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Review - The Square

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LUCIA SORBERA, MAY 5 2017

The Square
by Jehane Noujaim,
Participant Media, 2013

January 25th 2011: when something beautiful happened

In a lengthy interview with journalist Albert Reif about her study *On Violence*, during the summer of 1970, the political theorist Hannah Arendt remarks: “The good things in history are usually of very short duration, but afterward have a decisive influence on what happens over long periods of time.”[1]

In 2011, we saw something good happening in Egypt, when millions of people took to the streets, claiming the public space and demanding dignity, freedom and social justice.

It is true. The beauty of the Egyptian revolution, like that of all beautiful things, was short-lived, and soon the cruel face of political strife was revealed. In times of normalization of the “state of exception”, [2] the political contest, which is part of the democratic dialectic, is substituted by the arbitrariness of the law and its application. The public space shifts from being a political arena to a securitized space: from agora to Green Zone.

Yet, there is no doubt that this revolution, disliked and undermined by the old patriarchs in uniform [3] and their international partners in business suits, has already inexorably influenced the course of history.

The global history of revolutionary processes suggests that the generation that lived through this moment of public happiness is meant to renew the way of thinking about politics and public space. The challenge is to make this generation and their ways of thinking survive the counter-revolution. Art is what keeps people, their ideas and the memory of their actions alive in times of severe political repression. Jehan Noujaim’s *The Square*, released for the first time in October 2013, and immediately acclaimed as an iconic documentary, is part of this collective effort of archiving to keep the revolution alive.

The Autobiography of a Generation

“Let me tell you how the whole story began....”

These words are Ahmed Hassan’s, a young man who took part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, and are the *incipit* of *The Square*. Jehan Noujaim entrusts to Ahmed the task of narrating history through the plural stories of politics, friendship and coming of age that Egyptian revolutionaries experienced between January 2011 and August 2013. This choice discloses the Egyptian-American filmmaker’s poetics from the first minute: the revolutionaries should be put in the position of telling their own story. Taking into account their subjectivities, political history takes on a new dimension. In so doing, *The Square* is central to the collective cultural project of countering hegemonic and state-centred narratives about the Egyptian 2011 revolution. Building on the ground-breaking work of the historian Luisa Passerini on the relationship between memory, subjectivity and history, I describe and analyse this project as the

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“Autobiography of a Generation”.[4]

The story does not begin in January 2011. Ahmed commences his chronicle by framing the 2011 revolution against the background of Egyptian political and economic situation in the age of Mubarak: “Egypt was living without dignity, injustice existed everywhere...”.

In the years where international organizations were praising the regime for policies of privatization and reduction of the already inefficient welfare, clear signs of the collapse of society were already evident to Egyptian critical scholars and artists.[5] In the early 2000s, Egyptian academics and human rights activists denounced the state of corruption and violence,[6] calling the Egyptian government to address the social, economic and political crisis. But their calls remained unheard. Many of them paid for their criticism against the regime and their commitment to human rights with jail and exile.[7] Islamists were also condemned by military and civil trials in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The police’s violence and, more broadly, that of the security apparatus under the Mubarak regime were also addressed in literature and in cinema, notwithstanding the censorship. For instance, Youssef Chahine and Khaled Youssef denounced it explicitly in *Heyya Fawda* (Chaos, 2007), where they paid homage to the democratic movements of that time (Kifaya and the Judges movement). Significantly, the last scene in the fiction was a popular assault on a jail to liberate political activists and poor people. At that time, one could think that the scene was a metaphor, inspired by the Conquest of the Bastille, which started the French Revolution. Today, the same scene looks like the wise premonition of the 2011 spontaneous uprising.

Notwithstanding this gloomy picture, on the eve of the 2011 Revolution, the international community considered Egypt a stable country and one of the most reliable allies of the West in the fight against Islamist terrorism.

Ahmed’s testimony in *The Square* tells another story, a story of widespread popular discontent, which was due not only to economic problems but also to state violence, corruption and unaccountability. On the eve of the revolution, the emergency law had been enforced for 30 years, and the brutal murder of Khaled Said[8] by the police added to people’s rage against the security apparatus.

Ahmed does not hide his surprise on the 25th of January: “I went down to the street. I found that everyone was there. People broke their fears”.

The topic of fear and overcoming fear runs through the whole documentary, and it intersects with the theme of the trans-generational transmission of knowledge and activism. When a British Television program asks the actor Khaled Abdallah if he does not fear arrest in the days of the January uprising, his answer opens a new perspective:

Actually, I don’t care. I know why I am here. I come from three generations who have been fighting for reforms and for political freedom in this country.

These words resonate with the experience of many activists, artists and intellectuals who took on the battle over narratives on the Egyptian revolution. Over time, these narratives turned into “a narrative of despair.”[9] Yet, just as naming the loss is an act of signifying that allows the projection of the self into the future, naming despair is not an act of resignation. In the new grammar of dissidence that has been written by the Egyptian revolutionaries, narrating despair turns into resistance against violence. Noujaim eloquently represents people’s demands for democracy, freedom, social justice and political reform in January 2011. What characterizes her illustration of the glorious 18 days is the elegant blend of the language of politics with that of emotions, shedding light on the sentiments of inclusiveness and love that the revolution inspired among Egyptian people: “We found ourselves loving each other without realizing it. There were no Christians or Muslims,” declares Aida El Kashef, young filmmaker and co-founder of Mosireen, a major collective for civic journalism that was created during the revolution.

As it is stated in the title of the documentary, Noujaim’s narrative focuses on Tahrir Square. It is however clear that the young people involved in the revolution were thinking beyond this small and iconic space in downtown Cairo. Remembering February 11, 2011 Ahmed says: “We dreamed that one day all Egypt would have been like Tahrir

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Square". The dream crossed the borders of Egypt, and involved the Egyptian diasporas around the world, especially exiled activists, to whom Noujaim also gives voice. In a short interview, Hussam Abdallah, Khaled's father, is almost in tears when he declares: "We all worked for this, years, in exile and in Egypt".

In the documentary, moments of enthusiasm often give way to disillusion. In the spring of 2011 Egypt remained under emergency law, with the apparatus of the Mubarak's regime still in power. On the 9th of March the sit-in in Tahrir Square was brutally attacked, and 173 men and 17 women were arrested and taken to the Egyptian Museum and other locations, where severe torture and the so called "virginity tests" were imposed on them.[10] Noujaim assigns the testimony of this violent assault to one of the icons of the Egyptian Revolution, the singer Rami Essam. In the scenes of February, the young artist was joyously singing the collective happiness of the Egyptian people. In March, the same man is bed-ridden, narrating the violence and the humiliation his sore body underwent. The contradiction between the two scenes adds strength to his witness accounts of the security apparatus' brutality.

In *The Square*, state-run media are criticised for the way they covered the 9th of March clashes, and a need for independent media outlets is clearly expressed by the film protagonists. Ahmed says: "The battle is not just the rocks and the stones. The battle is in the images, the battle is in the stories". The film documents the birth of popular media, in particular that of the collective Mosireen.[11] The significance of this alternative narrative is immediately clear: "We must film everything and show them the truth. As long as there is a camera, the revolution will continue".

In the summer of 2011, six months after the start of the revolution, thousands were arrested and put under military trials, and protestors took back to the square to demand the end of military rule. But something changed since the early days. This time, the Square was not united anymore. The Muslim Brotherhood was using it to negotiate with the army. Also the revolutionary scene appeared now divided. On one side, there were those who, for fear of ending under military rule, wanted immediate elections. On the other, those who believed times were not mature yet, because the democratic political forces were not ready.[12] Noujaim seems to suggest that this disagreement reflected a generational gap, featuring a conversation between the journalist Mona Anis (pro elections) and Khaled Abdallah (against the elections). It became later evident that the army and the Brotherhood were two sides of the same coin: the counter-revolution. The first victims were the Copts in October 2011. Dedicating a nuanced and significant section of her documentary to the Maspero massacre, Noujaim describes it as a key chapter in the history of State violence and the unaccountability of its perpetrators.

On the Maspero corniche, on the 9th of October 2011, the army did not hesitate to run over defenceless people with their tanks. Noujaim includes in the documentary scenes from the massacre, the desperate tears of Mina Daniel's parents at his funeral, and human rights lawyer Ragia Omran's indignation, when the hospital refuses to perform autopsies on the victims. Watching *The Square* in April 2017, when the Egyptian president claims that the State wants to protect the Copts, and declares a three-month State of Emergency as a consequence of the Palm Sunday attacks, a number of questions come to mind. Isn't this the same leadership that, back then, ordered the massacre? Why, if "protecting the Coptic community" is a priority, has nobody been held accountable for the Maspero massacre? Maintaining and transmitting the memory of Maspero is more necessary today than ever, and Noujaim's documentary adds to building an archive of images and words[13] that contribute to historical justice in a context where juridical justice is not achievable yet.

Tension kept escalating until November 2011, when the battle exploded in Muhammad Mahmoud street: "This was war, not revolution," declares Ahmed. Here, Noujaim denounces the opportunism of the Muslim Brotherhood, and praises the civil forms of resistance, from the setting-up of field hospitals to the work of independent media, including the experience of Cinema Tahrir. The aim of building a revolutionary counter-narrative of the revolution continues to be a central part in *The Square*, where it is clear that the point of view that is endorsed is that of the revolutionaries.

The protagonists of *The Square* express scepticism toward the electoral process, both in the November 2011-January 2012 Parliamentary elections, and in the May 2012 Presidential elections: "We are stuck between a rock and a hard place," states Ahmed. The political scene was by then very difficult, and the weaknesses of democratic and secular activists in the square were mirrored by the weak position of secular and democratic politicians in the Parliament.[14]

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The political legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood was under question, and their crisis of legitimacy overlapped SCAF's (The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) numerous efforts to defeat the democratic forces. In June 2012, the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolving of the lower house of parliament. By the winter of 2012 the cleavages between the revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood, by then the governing power, became open hostility. The Muslim Brotherhood did not hesitate to mobilize their supporters to attack revolutionary protestors. Although legitimised by an electoral process, the Brotherhood lost popular consensus due to their incapacity to address substantial social and economic issues, their unwillingness to truly embrace democratic values, and their manipulation of sectarian and class tensions to create division. The second anniversary of the 2011 revolution was marked by popular demonstrations, which continued till the end of the year. In early June 2013, even the artists mobilized against the government, declaring a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Culture to demand the removal of the newly appointed minister, Alaa Abdel Aziz:

The intellectuals, writers and artists inside the ministry announce their rejection of the minister, appointed by the religious fascist regime, who has embarked on his plan to destroy national culture.[15]

Then, history underwent a dramatic acceleration, marked by the end of the alliance between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, which eventually led to the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi on July 3, 2013. The documentary covers all these phases and shows that the population initially welcomed Morsi's overthrowing. At that time, very few critical intellectuals openly expressed their concerns about the direct involvement of the army,[16] and their voices are not included in Noujaim's narrative. More broadly, an intellectual history of the Egyptian revolution is yet to be written and Noujaim's project is of another nature. The filmmaker focuses on the activists, and in the last scenes of the documentary her film shows the gap between electoral legitimacy and popular consensus in the days leading up to the 30th of June 2013 demonstrations.

Back then, the kaleidoscopic galaxy of politically conscious Egyptians, made of new social movements, old political activists and ordinary citizens, was well aware that the space for political action was shrinking. However, they continued to practice the Gramscian "optimism of the will" and to nourish hope for the fulfilment of the 2011 revolutions demands: Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice. People were failed by the regime, but they created a new way of thinking about politics. In Ahmed's words at the end of the documentary: they were "looking for creating a conscience among the people".

The Square and the battle over memory

The 2011 Egyptian revolution captured the cultural and political imagination of a generation. Intellectuals and activists who grew up studying post-colonial theories, who had Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2009) on their bedside table, and participated in the World Social Forums (since 2001) were inspired by the 18 Egyptian days. International social movements that flourished around the world in 2011 and 2012, from Occupy Wall Street, to Podemos, Siriza, Taksim Square and even the Jasmin Revolution in China were all stirred by the wind of hope blown from Egypt in January 2011.[17]

Jehane Noujaim belongs to this generation, and her narrative of the 2011 Egyptian revolution shows the collective political aspirations for social justice of the Egyptian revolutionaries and their international counterparts. It is not surprising that the documentary was welcomed by overwhelming applause at its first release in January 2013.

The Square has the merit of giving names and faces to what are generally conceived as abstract categories, such as secular, leftists and Islamists. For instance, the experience of Magdy Ashour deconstructs simplistic readings of Islamists' political activism, showing the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership, which betrays the revolution, and the revolutionaries who are affiliated to the organization, but who share with the seculars the dream of social justice. The documentary follows the trajectory of its protagonists, the relationship between politics and friendship that they developed during the revolution and beyond political affiliation, bringing into the picture also the voices of prominent activists who campaigned for democracy under the Mubarak regime (Bothaina Kamel),[18] intellectuals (Mona Anis), and human rights lawyers (Ragia Omran). The voices of secular and democratic activists are mostly unknown to the Western audience. Those voices, especially women's, are commonly neglected in the

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Western narratives of Egyptian politics, unless they explicitly focus on gender related issues. Western media are not interested in Egyptian women who do not conform to the Orientalist stereotypes of “subjugation”. Bringing to the silver screen the voices and faces of these three high profile women intellectual and activists, Noujaim successfully bridges a gap in the international discussion about gender and women. Although the documentary does not explicitly engage with women’s protagonism in the 2011 revolution, the presence of these three characters suggests the relevance of women’s political activism, a theme which deserves further development, both in political science scholarship (which outside the feminist studies field tends to be gender blind) and in the broader cultural sphere.

A lot has been written on the events that led from the popular uprising to the military coup. Less attention has been devoted to the ways Egyptian activists experienced this troubled process, something that can best be analysed through studying politics from a bottom-up and humanistic perspective. Cultural productions, not only documentaries, but also feature films, theatre plays, visual art, novels, and essays are essential sources for scholars who approach politics as an integral part of life of every human being. *The Square* is a gemstone in this wide corpus of sources, and the history of its success should be contextualized in the historical moment of its release. At a moment when the new regime was trying to define the coup as a new phase in the revolution, *The Square* played the fundamental function of remembering to the international audience what the 2011 revolution was, translating the ideas, the hopes and the projects of its protagonists. Thanks to its timely release, to the high quality of the production, and its heartfelt approach to the history of the 18 days that changed the perception of politics of an entire generation, *The Square* was labelled as “the documentary” on the 2001 Egyptian Revolution, immediately capturing the attention of a broad international audience.

One year later, its revised version, which included shooting of scenes from the 30th of June’s oceanic demonstrations, the dramatic aftermath of the military coup and the dispersal of the Morsi supporters’ sit in, was nominated for the Oscar.

Three years after *The Square*’s first release, the political situation in Egypt is tragic. The most serious crisis of human rights is underway, and is met with the cynical indifference of Western governments and their diplomats. The State can’t face the economic challenges, especially youth unemployment and social inequality.[19] Security against terrorist attacks is claimed as a priority and the main reason for policing people, but, in fact, security remains a mirage. Even among the Coptic clergy, who are traditionally complaisant with the regime, some voices have started to be critical.[20]

Watching and screening *The Square* in 2017, in the days when Mubarak is acquitted of complicity in the killings of hundreds of protesters during the 2011 uprising, is a political act of resistance. In a country where the judiciary claims that “nothing happened”, a documentary like *The Square* is there to remind us that, indeed, something important happened. If on one side the “voice of the law” is there to support the political power in its effort to wipe out the memory of the revolution from history, on the other, film directors, writers and, more broadly, artists, offer a compelling counter-narrative that pays justice to the victims of state violence and, far from being instrumental and consolatory, is empowering and subversive.

“The holes of oblivion do not exist” writes Arendt in the last pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be ‘practically useless’, at least, not in the long run.[21]

The Square needs to be read as part of a broader corpus of works by Arab film directors who critically engage with politics and history, and claim the right to narrate history from the margins of the political power, shedding light on micro-histories and individual experiences.

For this reason, not only arts and cinema studies scholars, but also social scientists show growing interest in films and, more broadly cultural productions as a site of performance for the new civic activism.[22]

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In times of severe repression of all forms of political activism, the arts play the crucial role of keeping memory alive, empowering people and inspiring subversion. For all these reasons, we can certainly affirm that, yes, six years on, it is still worth it to see *The Square*, and to remember that, yes, something happened.

It is indeed true: "The good things in history are usually of very short duration.....".

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[2] Giorgio Agamben, *Stato d'Eccezione* (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003)

[3] The historian Margot Badran has elaborated the concept of uniformed patriarchy in the context of the Egyptian revolution. Margot Badran, "Dis/playing power and the politics of patriarchy in revolutionary Egypt: the creative activism of Huda Lutfi", *Postcolonial Studies* 17, n.1 (2014): 47-62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.912188>

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[5] Rabab el Mahdi and Philippe Marphlet (eds.), *Egypt. The Moment of Change* (London: Zed Book, 2009).

[6] The human rights activist and scholar, Heba Morayef, dates the birth of the Egyptian human rights community in 1985, when the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights was established. At that time, the community was composed by about 19 organizations which were members of the informal Forum of Independent Egyptian Human Rights NGOs. Morayef documents the trajectory of the community under the Mubarak regime, when its members were constantly threatened, during the Egyptian revolution, were they had more operational space and visibility, to the present day, when human rights activists are the main target of travel bans, freezing of assets, and military trials. Heba Morayef, "Reexamining Human Rights Change in Egypt", *MERIP Report*, 45 (2015) <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer274/reexamining-human-rights-change-egypt>

[7] The pioneer of the Egyptian human rights movement, Ahmed Seif, served five years of jail from 1983; the human rights activist Hafez Abou Saada was condemned in 1998; the sociologist Saadeddine Ibrahim in 2000, the politician Ayman Nour in 2005

[8] Amro Ali, "Seeds of Revolution. De-mythologizing Khaled Said", *Jadaliyya*, 5 June 2012. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5845/saeeds-of-revolution_de-mythologizing-khaled-saeed

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[11] http://mosireen.org/?page_id=6

[12] In a detailed analysis of Egypt's secular political parties, Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy underline the historical role of the State in creating the condition for the electoral success of the Islamist coalitions against the seculars: "Caught in the crossfire between a state dominated by the military/security apparatus and an opposition dominated by Islamists, secular parties have struggled to define coherent identities as well as to build bases of support and funding". Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy, *Egypt's Secular Political Parties. A Struggle for Identity and Independence*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017: 11. The authors also acknowledge that the 2011-2013 period represented an unprecedented opening of the political space and that secular parties had compromised themselves since the Sadat era: "Egypt's secular parties were often criticized as being elitist, internally undemocratic, financially corrupt, and unwilling to do the hard work of building real constituencies outside the country's major cities. Once politics opened up after 2011, secular parties also took actions that undermined their credibility and the democratic opening they claimed to prize" *ibid.* p. 19

[13] Alaa Abd El Fattah, "Living with the martyrs", *Mada Masr*, 10 October 2014 (First published in *al-Shourouk*, 20 October 2011). Available from: <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/politics/living-martyrs>: Hani Atallah, "Remembering those who were slain", *Mada Masr*, 9 October 2014,

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[21] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the Banality of Evil* (NY, Penguin Books: 2006. First edition, 1963): 232-233

[22] In a recent report published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Hafsa Halawa writes: "Arab film directors recently have become more politically vocal and garnered international recognition, including Sara Ishaq for her film *Karama Has No Walls* and Jehane Noujaim for her film *The Square*. Hafsa, Halawa. "Egypt and the Middle East: Adapting to Tragedy", in Richard Youngs (ed.), *Global Civic Activism in Flux*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 March 2017. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/03/17/global-civic-activism-in-flux-pub-68301#top-content>

About the author:

Lucia Sorbera is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Arabic Language and Cultures and Kathleen Fitzpatrick Research Fellow in the Laureate Program in International History at the University of Sydney. Her main area of research expertise focuses on women and gender in Egyptian cultural and political history. She has recently published in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought* (2016); *Post-Colonial Studies* (2014) and *Genesis, The Journal of the Italian Society of Women's Historians* (2013). In 2015 she curated the Arab Women Film Festival at the University of Sydney. Since 2016 she has been a guest curator with Paola Caridi of Arab Souls, a program focusing on Arab Literature and Cultures at the International Torino Book Fair.