The Revolution *Will* be Uploaded:
Vernacular Video and the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The vernacular online videos produced by the Arab revolutions constitute an unprecedented (though not unproblematic) historical resource for understanding the subjective experience of the ordinary people who find themselves on the front line of revolutionary struggle. But they also effect a sea-change in the way in which we view and understand YouTube itself. This article argues that the political significance of these videos lies less in their explicit content, than in their aesthetics - that is, in the new formal and sensory propositions that they constitute, the ways in which they "redistribute the sensible" (Rancière).

The prologue proposes, following Judith Butler, that "the people" who are the subject of history are essentially a performative event, rather than a pre-existing entity, and that to write about revolution therefore requires a performative and allegorical approach. The first section reviews the current academic notion of "vernacular video" in the light of Ivan Illich's work of the early 1980s on vernacular language and values, and argues that a stronger, more political conception of the vernacular is necessary to do justice to these works. The second section offers a close reading of one particular video from the Libyan uprising, and argues that it offers less an example, than an allegory of the dialogical relationship between the individual and the collective that defines the moral economy of the vernacular. The article concludes by proposing that the right response to such videos is not (just) more theory or criticism, but rather to seek to emulate their radically egalitarian forms of practice.

Keywords: Ivan Illich, Judith Butler, revolution, Arab Spring, YouTube, online video, vernacular, Libya.

Introduction

Not the least extraordinary thing about the Arab revolutions of 2010 onwards is the fact that they have given 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 event from the same series, a first tremor announcing the larger earthquake to come. But whether we include Iran in 2009 or not, this ongoing sequence is, I believe, the first time since the invention of the cinema that the people have not largely left it to experts, professionals and/or 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 each other as together they made and unmade history, day in and day out.

The result has been, for the viewer, an almost overwhelming proliferation of material, archived and made accessible in quasi-real time via online video-sharing websites. These videos do not simply sit there on YouTube, either, waiting for us to stumble on them: they are always already in circulation, posted and reposted via Twitter and Facebook, as well as being passed on through more private communications channels, such as email. They are not static objects waiting to be discovered and analyzed: they are part and parcel of a much larger dynamic process, in which what matters most is not any specific video itself, so much as the affective energy 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 revolutionary social change possible, or at least, conceivable (Aouragh & Alexander 2011).

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 one comes across one or more which do not simply *record* events that were, or aspired to be, significant, or even exceptional, but which 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.

This article represents a first step towards trying to elaborate an approach to the videos from the Arab revolutions which can do justice to them, both as a mass phenomenon that is too vast ever to be fully encompassed by analysis, and as a series of singular events whose perceived value is related to, but not entirely dependent upon, their online and offline contexts.

In the first section of this article, I propose a theoretical framework for considering these videos collectively as an emerging "vernacular" practice, based on the sense given to that term by Ivan Illich in his work of the early 1980s.[1] In doing so, I am applying Illich's *political* conception of the vernacular to a realm (online video) where the term has generally functioned up till now as a purely *descriptive* category. But I am also actively extending it to a domain of practice – the Internet – to which Illich himself never applied it, and I do so in a way which he might not have approved of, though I would argue that this extended usage is indeed consonant both with certain strands in his own thought, and with the views of some of his closest friends and intellectual heirs (Esteva & Prakash 1998).

These online vernacular practices differ from their offline forbears in part because they are *emerging* practices, rather than established ones (Mackey 2010). Their vernacular status is less a given, than a projection: we are watching territory being claimed, contentiously and performatively, rather than merely observing a state of affairs whose status is securely established and largely consensual. As such, these videos represent not so much the continuation or renewal of an earlier practice, as an *aesthetic* (that is, sensory *and* formal) revolution in the way that online video is perceived and used. Following Jacques Rancière, I propose that we should see the aesthetic dimension of these videos as integral to the political proposition that they represent. In this perspective, they function less as the documentation or representation of a political process that is already given in reality, than as a "redistribution of the sensible" that makes new forms of political process possible. In doing so, they prefigure a new order that is at once, and indissolubly, political and sensory (Rancière 2000).

In the second section, I turn to examine what this "aesthetic revolution" consists in when viewed close up, through the detailed discussion of one particular video from Libya. Building on the idea that the aesthetic prefigures the political, I seek to foreground precisely those formal and sensory features that are generally bypassed by both social scientists and political commentators when they discuss such videos as evidence of social and political phenomena. If Rancière is right, it is precisely these aesthetic features that we need to attend to, if we are to understand the kind of politics that videos such as this one may anticipate or invoke.

The first part of my essay, then, constructs this video practice in terms of a "collective" subject – the people, or more precisely, the Arab peoples, who have "occupied" the virtual public space of YouTube in a way that can be seen as analogous to the way in which they have repeatedly occupied physical public spaces over the last three years. The second part, on the other hand, explores the work of an anonymous, but incontrovertibly singular (and almost certainly male) cameraperson, in order to bring out what is unique and irreducibly complex about the specific forms of subjectivity that one particular vernacular video can construct.

Before proceeding with my main arguments, however, it is first necessary to clarify a little further some of the presuppositions I am making about the nature of

revolutionary processes, including their mediation through film and video, on the one hand, and about the limitations and potentials of different ways of analyzing and writing about them, on the other.

Methodological Prologue: The People as Performance

Judith Butler has argued that "the people" referred to in the talismanic anaphora of the Arab revolutions, "The people want…" (*Ash-sha'b yurīd*), should not be understood as a singular, pre-existing and substantial, essence, however "progressively" defined, but rather as a performative, plural, conflictual, and self-constituting event. The political meaning of the "people" who are invoked in such moments is not given in advance, but exists only as the projected outcome of the process which such a declaration initiates, without any guarantee of being able to see it through (Butler 2013). And her interpretation has been confirmed by close observers of these events themselves:

> As revolutionaries have testified [...] it was the collective act of stating that the people wanted something that created the sense there was a social actor by that name. For many Egyptian activists, it was this locutionary event that proved there was an Egyptian people capable of revolutionary action in the first place (Colla 2012).

Indeed, following Hannah Arendt, Butler sees the inaugural moment of this performative event as not even linguistic, but physical. The coming together of bodies, whether in a single time and place, or distributed and yet connected, not only makes this collective self-enunciation possible, but in some sense, *already is* the claim that, simply through their physical presence or attention to one another, "the people" may be said to have come into existence (Butler 2011, 2013).

The people want
To overthrow the regime!

Performing the people who perform the revolution: Cairo, 28 January 2011
(Still from video by Hossam El-Hamlawy, subtitles by Peter Snowdon)

So "the people" of the Arab revolutions, as I use the term in this essay, is a performance. And the videos which they produce and post online are part of that performance – part of that process of constituting themselves as a collective subject, and negotiating exactly what such a form of subjectivity may be and can do. Since the sense of "the people" is therefore always dependent on the specific moments of its production in public space, and not vice versa, the people is never a substance that might be captured in a static definition: it is at most an ongoing process, and at least, a series of irruptive interventions, whose apparent isolation from one another is perhaps one of the things that it is most difficult, and most necessary, for political theory, and political activists, to think through.

If the people is a performance, and a process, then it follows that some of the problems alluded to above in my introduction may be less intractable than they at first seemed. For the performative changes the nature of the relationship, not only between the individual and the collective, but also between each event and the larger political phenomena in which it seeks, and sometimes finds, its meaning. In that case, there is no "Arab revolution(s)", singular or plural (no "Egyptian revolution", no Tunisian, no Bahraini...), and no corpus, real or imagined, of "the Arab revolution videos". There is only ever an accumulation of particular paths through experience, and through the traces of experience performed that are video, some of which may intersect with our own paths, but which can never be totalized arithmetically, statistically, or otherwise, to produce a single, coherent, and objectively knowable world, because the worlds that they invoke, and help to make, can never exactly coincide, even if in places they may touch or even overlap.

In bringing together in this article a theoretical discussion of vernacular video in general, with my attempts at interpreting one particular video, I am *not* therefore proposing that the particular should be read simply as a case study whose specific features, once explicated, may validate the more general claims that precede it. Rather, following Gregson (2011), I am as much interested in how the experience of the specific and the particular exceed and overflow any conceptual limits within which we may try to enclose them, and how the kind of thinking which they provoke cannot be separated out from specific textures of embodied, sensory experience, without being caricatured and betrayed.

It is for this reason that my "reading" of the Libyan video is less a reading than a *writing*. Borrowing deliberately from literary and poetic techniques, I try to do justice to what there is in this video that cannot be separated out for capture in concepts, as well as to what can. Through ekphrasis, and in particular by dramatizing the different subjective positions to be found both within the video (cameraperson, martyr, crowd...) and outside (viewers, both real and hypothetical, singular and plural), I try to give a sense of the complexity of the way it figures and refigures the relationship of the individual to the collective, without implying that

this complex choreography can be reduced to something as blunt and immobile as a "theory" of the revolutionary subject.

As long as the revolution is in progress, there can be no "theory" of the revolution. But as long as the revolution is in progress, there will and indeed must be theorizing going on. This concrete, situated theorizing privileges the possible over the actual, the embodied over the abstract, and the particular over the general. For that reason, the video discussed in the second part of this essay should be viewed neither as a "sample" that is conveniently representative of some larger body of work, nor as so irremediably unique that it can have nothing useful to say about the larger course of these events and their mediation. Rather, I offer both the video, and my textual re-enactment of it, as (in John Law's sense) an *allegory*: that is, an aesthetic relationship, indissolubly abstract *and* sensory, which condenses in a single complex figure *both* something that is conceptually significant, *and* all those aspects of our experience of it which explicitly and persistently resist conceptualization (Law 2004: 96-113).

My argument, therefore, embraces theory, rather than rejecting it. But it embraces it as just one more kind of practice – as a particular mode of performance, rather than an Archimedean point from which performances and practices can be assembled, compared and judged. Even my discussion of Illich on the vernacular, by extending his concept far beyond its original field of application, seeks not simply to recognize a state of affairs, but to enact an ontological politics (Mol 1999). And behind that ontological politics, there is, of course, a politics *tout court*.

In the final paragraphs of this essay, then, instead of trying to tie my arguments up in neatly conclusive theoretical bundles, I return instead to the question of practice, broadly conceived, and try to make explicit the kind of politics which I see these videos as proposing (in general), and enacting (in the particular cases of their own times and places). More specifically, I argue that, in the wake of these revolutions, video making can only be approached, beyond both personal creative pursuit and collective political strategy, as a radically egalitarian commitment to the poetic possibilities of the present.

Defining the Vernacular: Ivan Illich Looks at YouTube

The term "vernacular video" is commonly used to refer to the proliferation of user-generated content provoked by video-sharing services such as YouTube. In academic circles, this term is generally treated as straightforwardly descriptive, and largely synonymous with "non-professional" or "non-commercial". This "de-politicized" vocabulary both reflects, and obscures, the atypical nature of the early years of online video, which were dominated by North American and (to a lesser extent) European productions. Thus, by the force of historical circumstance and

ethnocentric happenstance, the idea of "vernacular video" has come in practice to be heavily weighted towards the domestic and the personal.[2]

In the first part of this article, I want to develop a concept of the vernacular which is explicitly political, rather than descriptive, and which might provide a better basis for exploring the plurality of grassroots media practices emerging on today's decentered Internet, without eliding the constraints and imbalances of power within which they have to operate. To do this, I turn for guidance to the work of Ivan Illich.

In the early 1980s, Illich published two books in which he developed a theory of "vernacular values". (A third book to be entitled, precisely, *Vernacular Values* was planned and announced, but never appeared: Illich 1982: xi). In the first of these, *Shadow Work* (Illich 1981), Illich identified vernacular practices as those activities that help make any given community autonomous from both the market and the State – activities which enhance subsistence, and reduce dependency.

This positive definition subsumes the negative definitions cited above ("non-professional", "non-commercial"), but it also goes well beyond them. The term "subsistence" in particular is intended by Illich in a strong sense, which implies not only an autonomous relation to the means of material survival, but also a complex dialogue between the individual and the collective. As he wrote in *Gender* in 1982, a "subsistence ethics", which he saw as closely related to E.P. Thompson's "moral economy", "affirms the right of every villager, of every member of the crowd, to make survival the supreme rule of common behaviour, not the isolated right of an individual. Both terms bespeak an attitude, an orientation, that protects the weakest from ruin" (Illich 1982: 111; cf. Thompson 1963). The right that is affirmed, it should be noted, is not the right of the group, as if it preexisted any individual action or decision: it is the right of the individual to limit his or her own rights and desires in favor of those of others, and in particular, of those who are most in need of such a gesture. This gesture, then, mirrors that described by Butler, who draws attention to the right of the individual to participate freely in enacting the people, rather than to simply be "enacted" as one of them, with or without her or his consent.

Seen in this way, to say that vernacular practices are subsistence-oriented, is to say that they are inherently ethical and political in ways that are incompatible with an atomistic and possessive vision of social rationality. Indeed, it is the viewpoint which such vernacular values provide which enables Illich to go on and distinguish a type of practice which is patently non-professional and non-commercial, but which is also anti-vernacular, because it aggravates rather than diminishes our dependency on commodities and services. This is the "shadow work" of the title of his 1981 book, which consists of all those unpaid activities that are needed to make commodities bought on the market genuinely useful to and usable by the household (Illich 1981: 99-116; Illich 1982: 45-60). The category of shadow work allows Illich to identify much of what lies apparently outside the bureaucratic and

commercial institutions of the modern State as being in fact deeply conditioned by those institutions. Many of the personal and individualistic Euro-American uses of online video which common academic usage would describe as "vernacular" should plausibly be classified as shadow work, in Illich's terms, precisely because they make little or no contribution to strengthening those forms of collective reciprocity on which autonomy and subsistence depend. "Broadcasting yourself" is not, or at least not necessarily, a way of acknowledging the needs of others, or of putting the group before the individual.

Illich's account of the vernacular is complex and far from systematic. For my present purposes I simply wish to point out three other characteristics of vernacular values as he describes them which specifically resonate with the argument I am making here. For Illich, the vernacular is intrinsically *performative*; it is essentially rooted in the primacy of *bodily* gesture and action; and it therefore cannot be understood through abstract conceptual analysis, but can only be approached through *poetry* and *metaphor*.

Where classical Western science posits a space that is universal, homogenous, isotropic, abstract, definite, and inert, the space of the vernacular is always particular, heterogeneous, asymmetrical, embodied, ambiguous, and alive (Illich 1982: 105-118). Indeed, there is for Illich no vernacular space that exists independently of the particular gestures and actions that shape it. Vernacular values are not given in advance, but are constantly and continuously being enacted, and this enactment is itself always a physical gesture. As a result, vernacular space is not some abstract Cartesian desert in which we find ourselves abandoned; it is "engendered by the bodies of its inhabitants", and exists only as "the environmental trace of their vernacular living" (Illich 1982: 121).

As with Butler's assembled bodies, so for Illich the performance here is physical before it is verbal. Seeking to explain why, as Robert Hertz had proposed (Hertz 1909), the vernacular realm is inherently ambiguous and asymmetrical, Illich proposes that it is because it remains rooted in what Piaget termed the infra-logical register of human experience. Vernacular life has not suffered those processes of abstraction and reduction that are needed to render it amenable to economic exploitation and bureaucratic management (while making it more or less unlivable for people in the process). Vernacular practices rather emanate from the deepest layer of our embodied, gestural experience, and it is this fact that determines their intrinsically dual character (Illich 1982: 127). That is why their complementarity is a "*fuzzy, partly incongruous* complementarity that can be understood only by means of metaphors" (Illich 1982: 75-76, emphasis in original). Vernacular practices do not try to deny these infra-logical registers of experience, as do Western scientific and sociological thought, by relegating them to the realm of the "private" and the "subjective": rather, they seek to keep them close, and to reaffirm their centrality in the life of the community, by reenacting them daily. They do this not only through separate specialized activities such as poetry, song

and ritual, but by embedding even the simplest of everyday actions in larger symbolic frameworks, through which origins are recapitulated, and collective decisions reaffirmed.

To approach vernacular experience without betraying it will therefore require forms of research that do not seek to disembed actions and intentions from the infra-logical and the bodily, but that instead embrace their mutual inextricability, even if this means accepting that reality is inherently enigmatic and ambiguous, irreducible to any single universal frame of reference. Travelling by a somewhat different route, Illich thus reaches a conclusion that resonates with those of Moll, Law and Gregson. The kind of research that the human sciences need if they are to do justice to the vernacular domain will of course be "disciplined, critical, well-documented, and public", but it will also have to eschew scientific reductionism and the pursuit of conceptual clarity at all costs, and instead explicitly embrace "analogy, metaphor and poetry" (Illich 1982: 62; cf. 129). For only poetry can show us ways to hold together the incompatible yet complementary dimensions which just *are* the nature of vernacular experience.

If we take the idea of "subsistence" in a narrowly materialist sense, rather than in terms of the constantly reiterated decision of individuals to put collective survival before their own personal interests, then to speak of online video as a vernacular practice may seem like an abuse of Illich's categories. After all, this media's dependency on commercial infrastructure, institutional regulation, and professional expertise is both obvious and potentially overwhelming (O'Dwyer & Doyle 2012). Illich's own attitude to information technology was complex, and sometimes contradictory, and changed dramatically over time, as the focus of his attention shifted from the practical impact of "disabling institutions" to what, following Marshall McLuhan, he termed their "symbolic fallout". While in his later work he frankly expressed his hostility to the "dimensionless cybernetic space" (Cayley 1992: 123) created by the computer and its screens, and the threat this transformation posed to the textual cultures of meditative reading and contemplative seeing which he so valued, the pages in *Descfooling Society* on how computer-assisted "learning webs" could help free people of their dependency on educational institutions have often been read as prefiguring the more positive, decentralized aspects of the Internet (Illich 1971: 72-104; Levi 2012: 348-349; Winslow 2013).[3]

Yet despite the apparent pessimism with which he came to view the age of electronic communication, Illich always remained alive to the ways in which people "creatively misuse" the new tools through which government and industry attempt to enroll citizens and consumers as collaborators in their own exploitation (Cayley 1992: 117). Nowhere is this more true than in his essay on the invention of the concept of "mother tongue" as a tool of bureaucratic power in the late fifteenth century (Illich 1981: 27–51). Looking more closely at Illich's writing on vernacular *language* can help us see how his concept of the vernacular might

plausibly be extended to include even such highly-capitalized activities as the production and circulation of online video.

While the printing press would eventually come to serve as an instrument for the centralization and homogenization of both language and thought, in the first fifty years following the invention of movable type it was just as often used for the exactly opposite purpose – to propagate a myriad non-standardized vernacular languages, through the dissemination of texts whose content was often politically subversive into the bargain. It was in the face of this tidal wave of creative misuse that the Castillian grammarian Elio Antonio de Nebrija proposed in 1492 that Queen Isabella should sponsor his project to replace this unruly and uncontrollable diversity with a single, artificially standardized Spanish language. This was a language which at the time no one spoke, and which Nebrija set out to invent, single-handed. Like Latin or Greek, it could only be learned from professionals. The decision to call it a "mother tongue" was an indication, not that it might actually be learned at some mother's knee (which was in fact the last place one was likely to hear it at that time), but rather that it was to play a key role in the State's attempts to replace the Church as the central "maternal" institution in the lives of the people (Illich 1981: 44-46).

According to Illich, Nebrija's explicit aim was not to facilitate communication among Isabella's subjects, but rather to make it easier for the authorities to monitor such communication, and terminate it whenever it showed signs of getting out of hand. His main argument against the vernacular forms of Spanish was that they made it impossible for bureaucrats to eavesdrop on what people in distant parts of the empire – which was just then about to commence its rapid expansion into the Americas – were saying (or rather, writing and reading) to each other, and so root out sedition before it could establish itself. After some persuading, Isabella finally agreed to this plan.

Thanks to Nebrija and others like him, print would thus come to serve the purposes of institutional control and bureaucratic censorship, not only in Spain but throughout the literate world. But Illich shows that it was initially a threateningly anarchic grassroots technology, whose power as a multiplier of vernacular discourses represented a directly political challenge to the authority of the emerging State.[4]

Illich's analysis of this proliferation of untutored discourses in the second half of the fifteenth century offers a lens through which we can better understand the political significance of the explosion of vernacular video across the Arab world over the last few years. What we are witnessing is, in these terms, another Gutenberg event: the unpredictable collision, under the conditions of a repressive political environment, between a cheap and accessible technology that can be used to amplify and disseminate the people's self-produced images and sounds without prior institutional censorship or professional formatting, and societies in which older forms of vernacular culture (including non-standardized vernacular lan-

guages – in Arabic, *al-lugha(t) al-âmiyya*) continue to shape many aspects of daily life, and thus play an important role in defining the people's sense of their own identity, and of their difference from those who would govern them.[5]

These videos are vernacular, then, not simply because they are non-professional and non-commercial. They are vernacular because they belong to the multiple series of gestures and actions through which individuals gather, both online and offline, to enact the people as the possible subject of *another* history. In doing so, they reaffirm the "subsistence ethic" as Illich describes it, and reinvent it for the age of online video. For those who make these videos, their own individuality is not denied, but rather is most fully realized by the act of self-limitation through which they give way to the collective. This ethic may be easily overlooked, because far from being dramatized, it is most often simply taken for granted. But it is woven through everything else which these videos do, and it is evident in two of the most obvious features that tie them to older forms of vernacular art in other media: that they are almost always *anonymous*, and that they are offered not as personal contributions, but as *common property*.[6]

It is in this explicitly political sense, then, that I want to propose that the videos from the Arab revolutions should be called vernacular. They are the first attempt by a critical mass of non-professional filmmakers to extend an informal, home-made, and largely improvised practice out beyond the realms of private or domestic life, and to use it to give an account of the public and political realms – an account which one senses is intended not only to be competent by its own, vernacular standards, but also more pertinent, and more comprehensive, than any of the accounts attempted by the professional audiovisual cultures that preceded it. And in doing so, they do not simply supplant this institutional discourse, they also undermine the very division between "public" and "private" space upon which the current distribution of power in our societies depends (Butler 2011; cf. Illich 1983).

These videos, then, are not just amateur, spontaneous and "home-made". They speak from outside the enclosed domain of the dominant media institutions. They enact dissent in their idiosyncratic grammars, as well as in their subject matters. They speak a language that is learned from one's peers, on the street, or in the home, not one that requires paid instruction or seeks institutional validation. And their basic gesture is not "linguistic", but physical: not the image as representation, but the unauthorized and transgressive presence of the body that films in a public place, recording and participating in a collective event, against the will of the state. In their insistent iteration of this act of co-presence through which the people enunciates itself, and of which each single video is the trace, they constitute perhaps the first step towards the invention of Internet video *per se* as a genuinely vernacular practice.

In doing so, these videos do not just make use of the existing repertoire of YouTube's functions to broadcast the Arab revolutions. They are also a revolution

in the way YouTube itself is conceived and used. By unsettling the opposition between public and private, objective and subjective, collective and individual, they bring about an irrevocable change in the potential of the online database, because that database is not just an infrastructure or an algorithm, but is inextricably enmeshed with practices, experiences and desires without which it cannot make sense, and which exist only offline – not only in our heads and hearts, but in the simplest, least explicable of our bodily gestures, too.

These videos, then, are *not* home videos. Indeed, one of the striking things to me is how little domestic and interior spaces figure in them, and how rigorously they exclude anything that we might consider private, intimate or personal. In particular, they are notable for the near total absence of the archetypal online video form of the Euro-American internet, the vlog or video blog, in which a single person speaks directly to the camera in a domestic setting, such as a bedroom or home office, and where the sense of intimacy is generally enhanced by the implication that they are alone as they record their message. One Euro-American survey suggests that vlogs were, at least until recently, the single most widely watched genre of user-generated online video content, accounting for some 40% of the "most popular" online videos as measured by multiple criteria (Burgess & Green 2009: 43). The existence of a small number of high-profile vlogs from these revolutions, and most notably those made by Asmaa Mahfouz during the early days of the Egyptian revolution,[7] should not be allowed to obscure the fact that this format accounts for only a vanishingly tiny fraction of the material posted.

The exception that proves the rule. Vlog by Asmaa Mahfouz, Cairo, 18 January 2011. (Still from video uploaded by Iyad El-Baghdadi, subtitles by Peter Snowdon.)

These videos are not documentary films either, because most of them contain no narrative (Le Grice 2001: 166-67). They cannot be defined as citizen journalism, as they have no rhetoric of description or explanation; nor are they merely or mainly forensic video, of the kind which has become an increasingly important part of human rights activism worldwide. While they sometimes adopt some of the forms of journalism (such as the vox pop interview), and while they sometimes purport to prove that something terrible happened (though the element of proof rarely goes beyond mere verbal assertion, whether by voiceover or by written text), these videos are essentially uncategorisable. They are a new genre, or genres, replete with new forms, or old forms adapted to entirely new purposes.

The *political* revolution in the function of YouTube is thus accompanied by an *aesthetic* revolution in the kinds of experience people might look for when watching videos online. As such, these videos constitute, in the terms of Jacques Rancière, a redistribution of the sensible: they prefigure the political revolution that is to come,[8] by challenging the aesthetic limitations which popular culture, the mass media, and intellectual condescension, have sought to place on the forms of experience the people are supposed to be able to imagine, enact and enjoy (Rancière 1983/2007: vi).

What we have here then is a body of work that is accumulating from the bottom up, generating its own norms, habits and customs as it goes, and which makes a claim – individually and collectively – to speak, beyond any distinction between the private and the public, for society once again imagined as a vernacular domain, where every action is intrinsically political, because it is involved in the shaping of shared meanings. Through these videos, individuals explore, negotiate and express their relationship to the collective, and in doing so, they remake that collectivity, and reaffirm or redefine its values, its practices, and its symbols.

Of course, however numerically overwhelming these videos may seem as they unfurl day-by-day on to our screens, they in fact contain only a tiny, and quite possibly non-representative subset of all the experiences, relations and practices that these revolutions have put into play. Not everybody filmed. Those who did film were not evenly distributed in space or time, by gender, age cohort, or social class. When they filmed, they did so selectively. And of what was filmed, only a very small percentage was uploaded. The rest is still on the memory cards in people's camera phones, or on their hard drives. What we can see of these revolutions on YouTube is only the tip of the iceberg, and it may not be a very good guide to the shape of the main mass of these events, which remains stubbornly outside the lines of our digital sight.[9]

But it is possible, also, that precisely *because* the revolutions as they are figured on YouTube are not "representative" of the mainstream revolutionary experience, they may also include, and in some cases even provoke or create, experiences, relations and practices which are more radical, more subversive, and more productive of alternative futures, than those which the historical record may later

be inclined to define as the "core" of these events. If Kropotkin was right to claim that revolutions themselves are always made by a minority of society, so some of the most significant meanings of these revolutions may also be found in experiences and figures which, from the point of view of the majority of those who took part in them, were marginal, atypical, or directly incompatible with what they, or we, may want the sense of those revolutions to have been (Kropotkine 1909/2011: 249).

Souq Al-Jumaa, 25 February 2011:
Towards a Political Aesthetics of the Libyan Uprising

So I find myself, some three years after these events began, still looking at these videos with more questions in my mind than answers. What kinds of revolution do these videos imagine or invoke? And what kinds of revolution do they refuse? What sorts of action do they call for, and to what types of outcome do they seek to bar the path? What do they understand of the experiences that befall those who film, and what in those experiences remains opaque, obscure, recalcitrant to interpretation and appropriation? Above all, how do they succeed (or fail) in mediating between the recalcitrant singularity of their own point of view, and the performance of new forms of vernacular collectivity that is sometimes their explicit subject, and always their unspoken horizon?

To begin to sketch an answer to some of these questions, I'd like to look closely at one particular film, shot by an anonymous cameraman in Souk Al-Jumaa, a working-class neighborhood of Tripoli, and uploaded to YouTube on 27 February 2011.[10]

The Libyan uprising broke out in Benghazi on 15 February 2011, and the Day of Rage on 17 February saw protests spread to many other cities, including the capital, Tripoli. On Friday 25 February – the day on which this video would appear to have been made – several thousand protesters gathered after Friday prayers in the district of Tajura to the east of the capital, from where they set off to march towards the town center. As they passed through the Souk Al-Jumaa neighborhood later that afternoon, they were ambushed by state security forces, including snipers posted on the roofs of surrounding buildings. The result was a massacre. Different estimates put the death toll for the afternoon at between 10 and 25, with many more seriously wounded.

The march from Tajura followed a week of constant clashes during which the security forces had tried and failed to establish control over the neighborhood, and its brutal repression marked, perhaps, the end of residents' initial hopes that they might see Gaddhafi depart as quickly as Ben Ali and Mubarak before him. By 1 March, most of the people of Tripoli had abandoned overt public protest, and were looking for other ways to continue the struggle. (The city was not finally
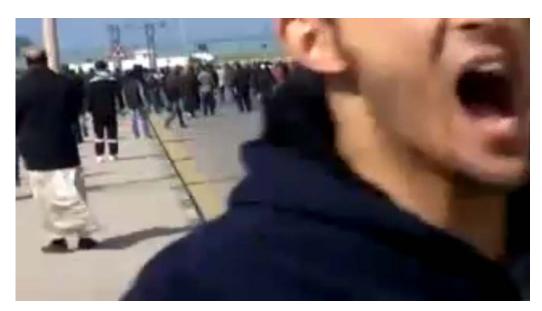
liberated until six months later, in a major military operation organized by the National Transitional Council, that ran from 19 to 28 August.)[11]

One of those who died during the march on 25 February was a fifty-year old man, named Ali Mohammed Talha. His name does not figure in any of the journalistic accounts of this day that appeared in the international or local media at the time, and I have not been able to find out any more about him.[12] This video records the moments immediately before and after his martyrdom.

Looking for Ali Talha
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution.)
To view the video with English subtitles, go to http://vimeo.com/49182496

The "information content" of this video is, in many ways, very low. It adds little to the little we already know from written reports, either about Ali Talha's death, or about what the other protesters around him, including the cameraman, were doing, saying, or thinking on that afternoon. But if offers us something inestimable, which few written accounts could rival, and none could replace. In the most simple terms, we might say that it gives us a sense of "what it was like to be there" in that particular place, at that particular time, and in this particular position. But what lies behind this apparently transparent (and, in some ways, problematic) claim? How exactly do these images and sounds shape the experience of the viewer in order to produce this effect? And how do the forms they take affect us,[13] not just intellectually, but also physically and emotionally?

The sea is only a suspicion
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

A man is advancing through space. He is among other men, though the space be-tween them is not clearly defined, and the crowd seems too strung out, too frag-mented to really count as "a crowd". On the soundtrack, there is a lot of noise, of a kind we may recognize (or not) as the sound of wind buffeting the camera's mi-crophone. We may get the sense that we are near the sea[14]. There is a large space that seems to open up on the horizon, far ahead of us and to the left, which seems to hold the future towards which we are heading – promise or disaster. Yet while the bodies move that way, the camera almost ignores this space, and seems intent instead on pointing off towards the right, and down towards the ground, when it's not tilting off wildly up into the sky, dodging and jerking across the multiple lay-ers of off-white cloud.

The sea is only a suspicion. Yet the men who have gathered here continue to advance and fall back in waves, and these human waves form a larger rhythm, which surrounds and absorbs the faster rhythm of the camera's tilting up and down. It is as if the group is testing some invisible boundary, trying to push it forward, incrementally, or at least to hold the line. At the same time, the way the camera is held creates a long diagonal that emphasizes the inherently unstable geometry of the space, which is further pulled apart by the asymmetries of the faulty stereo sound.

As if drugged, or stunned
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

The crowd surges forward twice, and twice they fall back.[15] During the second, more chaotic retreat, there is a strange hiatus: the camera, as if drugged or stunned, in any case in need of relief, suddenly tilts up and then stops moving for several seconds, and the sky, plus a shard of ochre building, finds itself caught within the frame. Just at that moment the sound of gunshots intensifies, and then suddenly, with a single cry, the crowd rushes forwards again. And a few seconds later we realize that although we are moving, we are not going anywhere – the barrier that stands between us and the sea, between us and the future, has not been demolished, will not be overrun.

True, we keep surging forwards, even stronger than before, but others are already trying to work their way back. We are going to meet someone who is returning to us. Returning to us dead. As a martyr. When the camera almost collides with his bloodied head, we run alongside him for a while, then let him go on, and instead the camera reverses course one last time to follow the trail of blood that he has left behind him, as if retracing the steps he could no longer take. We follow this trace as if it could lead us somewhere, as if it might prove something. As if. And as we advance, the shadow of the filmmaker falls across that trail, as if to cross it out. Or to imprint himself upon it. Or it on him.

It's very hard to do justice to this video, and the above re-description barely scratches the surface of what I find so extraordinary about it. So let me try and say something a little more analytical.

We follow this trace as if it could lead us somewhere
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

This video figures a moment from the heart of this revolution, and any revolution, and one which is central to the vernacular moral economy of the people: the moment when the decision that it is better to die fighting for what you believe in than to continue to live without honor has to be cashed in. And it shows us that moment from a point of view that is, for me, revelatory, and which is also hard to define, but which I think can best be described as being, simply, the point of view of the camera.

It's a fact about cameraphones – and one which is easily verified, for instance by watching how the many people who can be seen filming in so many of these videos, go about filming, physically – that whereas with most earlier cameras, the "natural" way to handle the machine was to hold the viewfinder to your eye, the natural way to use a cameraphone, and indeed most cameras with small digital screens, is to hold them at arm's length.

The camera is not an extension of your eye, it's an extension of your arm. It's not a lens through which to see, it's a tool with which to act upon the world (Figurt 2009; Campanelli 2013). Of course, sometimes you look through it, or more strictly speaking, at it. But much of the time, you don't. You hold it overhead to see over the crowd around you. You put it up to a hole in the wall while you remain crouched down, for fear of getting shot. Or you clasp it in your hand, while you grip a stone in the other, as you run for your life. This video falls mainly, but not entirely, into the latter category.

Nothing like what a human eye would have seen
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution.)

So the video doesn't show us anything like what a human being would have seen if they were in that crowd. No human eye moves up and down in this crazy delirious way relative to your center of gravity while you run. And few human brains lack the neural processing ability to iron out the constant jitter and judder from which they do suffer when moving around quickly, even when their eyes remain more or less in a single horizontal plane.

Nothing remarkable about that, you might say. Anyone could make a film like this. Maybe. Maybe that's the point. And then again…

There are two things which I find striking about this video. First, that anyone should have made it in the first place. By which I mean, that they should have thought it important enough to film in a situation where they are risking their life, where acute attention to what is going on around them is crucial to their personal survival, and where the existence of the film they might make is unlikely to have any direct material influence on the outcome of the day's action. But also, I mean, that they should have decided to start filming at this precise moment which, as we experience it in the film – but who knows how it was in reality? – is not the moment when something happens, but the moment when one begins to think that something *might* be about to happen. And it turns out, they were right.

The second thing which I find amazing is that, having filmed it, they decide to put the video on the Internet in its entirety. Unedited. You have to watch it for more than four minutes, you have to sit through what might seem (if this was a Hollywood action movie) an eternity of bad camera work, barely audible dialogue, and disjointed slivers of unintelligible action, before this apparent chaos coalesces into an event. And yet, by June 2013, the original upload of this video had been viewed just under 8000 times, and there are also several clones of it

around which I have not been monitoring. So I'm obviously not the only person who seems to find it compelling. But why is it so compelling?

   I would suggest that this video owes its force precisely to those formal and sensory extremes which it essays, and which constitute a large part of its unlikeliness, its strangeness. The gestural camera style creates an intense sense of the bodily inscription of the filmer in this space, even as it dissolves both space and time into a kind of distended plasticity, far removed from our sense of the everyday norms of experience. The soundtrack, with its alternation of intense wind noise, holes of near silence, distant voices, and gunshots that register like whiplash, further adds to this sense of being at the same time intensely present, and somehow absent, elsewhere, not directly concerned by what may be going on. And while the sound connects us directly to what is happening off screen, the image denies us access to it until what seems like the last possible moment. We never see the soldiers who fire on Ali Talha, though we hear the shots, and possibly – probably – we hear the shot that kills him.

We never see the soldiers who kill Ali Talha
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

The result of the whole is dream-like. We spend five minutes on the verge of an irrevocable, tragic event, and yet we experience those five minutes as a space of paradoxical, unstable freedom, in which the tension and threat of the situation is not denied, but is somehow abstracted to the point where it becomes almost unrecognizable. And it is this abstraction, and our collaboration in it – the pleasure we take in the figures which the camera produces, or in the epiphanic moment when the sky appears above this street in Souk Al-Jumaa, on one particular afternoon in February 2011, rather as it appeared to Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* after he was shot at the Battle of Austerlitz, in the moments just before he loses

consciousness[16] – it is this complete dissociation from the ultimate reality of what conventional narratives would tell us was "the event", and the sense of access to *another* reality which that inexorably produces, which makes the abrupt return of reality in the form of death that much more shocking. A reality which is no sooner exposed, than it too is recycled into an abstract form, namely, the line of blood that Ali Talha's dead body has left behind it on the ground, leading to his crumpled, useless jacket.

The abrupt return of reality
(Still from video uploaded by 17thFebRevolution)

Not many of the videos from the Arab revolutions achieve this level of dialogical interplay between form and content, sound and image, abstraction and brute fact. Not many of them go beyond the external recording of trance-like states, to embody them so directly in this way. But many of them do achieve a remarkable convergence between unexpected formal procedures and the complexity of shared collective truth. And many of them go well beyond the simple recording or replication of revolutionary figures already existing in the environment, and invent their own figures, which are not reducible to slogans, demands, or recognizable, goal-directed actions, but which are perhaps more closely comparable to the songs, poetry and paintings which overflow every time a space is liberated, and people are able to occupy it for what people were made for: celebration.

   This video from Tripoli disables and defeats many of the things we might know, or think we know, not only about the "potential" and the "limitations" of "amateur" video, but also about the place of subjectivity in the revolution, and about the relationship of the individual to the collective in such moments. It develops its own concrete sensory discourse on these subjects, in terms which are irreducible to any merely discursive language. It uses the camera to mediate be-

tween the individual, the group, and the elements (sky, sea, wind, and sun), and in doing so, it produces a form of subjectivity which is irreducible to either the individual, the collectivity, the impersonality of the natural world, or the somewhat different impersonality of the digital camera, but which is also unimaginable without the co-presence of all four of them.

It places the individual within a group which is never represented as a group, which is always either too dispersed, or too compact, too close or too far away. The group exists for the filmer not as a structured aggregation of individuals, but as a quasi-natural phenomenon, dictating his own wavelike movements back and forward, as it responds intuitively to that other unseen figure, the enemy.

And likewise, the camera oscillates back and forward between the ultra-mobile ultra-subjectivity of the human body, and the moments of static or deliberate framing – the sky above, the line of blood on the ground which can be followed methodically to its beginning or its end. Although I know, or suspect, that one of these shots was intentional, and the other not at all, I cannot help seeing them as somehow equivalent, as balanced against one another, the two moments of relative stability in a radically unstable world.

What both these moments share is, of course, a certain dissolution of the self. By filming his shadow as it falls across the trail of blood he follows, the filmmaker projects himself inside the frame, but he projects himself not as a character in some 19th-century novel – a person with a unique physiognomy, a particular temperament, a distinctive wardrobe, and a mailing address – but as an anonymous silhouette, the space where a person *could* be. This shadow doubles the ecstatic openness to life suggested by the shot of the clouds against the blue sky, embodying an act of acknowledgement, even consent, to the fact of death as unavoidable. The shadow *signs* the video, but it signs it not on behalf of the individual *qua* individual, but on behalf of the community. To belong to that community, to gather with it physically in the street, to proclaim its existence, is to accept the possibility of one's own death, and to assert the value of that possibility. In this moment, the unique and the common reveal their interdependence. It is in order to protect the possibility of a unique life for all, even the weakest, that "the people" are called to exist.

The originality of this video, then, is located in its very refusal of individual authorship, and of all the forms of authority that would traditionally go along with that. In the vernacular realm, it is the shading out of the possessive self, the placing in common of what is most unique and fragile in each of us, that makes the invention of new forms and new experiences possible.

In its representation of the revolution as a state that couples political clarity with perceptual chaos, living machines with dead bodies, invisible enemies with indifferent clouds, this brief anonymous video, for me, goes further than 99 per cent of what the cinema and television have produced in the last 100-odd years in expressing the lived complexities of the revolutionary present. And in doing so, it

effects a redistribution of the sensible whose significance and impact reach far beyond the confines of Libya, or even of the Arab world. It participates not only in the invention of a new, collective audio-visual language, a vernacular which exists to embody and project the desires and values of the people on their own terms, but also in the reassertion of the vernacular itself as a realm whose aesthetic and intellectual complexity is both independent of, and equal if not superior to, that of any institutionally-recognized artistic practice, however radical or "experimental".

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Revolution and the Poetic Imperative

In this essay I have argued that the online videos produced by the Arab revolutions testify, if not to the revolutionary nature of these events, then at least to the kinds of capacity for radical change that are implicit in them. I see this capacity for real-world, offline change as inherent in the formal and sensory "originality" of an online video such as that of Ali Talha's death in Souk El-Jomaa – in the ways in which it proposes non-standardized, extra-conceptual ways of "thinking" the relationship of individual to collective, of future to present, and of process to event. And I have proposed that we can therefore see such videos as examples of the "redistribution of the sensible" that Jacques Rancière has defined as one of the central ways in which political change can be initiated, beyond the categories of existing discourse, not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

I have argued that this capacity for change already changes the way in which we should see YouTube, decentering the Euro-American bias of both usage and critique during the first five years of the site's existence. Dissolving the dichotomy between "public" and "private" space which has structured most previous discussions of online video, these videos occupy YouTube in order to reinvent it as a genuinely vernacular space – one which is above all subject to and answerable to the people and their ways of knowing and acting. If we want to treat these videos from the Arab revolutions as "vernacular video", then we need a stronger sense of the word "vernacular" than that which has been prevalent heretofore. I suggest that we can find just such a sense in the work of Ivan Illich, despite Illich's well-known aversion to many aspects of electronic culture. And I propose that placing Illich in dialogue with Judith Butler can bring out a performative dimension in Illich's own work that is too easily overlooked, and which can help ensure its continued political and theoretical relevance.

I have also proposed that in moving between one particular case and one particular concept, the challenge is not to define and justify the "representative" nature of the video discussed, but to find ways of writing which can precisely *avoid* any such reduction of the specific to the general, and instead reinstate something of the textural density and figural recalcitrance of the particular which the social and human sciences eliminate at their peril. In responding to this need for the per-

sistence of the irreducibly concrete at the heart of all our thinking and doing, I suggest, following Law and Gregson, that such singular cases as this video might best be written and read as allegory, rather than as example. For allegory not only enables a consciously performative approach to critical method; it also respects the non-inductive logic of events such as revolutions, which are themselves inherently performative, and thus not answerable to any pre-defined conceptual framework.

I believe that this approach not only makes theoretical sense, but is also coherent with the politics implicit in the kind of radical grassroots movements and processes we have seen emerging in recent years. Indeed, it is hard to see how any analysis which treats particular events, including audiovisual events, as valuable because they are "representative", could be useful for elaborating a theory of *non-representational* politics of the kind such uprisings and occupations (including, but not limited to, the Arab revolutions) may be seen to call for (Tormey 2005, 2012).

Of course, in the absence of such a theory, many people have questioned whether we should call the Arab revolutions, "revolutions" at all. The Syrian poet Adonis has suggested that they cannot be revolutions since they have not led to a complete change of the political, economic and social system (Adonis 2011). The sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh describes them as anarchist in their methods, and liberal in their intentions, which may seem like a contradiction in terms (Bamyeh 2011). Back in the 1960s, Jacques Ellul proposed nominalism as the best way out of such a dilemma: if people call it a revolution, then that's how they experience it, and who are we to differ? (Ellul 1969/2008)

But maybe we don't have to make any such concessions. Maybe embracing these revolutions *as* revolutions is *in itself* a performative and prefigurative act – one that could help bring about not just a certain kind of theory, but also a certain kind of society, and a certain kind of artistic participation in that society's making. If the best criterion we have for recognizing a revolution is that moment in which everyday life can no longer be distinguished from poetry, then I'd like to think that this video from Libya, and others like it, show us the revolution in its essential action – that of inventing new ways of being and experiencing by which whatever comes after will be judged in the memory of those who were then alive.

As Louise Michel put it, speaking of the Paris Commune: "Just as drama was no longer to be found in the theatre, because it was unfolding in the street as the crowd wrote its own legends, so poetry now belonged to everyone" (Michel 1886: 347, my translation).

Since the Arab revolutions, the moving image too belongs to everyone. It's up to us – not to filmmakers, but to all of us – to make the films that will keep that true.[17]

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Notes

[1]   In its simplest empirical sense, "these videos" refers to all videos made and uploaded by non-institutional/non-professional actors from the six Arab countries that have experienced revolutionary processes since late 2010 (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain), and which either directly or indirectly reference some aspect of struggle against the regime in place. However, it would be more in keeping with the argument made below ("Methodological Prologue") to see "these" videos as a repertoire that is being *enacted* as much as analyzed by this essay. As hinted by the deictic, in so far as this repertoire does not simply vanish into the oceanic database that is YouTube by trying to identify with it as a totality, it must itself be a performance of that database - and only one among many that are possible.

[2]   For an analysis of YouTube as an almost exclusively personal (and Euro-American) domain, see Strangelove (2010). In her PhD thesis on vernacular creativity and new media, Jean Burgess relates the vernacular to the public sphere, but confines the term to a descriptive role, in line with her post-Habermassian conception of "participation" and "inclusion" as the maximalist goal of a reformist-progressive politics (Burgess 2007; cf. Burgess & Green 2009: 25–26). Tom Sherman has written perceptively about the coming vernacular age of video and the deprofessionalization required of the artist who wants to find an adequate response to it (Sherman 2008). But while he avoids the trap of automatically ranking the vernacular on the side of the private and the personal, his claim that vernacular video is essentially part of a larger culture of "messaging", and thus fated to ever more abbreviated forms, "excessive" use of digital effects, and an "anaesthetic" aesthetic, is seriously challenged, if not definitively refuted, by the kind of videos discussed in this article. For an example of how the term is used descriptively to refer to online videos produced by recent social movements, including the Arab uprisings, see Gregory and Losh (2012).

[3]   Illich was not a systematic thinker, and he was certainly not systematic in his approach to living. Just as the critic of modern transportation systems was a frequent flyer, and even chose to buy a (cheap) car when teaching at Penn State in the 1980s, he also came to use a computer to finalise his texts – but only after having first written them out by hand (using a felt tip pen – "a much newer invention [...] so soft that you can even write on a moving Mexican bus with it": Cayley 1992: 249). Practical familiarity with the concrete object was, for Illich, potentially an antidote to some of the worst aspects of its symbolic fallout. A comprehensive assessment of Illich's contribution to a critical media ecology, in all its contradictions and complexities, remains to be written. One starting point would be Kahn and Kellner (2007).

[4]   "It is estimated that before 1500, more than seventeen hundred presses in almost three hundred European towns had produced one or more books. Almost forty thousand editions were published during the fifteenth century, comprising something between fifteen and twenty million copies. About one third of these were published in the various vernacular languages of

Europe. This portion of printed books is the source of Nebrija's concern. To appreciate more fully his worry about the freedom to read, one must remember that reading in his time was not silent. [...] Habitual reading in a loud voice produces social effects. [...] Reading aloud was common in Europe before Nebrija's time. Print multiplied and spread opportunities for this infectious reading in an epidemic manner." (Illich 1981: 41–42).

5   On the role of vernacular forms of knowledge and expression, including *âmiyya*, in the Egyptian revolution, see El-Desouky (2011).

6   The point that these videos are uploaded *as* common property, in a moral if not a legal sense, was made by Rabih Mroué during his 24 January 2014 performance of *The Pixellated Revolution* at the Frascati Theater, Amsterdam (but does not figure in the earlier published version of the text). While Mroué's exploration of the Syrian videos which record (or seem to record) the death of the cameraperson often leads him to formulations which are quite close to mine, the conclusions he draws from them serve a quite different purpose (Mroué 2013)

7   See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk for the first, and most widely circulated of these videos. On the Asmaa Mahfouz phenomenon, see Wall and El-Zahed (2011).

8   On prefiguration as, itself, a principal mode of revolutionary action, with specific reference to Tahrir Square, see Van de Sande (2013). On the relation between politics as prefiguration and politics as performance, see Klimke & Scharloth (2009).

9   The Italian filmmaker Stefano Savona has speculated that maybe 90 per cent of the camera-phone videos made during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution were never uploaded to YouTube, but remain on people's flash cards or hard drives. The figure is an anecdotal estimate, but probably points us in the right direction (Savona et al 2012).

10   "Protest in Souq Al Jumma - Tripoli مظاهرةفيسوقالجمعة - طرابلس", uploaded 27.02.11 by 17thFebRevolution, accessed 15.04.13, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdlBRgi0BFc.

11   The best English-language source for the Tripoli protests of February 2011 is the diary of Sandra James, a British woman who had lived in Libya for over 20 years, and whose Libyan husband and two eldest sons took part in (and survived) the 25 February march (James 2012). I have also consulted the information and videos assembled by the *New York Times*'s blog, "The Lede" in the immediate aftermath of the event (Mather and Mackey 2011), and by John Liebhardt at Global Voices Online (Liebhardt 2011).

12   The date and place of the death of Ali Mohamed Talha, along with his full name and age, are confirmed by http://www.ayamnal7lwa.net/forum/index.php?topic=4487.385;wap2. I am grateful to Amira El-Noshokaty for cross-checking the Arabic-language sources for me.

13   In what follows, I frequently adopt the first person plural, "we", as a rhetorical strategy. Sometimes I use it to refer to the audience of the video, sometimes to refer to the group of men we see assembled in it. In both cases, I am not prejudging the reactions of others, which I can never know, nor am I trying to impose (or disavow) my own. Rather, my intention is to make explicit the way in which the political takes place *between* people (Butler 2011). The political implies a transition from the singular to the plural, from an "I" to a "we", that is always a risk, a gamble, and whose results are never given in advance. So, when I saw "we" as the audience, I am inviting my readers to experiment with identifying with my reactions, rather than to dismiss them as simply "my" individual subjective response. And when I say "we" as if I/we had actually been present on that day in February 2011, I am inviting the reader to join with me in experimenting with identifying with what might or might not be the reactions and emotions of the people figured in the video. I do so, not with the intention of producing a consensus, but in order to open a debate about the possibility of responding to such a flux of images and sounds, not just as an individual, but *also* as a collective.

14   All the accounts I have consulted place the massacre of 25 February on Aradah Road, near to the Al-Hany crossroads -- that is, several kilometers from the sea front. If it really is the sea we can see in this video, then it must have been filmed on one of the arteries running through

the neighbourhood perpendicular to the general east-west direction of the march, connecting Aradah Road with the coast.

15   Overall, the video can be divided into seven distinct movements (four 'forwards' and three 'backwards'): 0.00-2.19: first advance; 2.19–2.41: first retreat and regroup; 2.41-3.08: second advance; 3.08-3.35: second retreat and regroup; 3.35-4.12: third advance (to recover Ali Talha's body); 4.12-4.37: third retreat (with Ali Talha's body); 4.37-5.15: the cameraman alone moves forward against the flow of the people immediately around him, retracing the trail of blood the martyr's passage has left on the ground.

16   "Above him there was now only the sky – the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with grey clouds creeping softly across it. 'How quiet, peaceful, and solemn! Quite different from when I was running,' thought Prince Andrei. 'Quite different from us running and shouting and fighting. Not at all like the gunner and the Frenchman dragging the mop from one another with frightened, frantic faces. How differently do these clouds float across that lofty, limitless sky! How was it I did not see that sky before?'" (Tolstoy 1896/1982: 326).

17   A first, much shorter version of this paper was presented at the Anarchist Studies Network Conference 2.0 – "Making Connections", Loughborough University, 3-5 September 2012. I am grateful to the conference participants for their feedback, and to Ulrike Riboni, Samah Selim, Amal Eqeiq, Hallveig Agudsdottir, Remco Roes, Mathijs van de Sande, Dustin Zemel, Laura Waddington, Wendy Morris, Saraa Saleh and Karolina Majewska for their comments and encouragement at various points in the writing process. Special thanks to Madeleine Hurd and Mohammed Bamyeh for prompting me to clarify and articulate much that would otherwise have remained obscure, and to Chris Miller and Monica Woodhall for invaluable bibliographical assistance.

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