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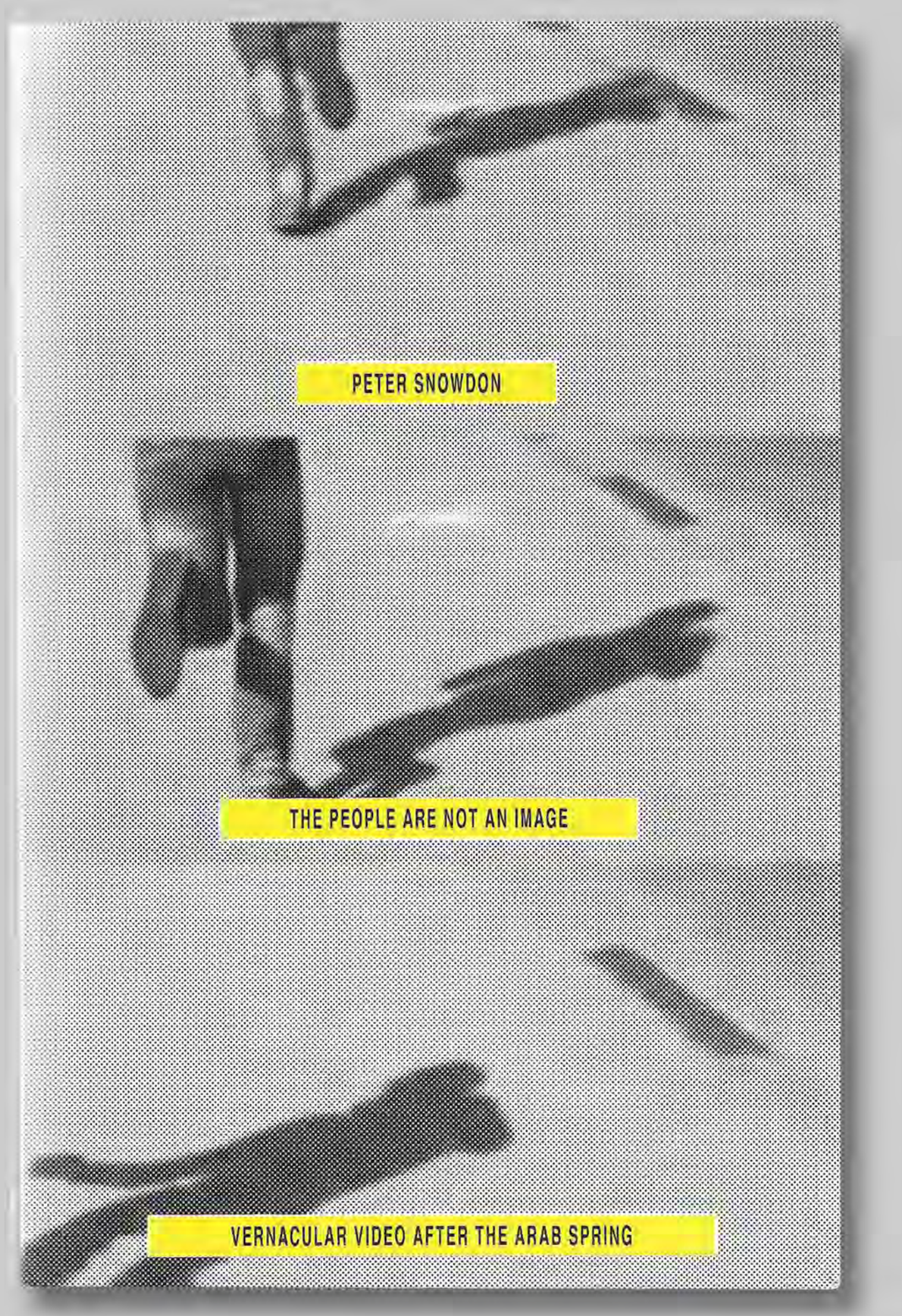

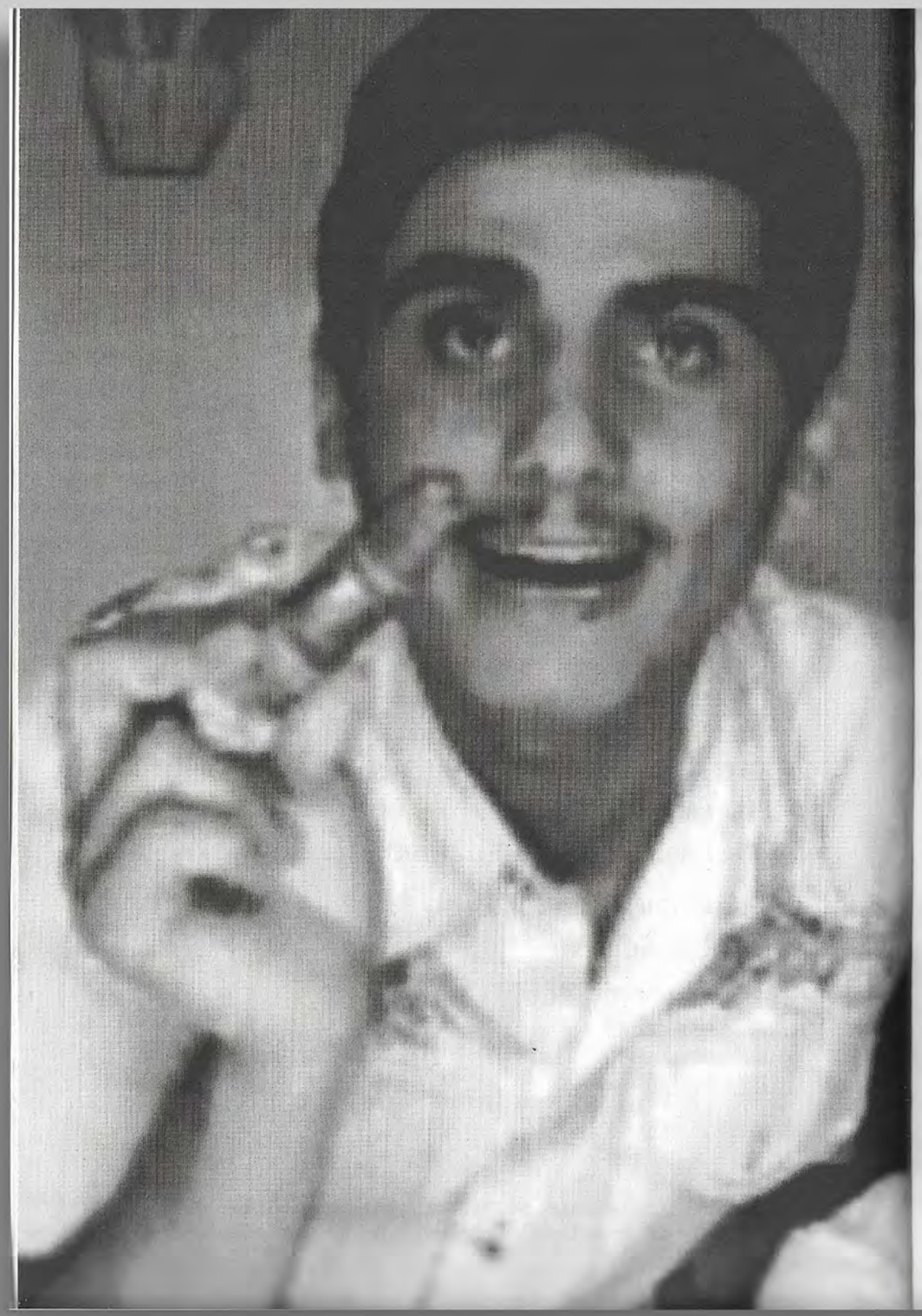

Introduction

Video as a Vernacular

Filming in the First-Person Plural

Not the least extraordinary thing about the Arab revolutions of 2010–12 is the fact that they gave rise to an exercise in popular self-documentation on an unprecedented scale. In this, they have an obvious precursor in the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, which might be considered an outlier within the same series, a first tremor announcing the larger earthquake to come.[1]

This ongoing sequence marks the first time since the invention of the cinema that the people have not largely left it to experts, professionals, and outsiders to film their attempts to overthrow an oppressive order, but have instead seen it as part and parcel of their revolutionary action, even as part of their revolutionary duty, to film one another as together they made and unmade history, day in and day out.

For the viewer, the result has been an almost overwhelming proliferation of material, made accessible in quasi-real time through online video-sharing websites. These videos do not simply sit there on YouTube, either, waiting for us to stumble on them: they are

Still frame from video posted to YouTube by 5000zukoo, September 21, 2011. To view, and for more information, go to vimeo.com/channels/thepeoplearenot, video 0.1.

always already in circulation, posted and reposted on Twitter and Facebook, as well as being passed on through more private communications channels, such as e-mail or various messaging apps. They are not static objects waiting to be discovered and analyzed: they are fully subsumed within a much larger dynamic process, in which what matters most is not any specific video itself, so much as the energy (both physical and affective) that they gather and transmit as they travel through the complex online–offline ecosystems these events have carved out across the region and beyond. These videos are, then, not primarily videos, so much as one vector among many for the ongoing work of mutual self-mobilization that makes radical political change possible, or at least, conceivable.

This double character, matching massive volume with high velocity, makes this phenomenon even harder to pin down—if indeed it makes any sense to refer to these videos as a single phenomenon at all. After all, no single viewer, however dedicated, is ever likely to be able to view enough of these videos to establish with reasonable confidence what might constitute any given sample of them as "representative." At the same time, one does not have to watch so many of them before coming across one or more that do not simply *record* events that were (or aspired to be) significant or even exceptional, but that also *produce* an exceptional effect upon the viewer, even when that viewer is remote, unfamiliar with the context, and has little or no prior emotional connection with the content.

In this book, I set out to explore some of the effects produced by certain of these videos and which are specific to them *as video*, however much they may remind us of experiences we have encountered elsewhere, whether offline or in other types of media. And I argue that these effects, and the affects associated with them, are, above all, *political*. More specifically, I suggest that the political work that these videos do—both those that strike us as exceptional and those which we are more inclined to treat as unremarkable, as almost too "ordinary" to merit any specific attention—is effected not simply through the documentation of offline events (demonstrations, occupations, speeches, songs, poems, debates, arguments,

confrontations, acts of State repression, and deaths, to name but a few) and thus through the information about the world "away from keyboard" that they inevitably contain, but is indissolubly bound up with their *aesthetic* properties as video—that is, with those of their properties that are at once *both* sensory *and* formal.

To speak of the aesthetics of these videos, whether singly or as a group, is not to ignore their importance as human documents and/or political gestures, to reduce them to an object of disinterested "appreciation," or to trivialize the very real risks that those who made them took, and often—too often—paid for with their lives. Rather, it is to focus on their nature as *gestures*—that is, as concrete ways of carving out singular blocks of perceptible, sensible space–time, each of which is imprinted with its own specific dynamic character. Alongside the more obvious reasons contained in their subject matter which may have led them to be recorded and subsequently posted on the Internet in the first place, these videos also contain a wealth of information that can neither be mapped without remainder onto their explicit first-order message ("On such and such a date, in such and such a place, such and such an event happened"), nor dismissed as mere "noise." To ignore the formal-kinetic-affective dynamics that traverse them and single them out for us, the viewer, is, I would argue, to ignore that which is most irreplaceable and most valuable about them and so risk misconstruing what they have to tell us about one of the most important recent passages in the history of human emancipation.

If I insist on the sensory and kinetic qualities of these videos, it is because the videos themselves insist on them. They are above all exercises in the concrete, and as such, acts of resistance against the kinds of abstraction that characterize both the practice of government and certain species of intellectual discourse. Their rebelliousness lies, at least in part, in their disdain for legibility, intelligibility, and/or "context." They do not offer etiologies, genealogies, or any other type of rationalization. They do not explain, much less explain away. They are presentations rather than representations. They are committed to appearance as a space of action in and for its own sake, not as something to be decoded or demystified. The strategies of the regime, the arguments of journalists, the

blandishments of false friends—these may need to be exposed and unmasked. But while they are aware of the functions of critique and distance, they do not make a fetish of them, for their main work is elsewhere. Their subject is not "them," even as "they" send their troops and riot police in to crush us. Their subject, in both senses of the term, is "us." If they try to articulate anything, to understand anything, it is simply how it has come about that a moment before there was nothing, and now there is a "we."

But to say they try to understand this "we" is also to miss the point. What runs through all these videos, I believe, is this sense of the "we," of the first-person plural, *not* as the thing that is most difficult to understand, but as that which is most immediately given, most obvious, most concrete—as that which cannot be analyzed, but can only be accepted and assumed. In the following pages I will try to add color and texture to that "we" as the subject of video, but on some level, I cannot analyze it or explain it either, without reducing it to what it is not. The whole point of this first-person plural is its originary quality. You can bring together as many "I"s as you like, and you will still never make a "we." For, as Jean-Luc Nancy has proposed, it is "we" who are, not the consequence, but the starting point.[2]

This "we" is not simply a ghostly presence haunting the individual with the camera. This "we" is, in some sense, both the actor of these revolutions and the maker of these videos. It is also their audience, including not only those close to these events, but also those who can only view them from a distance. The progressive convergence of these three categories, though never finally exhausted, represents an ideal limit toward which these videos tend.

This plural, anonymous, impersonal dynamic traverses these videos and the people who make them, shaping them from within. In this way, it is able to resist what Dork Zabunyan has described as "the danger that threatens all the images produced by revolutionary action, and by the periods that follow," namely,

> that the figure of the hero may be used to control the memory of these struggles, and deprive these actions of their true power. For their power is the power of the impersonal, which cannot be pinned down, nor reduced to the tranquillizing identification of a single name that excludes all other names.[3]

It is through their insistently first-person plural vision of these revolutions that these videos remind us, more perhaps than any other media, that all the other figures we encounter—figures of the individual, figures of the collective as structure or aggregation—exist only insofar as they emerge provisionally from this "we" and are liable at any moment to be folded back into it.

Video as Common Property

To say "we," however, is not the end of the matter. What is revolutionary in the first-person plural is not simply its grammatical form or some sort of inherent superiority of the first-person "perspective," which might easily collapse into an idealistic (and sentimental) subjectivism. As Jacques Rancière has argued, to say "we" becomes a revolutionary act when the empirical "we"—the limited group of people whose actual coming together makes the existence of such a plural subject plausible—cease to speak only on their own behalf and instead claim to speak on behalf of everyone. In the phrases "we the people" (as in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution), or "we are the people" (as was heard among the demonstrators in Leipzig in 1989), what is revolutionary is neither the "we" nor "the people," but the conjunction of the two.[4] In such a moment, the people ceases to be an abstraction constructed by the State for its own legitimation and becomes instead a concrete lived reality, even if that reality has no substance beyond the refusal of "them"—or indeed, the refusal of abstraction per se, as the form of the process which has created "them" as separate from (and superior to) "us."

This collision of the "we" and "the people" can be heard implicitly in the emblematic phrase of the Arab revolutions,

al-sha'b yurid—the people want. The very fact that "the people" was assumed by the crowds in the street as their own name represented a claim that went far beyond what their simple numbers might have merited alone. (However large those crowds, they were far from ever constituting a numerical majority of the population.) The "we" of these videos then has to be seen and understood in relation to "the people"—that is, to the *third-person* perspective in which the experience and claims of the first person are not simply restated but radically transformed. They are no longer the experience and claims of one person or of the small group of us gathered here this afternoon: they are, as Agustín García Calvo would put it, the experience and the claims of *all of us*.[5]

How do these videos—these visions—affirm and, at the same time, move beyond and outside the first-person singular perspective within which they might seem to be confined, if only for purely material-technical reasons (for how can more than one person hold the same camera at the same time)? This question will form a constant theme throughout this book. For the moment, I want to point to one simple fact: these videos already transcend the perspective of the empirical individual who made them (supposing that they were ever so limited) *at the moment when they are uploaded to the Internet*.

By uploading them, the filmer (or the filmer's intermediary) is not simply "sharing" the videos, in the limited "Web 2.0" sense of the verb. As the Lebanese performer Rabih Mroué has put it in his "non-academic lecture" *The Pixelated Revolution*, these videos are uploaded not as individual expressive statements but *as common property*.[6] Whichever individual may have happened to be standing in such and such a place at such and such a time to make this film, the videos that result from all these countless individual actions belong not to those individuals, considered separately, but to "us." If there is a concept of authorship in play here, it is a collective authorship. The self-evidence with which videos are not only remixed but also downloaded, reuploaded (with or without acknowledgment of the "original"),

and generally recirculated as if they were words in a common language, rather than specific authored enunciations, is further reinforced by the essential state of *anonymity* in which they exist. As Zabunyan puts it, these images are "impersonal, they have no signature."[7] The fact that we generally do not know, and do not need to know, who made the video cannot be reduced either to a political tactic to evade identification and reprisal or to an accident of the architecture of YouTube at a time when users were still encouraged to use pseudonyms ("handles") rather than their "real names." The desire for *strategic* anonymity (which is undeniable, especially in the case of videos from Syria and Bahrain) appears, through these videos, as entirely continuous with the *experiential* anonymity of the person who made them: the impulse to "escape from visibility" is, as the Invisible Committee puts it, indistinguishable from "the joy of being no one."[8] To upload confirms and extends the experience of filming as, in Giorgio Agamben's terminology, a gesture of *self-destitution*, in terms of both property and identity.[9] The "liberation" of these videos into a larger ecosystem in which their circulation and use cannot be controlled implies consent to what is already obvious: these videos do not and cannot belong (legally) to the person who may happen to have "made" them, because they belong (morally) to all those who make the revolution.

What makes the revolution the revolution, then, is in part the coincidence of these two perspectives, the first-person perspective of "we" and the third-person perspective of "the people," through which that "we" becomes (even if only experimentally and provisionally) "all of us." And it is through this coincidence that the concreteness of our own personal experience is allied with the properly political claims that imply an external point of view—that require us, that is, *to assume a position*, not *within* an existing distribution of places, powers, and competences, but in relation to, and in resistance *against*, that very distribution as a given.

The Demonstration Is the *Dhikr*

The sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh captures very well the interplay of external and internal perspectives that characterizes the lived present of the revolutionary moment:

> Concepts that had been previously unimaginable or abstract became in the revolutionary climate concrete. That which was immeasurable as the manifestation of a collective became felt as the property of the person. One of those concepts, "the people," was used so profusely in ways that suggest that it was felt to be a natural and organic extension of one's own sense of truth and justice. The novelty (as well as rarity and passing nature) of feeling an abstraction as "the people" was evident in how it was used everywhere and without compulsion as a namesake of what everyone assumed to be intuitively true: "the people have decided ...," "the people want ...," "the people will not be humiliated ...," "the will of the people is ...," and so on. These usages were never expressed in terms of any precise mechanisms —i.e. how the people might translate its will into a policy, or even whether a revolutionary committee ought to be formed, somehow, so as to express this peoplehood efficiently. In Tahrir Square, where I spent the majority of my time during the first five weeks of the Egyptian revolution, I saw that peoplehood was usually used to express what were commonly regarded as intuitive propositions about which there existed a presumed social consensus. It was never used to express complex or presumably divisive theories of social order. Even "Islam" was never used then in any way that was synonymous with peoplehood.[10]

The result is a sense of "the people" that is no longer simply a referent for the top–down discourse of the State, but which instead embodies the lived experience of those gathered together in this place. At the same time, the first-person perspective is no longer something irremediably personal to the individual; rather, it is experienced as the indispensable point of access through which they are able to participate in a larger circulation of

revolutionary energy, one which reinforces the perceived necessity of their own particular actions to that larger movement that traverses them:

> In that way, the revolutions drew sustenance, energy, determination, and the will to sacrifice largely out of a broadly distributed moral fire in individual psyches than out of organizational or hierarchical command structures. For "the people" appeared as a macrocosm of the single revolutionary person, who then experienced herself directly as the agent of a grand moment in history.[11]

Bamyeh's analysis here chimes with that of Ayman El-Desouky, who sees in the Egyptian revolution the emergence of a specifically "resonant" form of subjectivity, in which acts of public assembly perform a kind of "mass attunement" between "*placed* subjectivities that are both singular and collective."[12] And like Bamyeh, he sees the possibility of such emergent forms of plurality to be rooted in a consciousness of shared values and practices that distinguish the people from those who would rule over them and which legitimate the claim of the few to speak in the name of all: "When the people speak their own truth, collectively, what they produce is the linguistic, gestured and performed articulations, embodied memories, of their shared knowledge." Such speech is "a collective expressive force that is at once an aesthetic of resonance and an ethic of solidarity."[13]

El-Desouky refers to such "socially-cementing" practices—which are both used to express a set of shared values, and *themselves enact those values* in their rhythmic and resonant forms—as *amāra*, a specifically Egyptian practice of performing collective memory in everyday life. I examine the concept of *amāra* in more detail in chapter 8, where I consider what it may have to tell us specifically about the practice and circulation of video through the online spaces opened up by these revolutions. Here, I want to note how El-Desouky's argument converges with that of Bamyeh in pointing to the Arab revolutions as marked by the emergence into the public realm of "new languages and

new modes of knowing" that were "new to the discourses but older to the realities."[14]

This emergent knowledge is what Bamyeh terms an "anarchist gnosis," which he equates with the ways of living and acting of an autonomous civil society existing largely outside and independent of the State.[15] While some might see this as a radical rupture with the past, Bamyeh interprets it rather as the rediscovery of older values and older ways of living with one another. This leads him to suppose that "some connection between innovation and rootedness must be suspected even where it is emphatically denied":

> The traditional systems of multiple loyalties (which integrated in practical and useful ways the multiple resources available through tribal belonging, guild membership, religious order affiliations, urban patronage, and mutual help networks) supplied the sufficient basis of a self-organized civic order for centuries, while insuring that no specific group intruded too much upon another—until the emergence of the modern state. Elements of that old civic order appear to have sustained themselves even after modern, authoritarian states devoted all their resources to magnifying state power over society in the name of enlightenment. Yet, the persistence of elements of the old civic ethics can be evidenced in the revolutionary styles themselves: the spontaneity of the revolutions as an extension of the already familiar spontaneity of everyday life; revolutionary solidarity, out of which emerges the will to sacrifice and combat, as an extension of common, convivial solidarity in neighborhoods and towns; distrust of distant authorities as part of an old, rational and enlightened common attitude, based on the simple thesis that a claim to help or guide is unverifiable in proportion to the power and distance of the authority that makes it; and finally, nonviolence as a strategy learned not out of a manual written at Harvard, but as rooted in familiar and old habits of protest and conflict management.[16]

To these participant–observers, the Arab revolutions thus appear in a way similar to that in which the Paris Commune appeared to Marx, namely (in Kristin Ross's phrase) as "a mode of being intensely in the present made possible by mobilizing figures and phrases from the past."[17]

And the interest among both intimate and more distant observers in teasing out these lineages through which the past permeates and *radicalises* the present parallels the way in which Marx went on after 1871 to accelerate his study of Russian communal forms, thus descending "from pure theory to Russian reality" and learning, as he put it, to "not be frightened of the word 'archaic.'"[18]

Specific examples of "Arab realities" through which we can see how the figures of the past were mobilized in order to make the present possible are widespread in the emerging literature on the Arab revolutions. Sahar Keraitim and Samia Mehrez, for example, have argued that

> the vital inspirational and organizational sources for the tactics and strategies of life in Midan al-Tahrir during the initial days of the revolution, and well beyond, was precisely the historic familiarity of the millions of people who came to the *midan* with the extended and elaborate rituals and festivities of the popular *mulid* celebrations … . [For them] the *mulid* spectacle in the Independent Republic of Tahrir became not just a mobilizing factor but a radicalizing one… . Egyptians marshaled and deployed a myriad of specifically familiar cultural rituals, symbols, and performative aspects of the *mulid* to nurture and maintain the utopian space that they gradually constructed in the *midan*, the symbolic site of the birth of their freedom (*tahrir*).[19]

Such phenomena are of course by no means exclusive to Egypt. The French writer Jonathan Littell's account of his visit to the besieged Syrian city of Homs during the winter of 2012 insists on the way in which the nightly gatherings that bound the rebel populations together under the violent onslaught of the regime's forces not only drew on similar traditions of popular celebration

—again, like the *mulid*, associated with Sufism rather than with more mainstream or institutionalized practices of Islam—but that they were explicitly seen by the participants as inspired by these rituals even as they repurposed them. As one of his informants tells him, quite straightforwardly: "The demonstration is a *dhikr*," referring to the central Sufi ritual of praise that involves both song or chanting and rhythmical bodily movement.[20] And as Littell's description shows, it is indeed a *dhikr*, albeit one that has been secularized and in the process turned into a directly revolutionary ritual. Like *mulid al-Tahrir*, and like the Paris Commune that itself referred back to the revolutionary commune of 1792, as well as to older forms of local civic autonomy that had characterized premodern France, the *dhikr* of the Syrian opposition is not just a repetition of a preexisting form, but its *translation*.[21]

The Arab revolutions have thus been marked by a dual phenomenon of vernacularization. On the one hand, they have seen the emergence into public space of a whole range of vernacular practices of everyday life that perform the function of what El-Desouky calls a "cementing social imaginary."[22] The profoundly ethical orientation of these practices serves to give those who recognize themselves in them a sense of their own "profound self-worth that [stands] in sharp contrast to undeserved rule by petty thieves, dour autocrats, and visionless, ineffective functionaries," as Bamyeh puts it.[23] On the other hand, the visibility of these practices has in large part been made possible by the simultaneous emergence of a range of twenty-first-century grassroots vernacular media practices, of which the video practices to be discussed here are exemplary. Connected to these virtual channels, the everyday lived dimension of these revolutions has been able to spill out beyond the immediate confines of the street and the square, evading the censorship and/or ideological distortions of the mainstream and official media. They thus become visible, not only in Cairo or Sana'a or Redeyef or Dera'a, but anywhere there is an Internet connection and a screen (including in the many parts of those countries, and even of those same cities, where these demonstrations must at times have seemed as remote and as exotic as they did to those watching from abroad).

It is this convergence—between concrete practices of living embedded in the customs and idioms of specific places and specific communities and the emerging grassroots media practices that multiply and disseminate them, extending and enlarging their resonance beyond their specific time and place in ways that simultaneously exceed and confirm the limits of the local—that makes it possible, I believe, to speak of the video practices I will be discussing here as themselves genuinely *vernacular*. For what marks them and differentiates them from the vast majority of what elsewhere has been referred to as vernacular online video is not just that they are produced by "amateurs" outside any perspective of institutional recognition or financial gain.[24] If they are vernacular, it is also in this deeper sense that they are an integral part of the wider vernacular life worlds that the Arab revolutions have drawn on in order to lay claim to (and in the process redefine) political agency and the public domain. These videos, that is, are not just documents of vernacular practices that preexist them; nor are they vernacular simply by virtue of their artisanal conditions of production. They *perform* the vernacular in their own forms, too. They *enact* its ethics of solidarity through the rhythms they create and in the patterns of resonance they themselves initiate, and in so doing they *reinvent* and resignify the traditions on which they draw.

The Vernacular Anarchive

My understanding of these videos as vernacular owes much to the writings of those observers of and participants in the Arab revolutions such as Bamyeh, El-Desouky, Keraitim, Mehrez, and Littell, whose familiarity with the practices and histories of everyday life in the region has made them especially alive to this dimension of the people's struggles. But my thinking on this point is also more broadly informed by the work on "vernacular values" carried out by Ivan Illich and his colleagues (especially Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash), starting in the early 1980s.

For Illich, the vernacular was not simply the amateur and the homespun. It was above all the primary domain of people's resistance to the emerging (or invading) State's colonization of their everyday forms of life—to the abstract imperatives of bureaucracy and profit that sought to displace the lived ethic of solidarity that (following E. P. Thompson) he referred to as their "moral economy."[25] His writings on the vernacular resonate strongly with the accounts of the Arab revolutions as civil society's revelation of itself to itself that I have quoted in the previous section. And his discussion of how the printing press, which would later serve as a key tool for the homogenization and standardization of communication, initially functioned in the late fifteenth century as an anarchic grassroots multiplier of unruly vernacular discourses cannot help but recall the ambivalent nature of today's post-Snowden Internet, with its capacity for functioning as both a vector for emancipatory media practices and an instrument of potentially totalitarian control and surveillance.[26]

The vernacular, then—in contradistinction to the artificial construction of a "mother tongue," through which the bureaucrats of the emerging Spanish empire, anticipating the National Security Agency, sought to ensure transparent access to all subversive communications between their increasingly far-flung subjects—is above all the domain of living and *embodied* practices, which are by their very nature *performative*. Instead of an abstract Cartesian space ruled by countable coordinates and populated by arbitrary and measurable objects, vernacular space–time is a polycentric textural and experiential manifold, a palimpsest of dynamic processes each of which is particular to the person or persons who enact it. The kind of world that results is thus radically *recalcitrant to abstract conceptual analysis*, being rooted in the persistence and indeed cultivation of the infra-logical layers of experience that are mobilized by our own concrete gestural–kinesthetic apprehensions, and whose translation into symbolic language inevitably ends up taking the form of poetry and metaphor, rather than rules and calculations. The vernacular enacts an ethics of solidarity, and it does so through

dynamic sensory and aesthetic forms, which are not reducible to discourse but which engage us fully as living bodily creatures.

These vernacular forms are not then simply folkloric fossils from some putative golden age, but what Illich's friend Giorgio Agamben has rightly called (following Plotinus as much as Wittgenstein) "forms-of-life"—forms that are inseparable from the life that is lived through them.[27] Through their contingent singularity, forms-of-life activate the common both as pure potential—the possibility of something new—and as that which is necessarily inappropriable. As such, they are the very deactivation of that division of life into *bios* and *zoē*—that is, the politically recognizable life of the individual and the generic bare life that underlies it—that constitutes the core of modern governmentality, through its implicit generalization of "the state of exception." By rendering that division inoperative, they open the possibility for a new kind of politics, one that can escape the cycle of constitutive violence into which most revolutions fall.[28] For Agamben, such a politics is anticipated in, but not limited by, the "vernacular figures of anomic communities" documented not only by Illich, but also by Pierre Clastres and Christian Sigrist.[29]

It is precisely in this sense that I would suggest that both the videos and video practices produced by the actors of the Arab revolutions should be thought of as "vernacular"—as forms-of-life that open on to new possibilities, and in particular, on to new forms of living together, new forms of what we hold in common. And it is not only the individual videos that collectively constitute a vernacular. Rather, I propose that we should see their forms of online (and offline) circulation and concatenation as equally embodied and performative practices, which open on to equally singular and unexpected constellations and therefore require equally concrete description and analysis.[30]

Such an analysis is much harder to achieve, of course. In some sense, we "have" each individual video, and we can explore and interpret them as much as we like, as I do in the close readings of specific clips that form the core of most of the chapters in this volume. The human and social circuits through which

these videos collectively move and in which they are encountered, experienced, and further elaborated are, however, much more difficult to access and pin down. While they may leave traces—comments on YouTube pages or on Facebook timelines, for example, as well as data accumulating in Google's databases beyond our possibilities of access—the information these can provide about the actual practices of viewing and (re)distributing online video remains limited and indirect. What would be required is, rather, detailed ethnographic fieldwork implying, if not actually spending time with people while they watch, upload, remix, and generally participate in the active circulation of videos online, then at the very least extended conversations with them about what they are doing during that time and how they think about it when they are no longer doing it. Only in that way could we begin to follow Zeynep Gambetti's advice, in her discussion of Occupy Gezi: "One would need to look into the extensive interstices of this politics of the body, rather than into macrolevel discourses, to begin deciphering it."[31]

I have learned a lot from ethnographers and from others who have gone to "the field" specifically to try and understand these practices, and in particular from recent work by Ulrike Lune Riboni, Cécile Boëx, Donatella Della Ratta, and Alisa Lebow.[32] But I am not an ethnographer; I am a filmmaker. My main activity while I have been working on this book has been watching and rewatching the many hundreds of hours of online videos from the Arab revolutions that I collected while making my 2013 feature-length montage film, *The Uprising*.[33] In the course of this research, I have spent extended periods of time "within" the online/offline ecosystems through which such videos circulate. I have read the comments appended to them on their YouTube pages. I have also read blog posts, tweets, Facebook status updates, newspaper articles, and academic essays in which they and the events that they record are discussed. I have met people who made such videos, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. I have discussed online video practices at academic conferences, in grassroots media centers, in cafés and in cinemas and on trains, with my friends in their living rooms, with strangers

I have met on demonstrations, and—over e-mail, Messenger, Skype, and FaceTime—with people I have met and only ever met online. I have had these discussions with Egyptians in Egypt, with Tunisians in Marseille, with Yemenis in New York, and with Syrians in Brussels, as well as with Indonesians, Brazilians, Turks, Algerians, Palestinians, Israelis, North Americans, and Europeans. I have also spent two months in postrevolutionary Egypt, meeting people when I showed my film as a work-in-progress to different audiences in different places. But I have always had these conversations either in the context of friendship or as part of the process of making my film and (subsequently) trying to understand what it was I had done and how it might affect other people. I have not attempted to do the (extremely difficult) work that would enable me to speak with any form of ethnographic authority about the actual practices that constitute the online everyday of YouTube in and around the Arab revolutions, or the emic discourses that surround them.[34]

What I did do, however, in the course of making and showing my film, was to formulate a number of hypotheses about how the videos I was watching may function—both as individual videos and as an online/offline circulation of forms and energies. This book is the outcome of these speculations and of my attempt to situate them in relation not only to a growing body of theoretical and political writing about the occasions and contexts of insurrectionary and revolutionary action within and outside the cinema, but also to my own experience—as a filmmaker seeking to think with a camera in unpredictable times and situations and as a (generally cameraless) rank-and-file participant in various sequences of more (or less) radical protest over the last thirty years. On one level, then, this text can be read as an indirect, almost cryptic memoir of the multilayered experience of editing my film with my friend and collaborator Bruno Tracq—an experience that was discursive, affective, and embodied in roughly equal proportions. (The embodied dimension of film *editing*—as opposed to film making—is rarely talked about, yet crucially determines the outcome of such work.) However, I have tried to approach the arguments I make here as if my film did not exist

and to ensure that they can be understood, and accepted or contested, in their own right, without any reference to or knowledge of my creative work. This book is an attempt to think through some of the issues that might emerge for *anyone* who seeks to take these videos seriously, both as aesthetic forms and as political gestures. It is less a continuation of my film work than a *displacement* of certain energies that it had released and which could not be fully worked through in a cinematic (nondiscursive) form.

In the second part of this book, I describe in some detail my sense of how these videos from the Arab revolutions may circulate online and offline and how in doing so they become not just traces of the singular bodies that made them but also in some sense themselves a *body* of work. For now, in order to avoid either prejudging this complex issue, or speaking of YouTube as if it were one single unified system delivering a set of largely homogenized experiences rather than an open-ended series of overlapping, partly constrained yet also partly plastic and malleable practices, I will refer to the video corpus produced by the Arab revolutionaries as they filmed their revolutions as "the vernacular *anarchive*."

I do so partly to distinguish my proposal here from the multiple understandings of the archive and its place in Western thought initiated by the seminal essays of Foucault and Derrida.[35] But I am also, at a less reflective level, simply allergic to a term that would seem to consign these videos to the past, when they remain—at least for me, and until very recently—resolutely of and in the present. Even today, the accounts which they have opened are in no way closed, though the way forward may be difficult to see through the brutal fog of war, neo-authoritarianism, and—in the most "fortunate" cases—parliamentary spectacle.[36]

As Dork Zabunyan puts it, these images are an attempt "to tear a fragment of reality" out of a context that has become unlivable:

> Before they become an archive in their own right, these images from the "Arab Spring" have a dual function, to put it schematically … they serve as weapons in the present and, whether deliberately or not, as forces for the future … [37]

The Tunisian film critic Tahar Chikhaoui makes a similar point when he describes the cameraphone videos made during the Tunisian revolution as the invention of a "pragmatics of the gaze," in which seeing becomes a way of acting. And he goes on to say:

> To be clear, these are not works of cinema, creative works, but they offer us the prototype of another kind of image. While the distance [that characterized earlier forms of moving image] has not been entirely and definitively abolished, the gap between the screen and the audience has shifted, now it is extremely slight, and mobile. Like this revolution that will lead, whatever its outcome in the short term, to the transformation of political and social structures in the longer term, these images of the revolution show us what the cinema of the future will be based on.[38]

For Chikhaoui, these videos are not documents of the past, nor are they themselves subject to any existing audiovisual codes. They are the prefiguration not only of different ways of living, and different ways of doing politics, but also of different ways of making images, and of joining them together, whose full implications we are a long way from being able to grasp.

The "object" I wish to construct here, then, is very definitely *not* an archive in the sense of a repository of the past, whether that past takes the form of literal documents, allegorical monuments, or somewhat more abstract discursive formations. It is rather a living space, one that is totally porous and plastic to its users, that is constantly being shaped and reshaped by each gesture that contributes to it, each video that is added to it, each comment that is appended. While in standard usage the term "archive" is clearly linked to the idea of written documentation, its etymology refers more generally to a form of rule or governance (Gr. *arkhē*) rather than to any specific technology of storage. On both these levels, the term seems largely

inappropriate.[39] I therefore adopt the term "anarchive," by analogy with the term "anarchy" (also formed from the same Greek root), which designates not chaos but a form of order independent of any ruler, any hierarchy, or any institutionalized government.[40]

The term "vernacular," then, should be understood as applying not only to the *content* of the anarchive, but above all to its *form*. The anarchive is vernacular precisely in that it has, and can have, no central card index, no Dewey Decimal Classification System, no hierarchical ordering. And yet it is more than just an unstructured mass of random material, of which each element would be animated solely by the narcissistic search to distinguish itself from all its peers. Indeed, it might be more useful, and more accurate, to think of the Arab revolutionaries' subversive reconfiguration of their algorithmic online database of choice as a sort of "Occupy YouTube" by anticipation. Starting in early 2011, the videomakers from the region effectively established what might variously be recognized as a "space of anarchy" (Mohammed Bamyeh), a "temporary autonomous zone" (Hakim Bey), or—more precisely, I shall argue —what the review *Tiqqun* has called a "zone of offensive opacity" within the YouTube database, parallel to those which they and their comrades were establishing at the same time in the physical world, and of which Tahrir Square in Cairo was long the luminous (if also sometimes distracting and misleading) emblem.[41] This online zone was only temporary, in the sense that at some point the YouTube of algorithms would inevitably reassert itself and begin to erode its collective identity—erasing its borders, burying most of its contents, and reducing what remained visible to a more "representative" and more "relevant" subset. Nevertheless, for as long as it persisted, it could be called autonomous because it represented a use of YouTube that has been enabled but not foreseen by the website's inventors, and which subverted more than it realized the liberal vision of social media as a forum for individualistic self-expression with its correspondingly decentralized (and inoffensive) forms of collaboration.

In seeking to understand better, then, how the videos from the Arab revolutions enact forms of video that are at once and indissolubly political, ethical, and aesthetic, in ways which earlier practices and theories of online video had barely anticipated, I will consider not only how these videos exist as singular forms created in specific times and places, but also how they organize themselves collectively, so to speak. For it is also through their collective rhythms and patterns of circulation that they reimagine what online video is or might be.

Still frame from video posted to YouTube by feb tub, February 14, 2011. To view, and for more information, go to vimeo.com/channels/thepeoplearenot, video 3.