The aesthetics of dissent: Culture and politics of transformation in the Arab world

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Abstract

Our special issue captures the interplay of media, politics, religion, and culture in shaping Arabs' search for more stable governing models at a crossroads of global, regional, and national challenges through systematic and integrated analyses of evolving and contested Arab visual and performing arts in revolutionary and unstable public spheres. The issue presents a unique attempt to investigate these forms of cultural production as new modes of knowledge that shed light on the nature of social movements with the aim of expanding the critical reach of the disciplinary methods of political discourse and social theory. Contributors articulate the ways in which the Arab scene can contribute to the understanding of the rise of new social movements worldwide by exploring the methodological gaps in dominant Western discourses and theories.

Keywords

aesthetics of dissent, Arab Spring, creative expression, culture and activism, culture and politics

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Ever since the 2011 youth embrace of the public arena and demand for regime change in a fervor once described as the 'Arab Spring', a sense of polarization has grown in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen around certain issues of local, regional, and global relevance. Echoes of this polarization reverberated around the politics of Islam with its various sectarian and tribal articulations. The resurgence of counter-revolutionary forces further complicated the public search for more stable and inclusive governing models, and public demands for autonomy and agency from pro-Western military institutions as well as elite establishments. The accelerating changes in Arab socio-politics in the second decade of the 21st century, which further witnessed uprisings in Algeria and Sudan during 2019, have also accompanied growth in the process of expressing and disseminating political opinions amid growing signs of chaos and uncertainty. In Arab Spring scholarship published since 2011, the aesthetics of dissent through artistic creativity remains under-examined, however, hence the importance of this special issue.

In his seminal essay, 'The artworld', Arthur Danto proposed: 'The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one' (1964: 581). This distinction between the world and the artworld gives any work of art thus naturalized a dual identity – one its own and the other the world that stages and marvels at it. 'It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always,' Danto adds, 'to make the artworld, and art, possible. It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing art on those walls. Not unless there were neolithic aestheticians' (1964: 581). What about the painters on the walls of Cairo, Damascus, Bahrain, or Sana'a? Where would such aestheticians emerge to call rebellious graffiti an art and bring it to dwell and mean on the borderline between the real and the artworld? Under revolutionary circumstances the real and the artworld commingle, become one, and craft a tertiary space. Here one might say a revolutionary banner – mere ink on a piece of cloth – that declares *Irhal* (Go Away) in Tahrir Square addressing Hosni Mubarak is not just a banner but a revolutionary leader, a person, a persona, just like Vladimir Lenin in Red Square. Here one might also say an entire revolutionary rally in the streets of Tehran might as well be a *Ta'ziyeh* (expression of condolence) procession.

These uprisings were collective actions without anyone playing a leadership role. Deprived youth, impacted by the major burden of their deteriorating socio-economic conditions, led the protests. The frames that were developed to motivate people to get involved in collective action were similar throughout the uprisings across the Arab world and were based on grievances around injustice, poverty, inequality and repression. However, it was not possible to motivate masses to claim the aesthetics of expression and stand against brutal regimes 'without having a powerful cultural and artistic component to convey the messages in the most affective – that is, emotionally effective – manner possible' (LeVine, 2015: 1278). Art played that critical role in mediating the revolutionary messages to various segments of Arab societies. Artists during and after the uprisings contributed to motivating and mobilizing people. They certainly helped shape 'post-fear' conditions in several Arab societies (LeVine, 2013). After decades of censorship and fear, revolutions certainly brought about cultural and artistic awakening (Khalil, 2012). The emergence of rap music in Tunisia and street art campaigns in Yemen, for instance, enabled artists to speak up against human rights violations, infringement of liberties, and regime tyranny. And in some contexts, artists built on the pre-2011 history of creativity

to produce aesthetics that communicated freedoms, respect, and diversity effectively. Art and culture have, therefore, been key to the politics of transformation in the region.

Historically, artistic production more or less reinforced major political and sociological transformations all around the world. As Mark LeVine (2013: 206) argues, 'for at least 100 years, most revolutions have been supported by artistic production of various types that reflect the ideology and goals of those leading it'. LeVine states that after the industrialization of artistic production, when works of art became commercial objects, the 'aura' of art, which furnished it with ritualistic power, disappeared. He examines the views of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on the consequences of this process through a critical theory perspective. Benjamin saw the process as a positive development as he believed the ritualistic power of art would no longer be used to serve existing power structures, and the loss of aura could facilitate the revolutionary use of art. However, Adorno held the belief that the commodification of artistic products could generate a 'culture industry' which could support the hegemonic ideology. LeVine emphasizes that the rise of social media and availability and accessibility of new digital technologies can bring the lost aura back to artistic production. He argues that the production of art has become easier and affordable owing to new technological advancements as anyone with artistic talent can produce high-quality music and video using a computer. These technologies also facilitate the distribution of artistic products. The internet and social media help artists to circulate their works fast and free to reach a wider audience. During the Arab uprisings, artists took the advantages of technological developments in media production and digital communication and created artistic works to reinforce the revolution. The aesthetic aspect of the Arab Spring, as this special issue shows, demands research to explore the relationships between artistic creativity and revolutionary action.

The Rand's Corporation report (Schwartz et al., 2013) on the cultural and artistic aspects of the Arab uprisings investigated how Arab artists shape public debate during major political transformations, and how uprisings influence freedom of expression in Arab countries. The report examined Egypt as a case study to understand the impact of the Arab uprisings on artistic freedom. The Office of Censorship of Artistic Works is the authority in Egypt that oversees the censorship of artistic materials. The office particularly reviews political, religious and sexual content, as per Law 430 (1955) that authorizes the office to censor a film, piece of music, book or any other artistic work to 'protect the public system, morals, and the higher interests of the state'. The office can impose strict censorship, seemingly without following clear and well-established standards. Artists have no legal right to appeal the decisions of the office. The report revealed how the government could exercise control over artistic communities. Whether through financial and editorial control of media outlets or regulatory policing of unions and syndicates, artists affiliated with the regime are empowered and independent artists lose even basic licensing rights. Such censorship, imposed either directly by the government or through bureaucratic mechanisms, led to self-censorship in the artistic community. The risk of public backlash and societal pressure also contribute to self-censorship. An artistic work, viewed as un-Islamic, can trigger a reaction from conservative communities. Therefore, artists often avoid becoming a target of a public outcry (Schwartz et al., 2013). Lack of financial incentives is another reason for self-censorship. Artists who act

independently often have to bear the cost of production and circulation (Schwartz et al., 2013). The Arab uprisings challenged this history of multi-layered censorship (state censorship, social censorship, and self-censorship). The uprisings helped disrupt this history but did not eradicate it.

The uprisings provided an opportunity for artists to stand against censorship and to use art as a revolutionary tool. Arab artists succeeded in triggering an intellectual change in Arab societies where governments suppressed the intelligentsia. As advocated by the Revolution Artists Union (RAU), a group of Egyptian artists, a true revolution can only be achieved not only by ousting governments but also by changing mindsets of people, which can be realized through an intellectual change (Adel, 2011). Social and political changes can bring about an intellectual change. There are various social levels within Egyptian society. Although the revolution in Egypt was mainly led by the middle class, all segments of the society assisted in this major political and social transformation. The revolution affirmed the importance of diversity and revealed how diversity could contribute to social and political changes. More Egyptian artists came to realize the significance of diversity and cultural coexistence after the revolution that ended in a brief success (Adel, 2011). An essential responsibility of artists is to start a conversation and dialogue within diverse communities. Art projects, such as free cultural festivals, outdoor film screenings, theater troupes and different forms of street art therefore opened new venues for art to reach new audiences and promote dialogue (Lindsey, 2012). Egyptian artists launched Mashrou' Al Mareekh (The Mars Project), an initiative promoting dialogue, diversity and freedom of expression. They organized 'open mic' events to encourage self-expression and provide young amateur talents with a platform for artistic expression. Through such initiatives, Egyptian artists aim to achieve social and intellectual change (Adel, 2011).

Indeed, over time the uprisings saw a veritable blossoming of street art. Street art became more popular than traditional art during the Arab Spring as a way for artists to speak out. Street artists showed their support for the uprisings and encouraged people to resist against authoritarian regimes through various types of street art such as graffiti, calligraffiti, and performance poetry. 'Street art not only played a distinct role in the political dissent of this revolutionary period,' Khalil (2012: 1) notes, 'art has also been an ongoing experience for the revolutionary youth that is strengthening civil society and the democratic process.'

Focusing on this street art and on other forms of aesthetic dissent, this special issue examines the relationship between cultural production and changing socio-politics to understand the aesthetics of dissent in the Arab world. The purpose of this issue is to forge a space to conceptualize new, if not alternative, cultural modes of expression, and their function in the process of social change. It intends to address their role and capture the complexity of communication tools utilized to facilitate, if not hinder, political conversations. The special issue responds to a scholarly need to conduct timely and critical analyses of cultural texts in light of the multi-layeredness of unfolding Arab socio-politics. The issue's contributors highlight the importance of creativity in both informing and echoing the public search for autonomy, agency and self-representation.

Our special issue captures the interplay of media, politics, religion and culture in shaping Arabs' search for more stable governing models at the crossroads of global,

regional, and national challenges through systematic and integrated analyses of evolving and contested Arab visual and performing arts in revolutionary and unstable public spheres. The countries examined in this special issue were not selected because of any geographical import but as nodes of research that will allow us methodologically to go beyond national boundaries, while helping us to understand the specificity of local developments, and geared towards making an unprecedented theoretical inroad into the comparative historical sociology of nations. The special issue provides a timely assessment of the shifting dynamics in the region. Our collection, therefore, seeks to advance scholarly research, intellectual conversation, and knowledge dissemination related to the impact of identity politics (e.g. tribal, sectarian, Islamist) in undermining local regimes and drawing people to adopt transnational religious/social means of belonging, and instituting a critical dimension of the 'transcultural'. The framework makes sense of these new formations and their role in delivering meaningful social, cultural, and political support to power actors who lost faith in nationalism as a Western construct. This special issue examines new modes of cultural expression that articulate new social realities. This is in addition to examining the emergence of new dramaturgic techniques in the context of street performances and arts, as well as new online activism and music performances.

Our special issue contributes to contemporary scholarly conversations in three ways. First, it adopts a critical standpoint with respect to the term 'Arab Spring', recognizing its multiple constructions and interpretations, which invoke complex and yet fraught connotations tied to geographical, historical, and political realities and perspectives. The contributions therefore zoom in on localized revolutionary dynamics and modes of collective action. Second, the focus on the carefully selected case studies (i.e. Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, and Lebanon), conceived not as geographic units but as thematic clusters, adds depth to analysis of Arab revolutionary politics by revealing their multi-layered complexities and cultural denominators that operate fluidly across the Arab world. Third, the special issue presents a rigorous theoretical intervention based on thick descriptions and critical intimacy with primary sources, based on a methodological case study of specific nations on a transnational public sphere for the growing population of researchers on and in the region.

A few prior works have initiated an important step in exploring the socio-political formations of modern Arab citizens through art. For instance, the special issue *Creative Dissent: The Visual Arts of the Arab World Uprisings*, published in the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (vol. 11, issue 2, 2018) is an important recent contribution. Therefore, this special issue further responds to a earlier call for scholarly understandings of the relationship between the cultural production and the social/political change movements in the Arab world. Our special issue examines this relationship through multiple cultural texts like literature, photography, music, and online activism in various local sites. This special issue fills this gap by interrogating the theories of social change in media theory, integrating the cultural studies literature, and contributing to the prevailing theoretical trends in Arab studies.

This special issue corresponds to the intense process of 'change' that has swept the region in the past few years and produced conditions for political uncertainty. The accelerating changes in the Arab culture landscape over the last few decades have given Arabs

the opportunity to critically evaluate and assess literature, culture, media, and political rhetoric. Moreover, young people acquired the tools to critically evaluate, through new modes of cultural expression and alternative media, what the state-controlled media is telling them, selling them, and pushing them to believe. Traditional cultural platforms are no longer the only players engaging political and social transformations in the Arab world. The new Arab cultural production still needs more attention from Arab research-ers, due to its critical importance in creating a new period where these new modes of expression play a vital role in facilitating a transition to democracy in the Arab region. The special issue offers a thorough study of the complexity of media outlets in circulat-ing the revolutionary sentiment of citizen activism and engagement in the Arab world.

We begin by featuring a reading theory from social critic Matthew Arnold and Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to help articulate the revolutionary nature of the Arab Spring. In 'Culture and society during revolutionary transformation: Rereading Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci in the context of the Arab Spring's cultural production', Eid Mohamed moves beyond mere political transformations. The author correlates the Western thinkers' observations about the essence of revolutions with his own observa-tions about the post-2011 development of intellectual narratives and cultural productions in the Arab world. The article maps key changes in several Arab countries and empha-sizes the role of educators, artists, and activists in sustaining change. Key to the article is its focus on transculturality, that is, how local revolutionaries in countries like Egypt and Yemen, for instance, drew their inspiration and conceived their collective calls for change within a framework that transcended local contexts and functioned in interconnected ways.

The issue does not define the Arab Spring as 'the' turning point in Arab struggle, but as part of a continued struggle that predated 2010–11. In 'Sensing the next battle: An overshadowed prehistory of creative dissent in Tunisia', Joachim Ben Yakoub and Sami Zemni explore two modes of resistance during the decade preceding the 2011 Tunisian revolution. They demonstrate how various Tunisian artists and activists produced crea-tive works to subvert the mainstream narrative of then president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. More specifically, the authors examine this subversion process by surveying a corpus of posters, performances, and programs that contributed to ridiculing the celebratory sym-bolic power attributed to Ben Ali. Documenting this history, the authors argue, highlights an under-explored history of creative dissent, often lost in the sensational narration of the 2011 political transformation as a response to the tragedy of Mohammed Bouazizi, the street vendor whose self-immolation on 17 December 2010 has been credited with trig-gering the Tunisian revolution and, consequently, mass protests and uprisings throughout the Arab world.

Noha Radwan's 'Post-coup recuperation in al-Manawahly's songs' enriches the issue through its examination of the poetics of resistance in the songs of self-taught guitarist Yasser al-Manawahly. Chief among al-Manawahly's songs is 'Ahy Rig'it Rima' ('Here Returns Rima', 2014), which provides a critique of the 2014 military coup in Egypt. Radwan juxtaposes textual analysis of al-Manawahly's songs with notes from the author's interview with the singer himself. The article builds on existing scholarship exploring the relationship between music and politics during 2011–13 by further stress-ing the power of music in continuing revolutionary struggle in 2014 and beyond. It

illustrates the role of creativity in challenging status quo politics and the ways through which musicians navigate censorship in production and distribution.

In '"Loud" and "quiet" politics: Questioning the role of "the artist" in street art projects after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution', Darci Sprengel avoids the Orientalist trap of fetishizing the relationship between art and resistance in Egypt by both historically contextualizing Egyptian street art and revealing internal debates among the artists themselves. The article compares the revolutionary dynamics of organizing two street art initiatives in Egypt: al-Fann Midan (Art is a City Square) in Cairo and another street art phenomenon in Alexandria. The author uses the sonic metaphors of 'loud' and 'quiet' to respectively describe the politics shaping these two artistic phenomena. Al-Fann Midan, she argues, embodies 'loud' politics in its grassroots activism and direct critique of the state, a space through which artists see themselves as revolutionary leaders. By contrast, street artists in Alexandria embody 'quiet' politics as artists who indirectly critique authority; they primarily rely on ambiguity and advance art within the social as opposed to the political sphere. The article, therefore, complicates the narrative of creative expression by showing the multi-layered nature of artistic creativity vis-à-vis politics.

The special issue is original in its imagination of the aesthetics of hope. This is reflected in Kamilia Al-Eriani's 'Mourning the death of a state to enliven it: Reflections on the "weak" Yemeni state'. Al-Eriani criticizes the description of Yemen as a 'weak/ failing state' which led to interventions of regional and global power brokers in the post-2011 Yemeni political scene. Thinking of Yemen in such terms, the author argues, was guided by fears of the disintegration of the state but constituted a form of symbolic violence that not only disregarded the power of Yemen's social organization but also created conditions for chaos. The article then builds on this critique to show how mourning the rhetorical death of the Yemeni state could, in fact, open doors to a new form of political consciousness, that is, one that leads to a renewal of faith in unity. The article advances this poetics of hope through an inter-textual analysis of the musical *Raddat al-Dunya* ('Life has Recoiled', 2015) and the poem 'Anal al-Yemen' ('I am Yemen', 2014). Al-Eriani demonstrates how the aesthetics in the two works represents a flourishing mode of creativity among young Yemeni artists that paradoxically inspire hope through critiques of violence.

The special issue is also unique in its engagement with online activism as evident in Annemarie Iddins's 'The digital carceral: Media infrastructure, digital cultures, and state surveillance in post-Arab Spring Morocco', which examines the activist blogging collective Mamfakinch ('No Concessions'), which emerged as a 2011 youth response to the Moroccan control of media and allowed activists to learn and share information about Arab revolutionary spheres. The article maps the Moroccan state-sponsored spyware attacks on Mamfakinch, a citizens' media website, and prosecution of its contributors as a form of hyper-surveillance meant to police and confine activism. The relationship between Mamfakinch and the Moroccan government, the author argues, is symbolic of changing imaginaries in Morocco's resistance and carceral culture.

Moreover, the special issue is critical in its departure from the traditional way of thinking about the Arab Spring as exclusively limited to Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. Therefore, in 'Liberation or emancipation? Counter-hegemony, performance and public space in Lebanon', Hanan Toukan examines two public performances

in Lebanon: Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh's *Photo-Romance* (2009) and the Dictaphone Group's *This Sea is Mine* (2012). The article reads the two works, which were developed in different times, as part of a continuum in a Lebanese artistic environment channeling resistance, dissent, and agency, thereby illustrating how the 2011 uprisings were shaped by the deep localized histories that informed them. The author's analysis pays close attention to how the works, which evolved out of decades of growth in Lebanese public performance, exhibit modes of liberation and emancipation.

Funding

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Eid Mohamed is assistant professor of comparative literary and cultural studies and Arab-US cultural encounters. His work includes comparative literary and cultural studies, media studies, and anthropology of social change. Recent publications include a sole-authored book on American imagery in the Middle East (I.B. Tauris, 2015, paperback 2017), a co-edited volume about the 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath (Indiana University Press, 2016), and a co-edited compilation about Arab education after the Arab Spring (Sense Publishers, 2016). He is currently working on a book tentatively titled, *From Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park: Arab–US Cultural Politics in Post Arab Spring Era*, which examines the ways in which cultural identity and collective action have been transformed by the global uncertainty of both 9/11 and the Arab Spring. His work has appeared in various academic journals including *New Media & Society* and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

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Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He received a dual PhD in Sociology of Culture and Islamic Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1984, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University. He has taught and delivered lectures in many North American, European, Arab, and Iranian universities.

He has written 22 books, edited 4, and contributed chapters to many more. He is also the author of over 100 essays, articles and book reviews. His books and articles have been translated into numerous languages. Among his most recent books are *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (Routledge, 2008); *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (Transaction Publishers, 2009); *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Harvard, 2011); *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Harvard, 2014); *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (Zed Books, 2015); *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Harvard, 2015); *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation* (Verso, 2016); *Iran: Rebirth of a Nation* (Routledge, 2017); *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (Columbia, 2019).