Review – The People Are Not an Image

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The People Are Not an Image: Vernacular Video after the Arab Spring
By Peter Snowdon
Verso Books, 2020

A decade on from the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011, scholar and filmmaker Peter Snowdon compels us to rethink the very texture and operative functions of amateur videos produced by citizens and activists on smartphones. In service of this mission, Snowdon asks us to reflect on the videos he presents not as documentary artefacts, but as aesthetic gestures and living archives of radical political change that take on new life forms as they continue to circulate online. *The People Are Not an Image* extends the groundwork of Snowdon's 2013 film project The Uprising, which is a montage of online videos produced and posted to the internet by the frontline actors of the Arab uprisings from 2011 to 2012. In this book, Snowdon revisits his source material through a close and critical reading of videos produced during uprisings in Tunisia, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and Egypt and uploaded to YouTube. As Snowdon unfolds the matter of these videos, he reframes his earlier work to argue that the claims and experiences embedded within the videos cannot be simply understood as documents of eyewitness testimony. Rather, for Snowdon, these videos constitute the plurality of their collective subject: "the people" (p.5). This is the recurrent argument that Snowdon develops throughout the book. Snowdon deliberates on a selection of videos as affective modalities, as spaces of appearance and co-presence, that render possible the coming together of the plural subject, the we. The we, as revolutionary actors, are rendered perceivable and are enacted through collective claims made via third-person perspective, that is, the people of the revolution.

The main project of the book is to comprehend the ways these videos transcend the individual to affirm the collective. In this quest, Snowdon surfaces the dynamic character of videos as discursive artefacts that have material effects and that circulate performatively within transnational relations of exchange and emerge and re-emerge as politically productive forces. He terms the corpus of videos produced by Arab revolutionaries as the vernacular anarchive (p.18). Snowdon's deployment of the term "anarchive" is a portmanteau that blends anarchy with archive to deliberately distance his scholarship from dominant Western narrative understandings of the archive as being representative of static repositories of the past, and to reorient to the interventional, instrumental, and insurgent functions of the videos and their agentic potential. The vernacular anarchive, then, operates as a living or performing archive of the people as well as the people as an archive that exists in a symbiotic relationship. That is, the vernacular anarchive reconstitutes the people a communicative ecology within the YouTube infrastructure that links common resources and concrete practices of living together with common relations for being and imagining emancipatory futures. For Snowdon, the videos contained with the vernacular anarchive are always already in the process of becoming as they open out within the YouTube ecosystem and onto other spaces at other times to take on new revolutionary functions and political possibilities.

The book's theoretical provocations about political possibility are developed from philosophers including Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, and Gilles Deleuze, and the dimensions of revolutionary experience are narrativised through the work of Arab intellectuals, activists, and artists including Mohammed Bamyeh, Ayman El-Desouky, Ahdaf Soueif, and Taher Chikhaoui, among others. Its empirical claims are grounded in close critical analyses of a selection of videos from the vernacular anarchive, the corpus of which are available on a companion Vimeo channel. The People Are Not an Image is structured in two parts. The first – The Body of the People – comprises five chapters that

disentangle and examine the bodily intimacy of videos that invoke new vernacular life worlds of the people (through their haptic, tactile-kinesthetic qualities) as they appear to each other and as they are received by us in our conscious experience. The thread Snowdon explores through these chapters are the material conditions through which these videos are produced by bodies filming from behind cameras and within spaces of action, and which are then translated into the moving images we see as they playback to us. The complex convergence of embodied practices and digital affordances, those that emerge between bodily and machinic operations, simultaneously reveal and obscure ways of seeing the people. Snowdon's analysis reveals the felt dimensions of embodied, subjective experience through which these videos offer a new realm of presentation. It is within the multisensorial space of these videos that revolutionary bodies appear in their full vulnerability and finitude. These videos thus are understood by Snowdon as spaces of transformation that translate the matter of precarious and violated life, the flesh and blood of slain and struggling bodies, from their bodily materiality, into an imagined bodily co-presence that forces we, as the audience, to take up and confront the limits of our mortality as embodied spectators.

In the second part of the book – Video as a Critical Utopia – Snowdon turns his attention to another strand of the vernacular anarchive to inspect the way the people emerge into appearance through videos and to consider how assemblages of videos emerge to produce a new regime of visibility. This section, deliberated across five chapters, is organised around the particular forms, rhythmic texture, and radical capacity of videos to redistribute authority, collectively appropriate space, and (re)spatialise protest through levels and layers of common visibility enacted through online spaces, and offline in urban streets and squares. Snowdon explores the unprompted relationship that materialises between the cameraperson and the people, as subjects and as objects of the camera's vision. In doing so he finds episodes of discursive rupture where the people speak through the camera as an instrument of collective voice and revolutionary action. He demonstrates how the vernacular anarchive produces the people as a dynamic collective that emerges to (re)articulate what can now be seen, and said, around who has the capacity to speak and who has access to the properties of vernacular space through which these claims are made visible. Snowdon refers to this phenomenon as "spontaneous mutual choreography" (p.137). The circulation of the vernacular anarchive on YouTube then exists as a collective struggle for visibility and challenge to dominant regimes of visibility. As collective resonance forms among and between the videos it gives way to a space that enables for the extension of political possibilities and the performative capacities of the people. In this way, Snowdon orients us to an understanding of the vernacular anarchive as a space that renders visible and sensible what was previously invisible and makes possible the production of a new political subject: the people. That is, the actors of the Arab uprisings engendered new forms of collectivity that emerged between bodies, spaces, and voices, and that marked a radical shift to the sectarian and religious contours of past political movements. This collectivism gave way to a new politics of self-organised citizenry that reclaimed and expanded the notion of Arab citizenship as the necessary foundation for a radical re-imagining of the people as a new political subjectivity.

Despite acknowledging the terrain of discontent through which the people are constituted, Snowdon does not afford sustained consideration to the long histories of oppression and condemnation that underpinned the uprisings. Snowdon nods to the role of YouTube's algorithms as visibility mediators and orchestrators of these videos, as a type of "Occupy YouTube" (p.20). Yet, the book's weakness is that it does not speak directly to the algorithmic forms of the videos as sociotechnical complexes. That is, the book largely avoids locating its discussions within a critical reflection and contextual rendering of the histories of online censorship in the region and the human rights implications of YouTube as space for surveillance capitalism (see Shoshana Zuboff and Jillian York). The strength of Snowdon's project is that it reshapes the political imaginary of his reader, thereby working against the notion that these uprisings failed in their revolutionary quest. To do this, Snowdon asks the reader to think through the fragile qualities of the videos – as their technical surface becomes compromised through their remixing and reuploading online – and the material vulnerability of the bodies that produce and participate in the videos. From this, he argues these videos serve as indexical markers that are predicated on new forms of shared vulnerability and solidarity. Importantly, they offer new modalities of action to emerge, across borders and between people, and that do so in radical ways that move beyond the disservices of oppressive governments and international failings.

Many of the claims Snowdon makes about the mediated nature of the uprisings, for example, as being embodied, affective, and collective are not new. However, Snowdon's mission here is not to necessarily make new claims about the nature of protests. Rather, Snowdon is asking us to re-evaluate these videos as vernacular devices, as sensorial

presentations of lived experiences and gestures of citizenry resistance against repressive regimes, and to consider their radical texture and what they make possible. In doing this, Snowdon builds on already articulated understandings of the radical nature of the protests that took place across the Middle East and North Africa region by other scholars. In this vein, Snowdon charts a project that places his work in conversation with other scholars like Lina Khatib (2012, p.1) who contends that politics in the Middle East is now not only heard but seen. The work of Elisa Adami (2016, p.71), analyses the visual language of the protests and traces their material conditions. And Marwan Kraidy (2016, p.12), warns against technological determinism in place of acknowledging how insurgent bodies interact with digital technologies to construct a language that becomes the rhetoric of the revolution.

The People Are Not an Image has significance for scholars but will also find wider audience appeal with, for example, digital media activists, film makers, and human rights advocates. It will be especially relevant to digital media and communication scholars and students with an interest in activism, social movements, and visual politics. Ultimately, The People Are Not an Image charts a utopian, but not naïve, conceptualisation of the people in its mission to tell and show a different story about what seeing the people means and can be. It creates the conditions for another kind of politics to emerge and makes possible the imagination of alternative futures.

References

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