more brutal in their attempts to control what happens in their central squares. Tahrir Square has certainly witnessed this shift. Though the site of several return protests after the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed control, many have been met with brutal repressive force by the military and police that have left dozens dead and hundreds injured. In response to challenges by citizens and journalists to such savage treatment of protesters, the ruling council has pointed to the parliamentary elections as the true manifestation of the peoples' will and claimed that "Egypt is not Tahrir Square" (Hersh, 2011).

Has the protesters' spectacular imagery lost its power as its novelty, which is an essential characteristic of the Cinema of Attractions, has worn off? Is it possible that news

coverage has become too saturated with similar stories and images? If the politics of spectacle are beholden to novelty and the ability to attract an audience, is it the case that Tahrir Square has lost its power with the rise of SCAF?

The Cinema of Revolution in Tahrir Square could not last indefinitely. As with all spectacle, “soon the excitement, fear, and uncertainty diminish as the spectacular fades into the everyday” (Larkin, 2008: 62). Additionally, after the goal of Mubarak’s ouster had been reached, the bond that united those in Tahrir disappeared. Even without the looming presence of SCAF, it is ambiguous whether the various constituents of the Square could find a way to produce a coherent political system. While coming together in agreement on what they did not want in the new Egypt was easy — Mubarak — deciding what they wanted to include requires a completely different type of participation.

In film history, the Cinema of Attractions ended with the rise of D.W. Griffith’s magnificent narrative films. Their more complex narrative strategies drew the viewer in and helped them identify with the characters they saw. While the Cinema of Attractions was characterised by noisy spectacle and hullabaloo, the new age of narrative film drew the audience in more subtly. Can a *Cinema of Revolution 2.0* incorporate some of these elements while addressing the weakness of its narrative strategies?

Conclusion

Observers inside and outside Egypt are hard pressed to recapture the optimism they felt in the days and months after the revolution. The unfortunate term “Arab Winter” has begun to be thrown about as frequently as Arab Spring was in the first months of 2011. In Egypt particularly, the situation has degraded to one of gridlock punctuated by violent clashes as youth groups make alliances with supporters of the ancien regime and all manner of divisions and coalitions complicate the picture (Sabry M 2012). What can still be seen are some of the ways spectacle influences Egyptians politics and how technologies of coordination may have contributed to the current political and social malaise.

Omar Robert Hamilton and his screenings of Tahrir cinema were a major part of the Tahrir Square experience. In the days after Mubarak toppled, he and his Mosireen collective took their show around the country hoping that by showing audiences the spectacle that they had created, it would allow (Stuhr-Rommereim, 2011), a moment of reflection that could give birth to a common narrative. Unfortunately, that shared image of a national community was harder to realise in parliament and in the constitutional assembly than it was in the square

Egypt's major political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamists' An-Nour Party, the main opposition party of the National Salvation Front (NSF), and SCAF (now seemingly content to stay behind the scenes) are still missing a common narrative. These parties have instead focused on forging temporary alliances based on shared oppositions. Furthermore the April 6 Movement, which helped precipitate the events of 2011 is more interested in acting as a "lobby group" than a political party (Azeem, 2013). Marc Lynch has pointed out that the lack of coherence on the political front may partly be due to the technologies employed during the revolution and how they can be effectively used politically. Recognising that, "social media has proved more useful for mobilizing protesters than organizing civil society or political parties", Lynch claims that "leaderless movements are great for surviving regime repression and binding together loose coalitions, but less well adapted to formulating a coherent political strategy," (Lynch, 2013). The post-Tahrir rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation that had an impressively organised structure and for years provided social services in neighbourhood across Egypt, is an example of the enduring importance of old-fashioned community organising. Attention should also be paid to the divide and conquer tactics employed by SCAF to factionalise the revolutionaries in the days after Mubarak's ouster and also to the fact that many of the revolution's participants boycotted the elections that saw Mohamed Morsi claim the presidency.

Nevertheless Lynch is initiating a serious conversation on the lasting effects of a mediated revolution and while his appraisal is mostly negative, and has reason to be, it also suggests that the political scene is still in flux. Calls to action delivered on Twitter and Facebook cannot reach the millions of Egyptians without access to the internet.

Neither can screenings of Tahrir Cinema bury the growing sense of distrust between former inhabitants of the square. Still, they can show that Egyptians are committed to pursuing politics by any means, and that actions such as the gathering of seven million signatures by the Rebel (Tamarrod) movement and associated protests are public performances of that desire (Sabry B June 2013).

One of Tahrir's lasting contributions may be to reshape notions of the public sphere, the "lack" of which is often cited as an impediment to democracy in the Middle East. The new medium of Tahrir's spectacle and the mediated protesters that created it has not only announced the presence of such a sphere but can change the way it is imagined. In his acceptance speech, Egypt's new president Mohamed Morsi pointed into the assembled television cameras and addressed them directly, "Today you are the source of power as the whole world sees" (Kirkpatrick, 2012). All that remains is for the new Cinema of Revolution 2.0 to move from the public's square to the public sphere.

Egyptians are no longer mere voyeurs trapped in an exploitive political system but they cannot agree on how to project their own reality or what it should look like. Still it is clear that the visual will play a lasting role in politics. Those 18 days in Tahrir Square, and the impact of a revolution imagined, contested, and remembered through its images, should teach us to keep our eyes on the screen.

Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Ali Ahmed/Associated Press



Figure 2: Screen capture from Daily News Egypt video



Figure 3: Screen capture from Daily News Egypt video



Figure 4: Scott Nelson/New York Times



Figure 5: Chris Hondros/New York Times



Figure 6: Screen Capture from Al Jazeera Video



Figure 7: Asmaa Waguih/Reuters



Figure 8: Suhaib Salem/Reuters



Figure 9: Dylan Martinez /Reuters

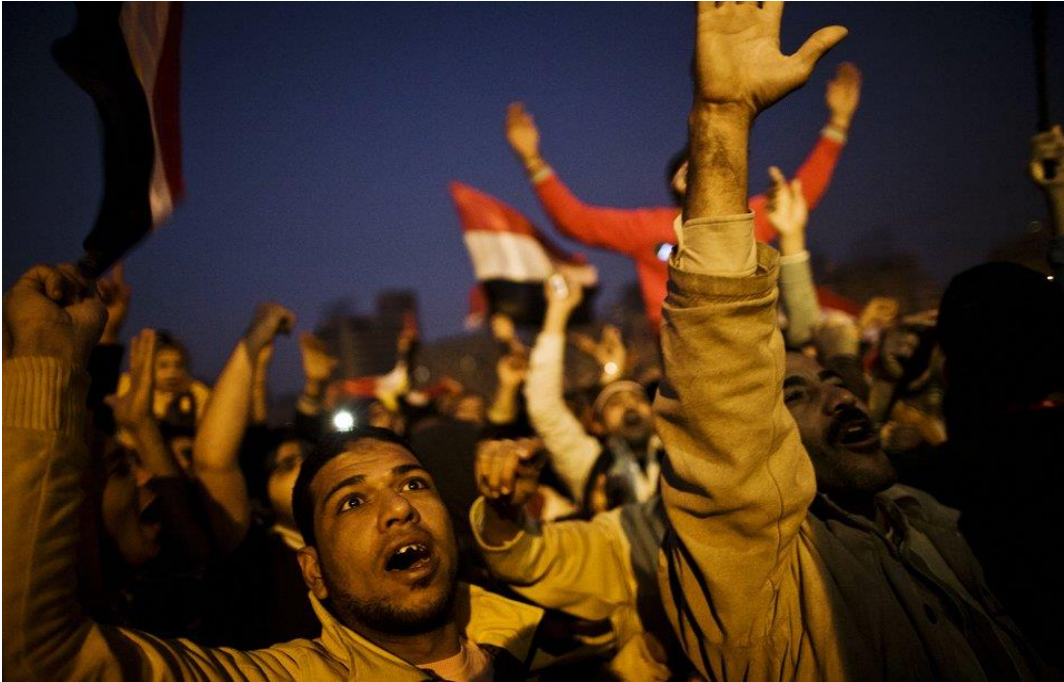


Figure 10: Guy Martin/Wall Street Journal



Figure 11: Guy Martin/Wall Street Journal



Figure 12: Danny-Ahmed Ramadan



Figure 13: Caren Firouz/Reuters



Figure 14 www.bahrainonline.org

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Photographs

Figure 1

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2011/02/02/world/middleeast/0202Egypt-slideshow-slide-NU54/0202Egypt-slideshow-slide-NU54-jumbo.jpg>

Figure 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQD-X9G9xfk>

Figure 3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQD-X9G9xfk>

Figure 4

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2011/01/31/world/middleeast/0131EGYPT-slideshow-slide-40H3/0131EGYPT-slideshow-slide-40H3-jumbo.jpg>

Figure 5

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/flash/Lens/2011/04/20110420-hondros-final/add3-480.jpg>

Figure 6

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhTrgKes6nk>

Figure 7

http://totallycoolpix.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11022011_egypt_protests_the_shoes/egypt_025.jpg

Figure 8

http://totallycoolpix.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11022011_egypt_celebrations/egypt_018.jpg

Figure 9

http://totallycoolpix.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11022011_egypt_celebrations/egypt_024.jpg

Figure 10

http://s.wsj.net/media/0211egyptmain12_J.jpg

Figure 11

http://s.wsj.net/media/0211egyptmain13_J.jpg

Figure 12

<http://language.log.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2933>

Figure 13

http://totallycoolpix.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/19022011_the_bahrain_protests/bahrain_016.jpg

Figure 14

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/68/Pearl_Monument_Leveled.jpg