

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Seeing Is Belonging: The Photography of Tahrir

Lara Baladi

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

In August 1990, herds of Kuwaitis sought refuge in Egypt. These tourists-in-spite-of-themselves flocked to the pyramids every day. I too was there on the Giza plateau, photographing the pyramids. My debut in photography coincided with this migration provoked by Saddam Hussein's first invasion of Kuwait.

That winter, Operation Desert Storm became the first war to be broadcast live on television. The perversity of how this invasion was represented reaffirmed Guy Debord's premise in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation."¹ The dark image in the convex screen was filled with occasional explosions in the night sky of an obscure city, CNN's big fat logo ever-present in the lower left corner. As this "clean," "bloodless" war was broadcast minute by minute to the world in an instantaneous mediation of unfolding events, America's overwhelming military response and its new, elaborate surveillance technologies became subject to much criticism and analysis. Jean Baudrillard, in his controversial and often-cited text on that period, went as far as to suggest that, "The Gulf War did not take place."² And, indeed, the images that saturated our TV

screens were perceived as surreal by many and inspired a whole new market of video games where soldiers, tinged by the green glow of night vision, crawl the terrain.

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

In a little corner shop in London, the image of a plane exploding into the twin towers flashed on TV. While gathering my groceries, I asked the shopkeeper sitting under the screen what this was. She glanced at it fleetingly over her shoulder and said, with a shrug, “It must be a film.” Never in the history of cinema had a scene of this amplitude been shot. Action movies have been trying, and failing, to catch up ever since. Reality had surpassed fiction.

So the Gulf War turned warfare, for many, into a computer game. In the Wikipedia entry for “Gulf War,” for example, a header reads: “‘Operation Desert Storm’ redirects here. For the video game, see Operation: Desert Storm (video game).” But 10 years later, the photo and film amateurs documenting the collapse of the 110-story towers in lower Manhattan re-humanized reality.

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

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

by shifting the hands holding it. “The power of letters and the power of pictures distribute themselves and evaporate into the social media such that it becomes possible for everyone to act instead of simply being represented,” observed the influential media artist and theorist Peter Weibel, in a recent article, “Power to the People: Images by the People.”³

The shift was felt worldwide. When Israel attacked Lebanon in 2006, Lebanese online activists and bloggers attracted enough of the world’s attention to put international pressure on Israel and help stop the war. Short-lived but devastatingly destructive, this war lasted long enough to spark the beginning of a new trend of online political activism in the whole Arab region.

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



FIGURE 12.1 *The “Friday of Victory” after Hosni Mubarak’s fall, Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt. Photo by Lara Baladi, February 18, 2011.*

Photographing in Egypt was prohibited in many areas during the Mubarak era; I was arrested no fewer than seven times over 15 years for taking pictures in various parts of the country. Fear-mongering propaganda made people paranoid, feeding an ever-present and general suspicion of the camera, and by extension, of the “other.” Complicit as societies become under dictatorship, Egyptians had for generations bowed to routine police humiliation in broad daylight, and worse brutality in the darkness of their torture chambers. Very few images of these crimes had gone public. The 2008 Mahalla protests by textile mill workers revived the notion that we had a right to see and be seen. Egyptian activist Hossam el-Hamalawy, blogged that, “the revolution will be flickrised,” pointing to the need to document and disseminate the regime’s repressive procedures. Seeing would mean believing and revolting for those blinded by the national media, which had concealed this repression persistently for 30 years.

This was never truer than in Tahrir Square during the 18 days of the 2011 revolution. Here, and in the whole region during the Arab uprisings, the act of photographing became not only an act of seeing and recording, it was fully participatory. At the core of the Egyptian uprising, photographing was a political act, equal in importance to demonstrating, constituting a form of civil disobedience and defiance. In the midst of the emergency, all theories on the subjectivity of photography suddenly became irrelevant. During the 18 days, people in the square took photos because they felt the social responsibility to do so. Photography became objective; photography showed the truth—yes, a Truth made of as many truths as there were protesters in the square, but nonetheless one that urgently had to be revealed at this turning point in history. The camera became a non-violent weapon aimed directly at the state, denouncing it. Photographing implied taking a stand against the regime; it was a way of reconquering territory and ultimately the country. Photographing meant belonging.

In his classic BBC series, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger tells us, “The images come to you. You do not go to them. The days of pilgrimage are over.”⁴ Commenting on our experience of images in the digital age, Slavoj Žižek argued that, “what goes on today is not ‘virtual reality’ but the ‘reality of the virtual.’”⁵ A media revolution also took place in Tahrir, when the reality of the streets reached the reality on our screens. The images coming to us through our screens, finally, were “reality.”

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



FIGURE 12.2 *Protesters during a speech in Tahrir Square, April 8, 2011. Photo by Mosa'ab Elshamy.*

Around the world—except in China, where the government banned the word “Egypt” from its Google search engine—images of Tahrir spilled into living spaces. Transcending computers, television screens, and other virtual channels, the images inexorably spread the energy of the square. As Žižek said when interviewed about the Arab revolutions, “It was a genuine universal event, immediately understandable... It is every true universality, the universality of struggle.”⁶ People all over the world identified with the protesters in the square. Tahrir became everyone’s revolution. Arab uprisings and Occupy movements followed in a chain reaction. Was image-making impacting the world and shaking its order by helping people rethink their relationship with political power?

The mainstream international media grabbed the event and sucked everything it could out of it. While it supported the crowds in Tahrir, it also diminished the revolution’s momentum by referring to it in the past tense after the 18 days and moving on to other news, thus confirming McLuhan’s theory that “you can actually dissipate a situation by giving it maximal coverage.”⁷ At this point, ordinary people had embraced the power of online images to such an extent that television news, often way behind the news on the ground, started broadcasting videos shot by amateurs or activists that had already gone viral on the web. Never, since the invention of the camera, had a historical event been so widely documented, with more videos and photos than there were protesters in the square.

The new economy brought about by digital photography has exponentially amplified photography’s intrinsic factory-like quality, which

is both its greatest promise and its greatest threat. On the one hand, anyone who owns a camera can produce limitless images for free. On the other hand, the abundance of rapidly distributed images is accompanied by a lack of critical distance; for example, images altered in Photoshop are mostly taken at face value.

This contributes to a general desensitization to reality. Vilém Flusser, in his 1984 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, rightly warns us of the dangers of this hyper-democratization of photography in the digital age: “Anyone who takes snaps has to adhere to the instructions for use—becoming simpler and simpler—that are programmed to control the output end of the camera. This is democracy in the post-industrial society. Therefore people taking snaps are unable to decode photographs: they think photographs are an automatic reflection of the world.”⁸

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



FIGURE 12.3 *Photoshopped NASA shot, July 3, 2013; image circulating on Facebook in July 2013.*

How long will the most extensive, multi-vocal documentary ever made—that is, this extraordinary and unedited portrait of Egyptians in Midan Tahrir one finds online—survive in the ephemeral virtual archive? With most of the images of the 18 days vanishing into a bottomless pit thanks to Google’s PageRank algorithm, will the vision of a possible new world people glimpsed in the Square die along with its digital traces?

Although the endless proliferation of images in Tahrir was produced for our own national consumption rather than that of a Western audience, images from the midan almost instantly turned old clichés of Egypt on their heads. The angry Arab terrorist became a dignified peace warrior. “Egypt! Help us. One world, one pain,” read banners in the protests that erupted in Wisconsin in the U.S. three weeks after the Egyptian uprising. The once “dirty Arab” had transformed into a politically and socially conscious citizen. President Obama even declared in a television speech he gave after the Battle of the Camel in the midst of the 18 days: “We should raise our children to be like Egyptian youth.”

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

One of the oldest debates in photography is about its relationship with death: “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality,” writes Susan Sontag in *On Photography*. “One can’t possess reality ... one can’t possess the present but one can possess the past.”⁹ The fear of loss—the fear that the vision born in Tahrir would vanish soon after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down—may have been another reason why people took images incessantly while they were there. Ultimately, photographing in Tahrir became an act of faith. As if recording the ecstatic reality of the present would remind us, in the future, of the Square’s utopian promise, and help us to keep hope once the real battle began.

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

Whether it was the revolutionaries, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Salafis who took Tahrir, owning the Square meant owning the revolution and by extension, Egypt. As the battle for the Square worsened, Tahrir came to represent a divided nation. Rifts between Egyptians intensified during and after the first presidential campaign that followed Mubarak’s toppling, in which the Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi won under dubious circumstances

and with a markedly small mandate. In the midst of economic free fall, he issued a constitutional decree granting himself virtually unchecked power. Hence, Egyptians took to the streets again, having lost all trust in his promises to support the revolution and Egypt's interests at large. Only six months into his rule, Egyptians were more bitterly divided than ever.

On June 30, Tahrir Square filled with an unprecedented number of protesters. As many other public places around the country were also being occupied with people demanding the removal of President Morsi, new bird's-eye views of Tahrir flooded the Internet and the mainstream media in ever-renewing iteration (the same but never the same). Alongside this poignant illustration of the experience of the overwhelming majority of Egyptians who, if only for a moment, united again in a common goal and spirit, a NASA photograph of Egypt from the sky—showing the Nile illuminated with a Photoshopped caption, “Egypt lights the way for the world revolution”—emerged and circulated on social media. This image, at a striking remove from the euphoria experienced on the ground, this iconic image of the Square's punctum archimedis, spread the global significance of Tahrir once again through the media.

Egypt was now defying the very core of the democratic process. Messages like the following one circulated on people's Facebook walls:

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

In the early days of the June 30th uprising, many Egyptians used social media to voice their anger against Western media, who were labeling the removal of President Morsi a “coup” rather than seeing it as military intervention in support of and responding to mass mobilization against his divisive and decidedly undemocratic rule.

In the days immediately following this new turn of events in Egyptian politics, 22 *Al Jazeera* journalists resigned, accusing the Qatar-based network of airing lies and misleading viewers. Reporting for *Al Arabiya*, Nada Al Tuwajiri characterized these resignations as “criticism over the channel's editorial line, the way it covered events in Egypt, and allegations that journalists were instructed to favor the Brotherhood.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, CNN's broadcasts recalled its biased coverage of the Gulf War; the network's coverage reflected its own narrative rather than the reality on the ground. CNN not only naively confused images of pro-Morsi with anti-Morsi demonstrations, but was also bluntly oblivious to the voices of the majority of the Egyptian people expressing their will. CNN's crew was thrown out of Tahrir Square, along with many other foreign journalists, because protesters refused to be misrepresented; from the start, this revolution had been about self-determination, in media as in society.

The Egyptian army regained control over the national media and gave President Morsi an ultimatum to resign. He refused. Arrested by the army,

he underwent what many people would call a “show trial” and eventually received the death sentence. But as time passes, the current ruling regime imposes an increasingly aggressive form of repression against freedom of speech and a stranglehold on the media even tighter than Mubarak’s.

In the wake of the uprising, the power of the image was supposedly handed back to the people, for the people. Someone even tweeted that a meteorite should fall on Tahrir. Did this message imply that Tahrir should officially be the sacred pilgrimage site for a redefined Egypt? At the time, it felt for a moment as if Tahrir could become the Mecca of a rebirthing Arab world, one in the process of seeking a new political practice and redefining democracy in ways the West has yet to imagine. Five years later, the last revolt turns out to be more like a popular movement co-opted into a full-scale counter-revolution—perhaps one more stage on Egypt’s long and painful road to representative politics.

When Napoleon Bonaparte addressed his army before the Battle of the Pyramids, he said, “Soldiers! Forty centuries behold you!”

The full-force return of the military regime and the increasingly restricted spaces of resistance available to citizens have only reinforced the significance of the bird’s-eye image of Tahrir. Imprinting deeper into our psyche the fact that the revolution happened; re-truing the fact that fundamental social change has been taking place in an ongoing process, against all odds; penetrating our collective memory as time passes—that image of Tahrir distilled from the mass production of images that took place in 2011 has come to represent in a way not only Egypt’s uprising but all the social movements that have since followed worldwide. The bird’s-eye view of Tahrir Square has become, in this way, a collective watermark of democratic longing. Even though the road to freedom seems long, this digital-age icon, by dethroning the pyramids, has brought Egypt back to the present, hopefully enduring, reiterating, and propelling it into a better future.

Notes

- 1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- 3 Peter Weibel, “Power to the People: Images by the People,” <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/power-people-images-people/>.
- 4 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972; London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008), DVD.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Reality of the Virtual*, directed by Ben Wright (St. Charles, Ill.: Olive Films, 2004), DVD.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, #1 *Arabian Revolution*, YouTube, June 21, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9Ok0JzUL_c.

- 7 Marshall McLuhan, "What TV Does Best," in *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*, ed. Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003), 252.
- 8 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 59.
- 9 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 163.
- 10 Nada Altuwaijri, "'We Aired Lies': Al Jazeera Staff Quit Over 'Misleading' Egypt Coverage," *Al Arabiya*, July 9, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/2013/07/09/Al-Jazeera-employees-in-Egypt-quit-over-editorial-line-.html>.