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# Body Image as Strategy for Engagement in Social Media

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## Abstract

Worldwide, the use of digital communication networks has been a key strategy in activist events involving demonstrations. Its use was evident in the media's repeated publication of pictures taken on demonstrators' mobile phones during actions that have overthrown heads of state during the Arab Spring in 2011. In countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, social network websites and mobile communication devices (phones and notebooks) were used widely for organizing participants and for recording events.

This work intends to analyze not only how communication technologies have contributed to the emergence of such events but also how image production can be interpreted in such environments. Since the use of social media in protests caught the attention of broadcasting media in 2009 during demonstrations in Iran, a strong connection can be noticed between the content circulating through digital communication technologies and the body. For images produced during the Arab Spring, the same is observed with a series of strategies connecting body image and social mobilization.

Our intention is to contribute to the debate of political images, considering the way they have been produced in contemporary society, which deals with a complex environment composed of communication technologies, social organization, and the body itself.

**Keywords**: Arab Spring, mobile technologies, body image, face, biopolitics.

## Introduction: Green and Arab Revolutions

In the recent past, social revolutions received increased attention from the media not only because they were politically significant movements but also because they were very innovative in the way people were mobilized.

In the Middle East, the "Green Revolution," which occurred in Iran in 2009, can be considered one of the first popular movements in the area in which connections between mobilization and the level of digital inclusion of the population became clear (considered as high for that region at the time of demonstrations). The name is a reference to the color of the opposition party that lost elections to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His victory was questioned because of possible fraud that might have occurred during the electoral process. During subsequent protests, the Internet was used to organize actions and spread amateur videos of demonstrations because the majority of official journalists had been expelled from the country or had been forbidden to work. A video footage clip particularly stands out – the one that shows Neda Soltan's death, the young student who later was projected as the martyr of the movement. Although the use of new communication technologies as facilitating devices for social mobilization has been pointed out by other authors before (e.g., Rheingold 2002; Shirky 2008; Castells 2013), the "Green Revolution" makes this connection more evident, given broadcast media's growing interest in the subject.

Between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, digital communication technologies were used for social mobilization in other places – North Africa and the Middle East. The set of political movements leading to a wave of change in the region after decades of dictatorship was termed "Arab Spring." The initial focus of tension was in Tunisia, followed by Egypt.

In Tunisia, demonstrations began the day after Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed young man, set himself on fire. This happened after he was forbidden from selling vegetables by the police because he did not have a license to work. The symbolic act was the catalyst for an outpour of the people's general discontent. The country entered a political crisis that overthrew President Ben Ali, the country's ruler for the past 23 years. Again, heavy use of digital communication tools such as mobile phones and social networks was observed.

Inspired by the success of protests in the neighboring country, the population in Egypt, too, took to the streets to protest against the dictator Hosni Mubarak. However, these protests originated in June 2010 after the death of Khaled Said owing to police brutality. Local police officers accused Said of having recorded and posted a video in which the policemen were seen negotiating goods confiscated in a drug bust. Soon after the incident, a Facebook page called *We are all Khaled Said* was created and from there the first protests began to be organized.

The Arab Spring protest ended with other two Presidents being overthrown: Muammar Gadaffi, Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen. As mentioned by Cas-

tells (2013), many other countries in the region had their days of protests, including Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, and Kuwait. The most serious of all these conflicts remains alive in Syria, where protests in 2011 turned into a civil war that has killed thousands of people thus far.

Of all the things that have already been discussed about political engagement and digital communication in the above mentioned conflicts (e.g. Castells 2013), considerable effort is spent trying to understand the influence of social networks and mobile technologies in environments of conflict and revolution. Whereas important aspects such as the level of digital inclusion of population, media control, and political circumstances are being reported as relevant items to be considered, image production itself has not been explored much yet.

Given that political issues and social behavior have been changing with the use of digital technologies, images, too, can be read from a new perspective based on the way they come out in such environments. Therefore, the goal here is to try to explain the manner in which these images are consumed in this new context, where the relationships between audience and content are reconfigured. The first question to be posed is how images emerging from an engaged digital environment can be discriminated from other forms of visual culture? What is so special about such images?

Although generated in traditional forms of media production (video and photography), these images have been challenging our understanding of visual reception because they are being created and shared in environments overwhelmed by body-related stimuli. They are captured in places where the energy of life is at its peak (such as demonstrations and public protests) and recorded with mobile devices, which are intensively connected to the user's body.

Images in such environments are produced and consumed with the whole body. A demonstrator pushes a police officer to get the best shot. In turn, the police officer pushes the demonstrator back. The demonstrator falls to the floor, but continues filming. The camera is given to another demonstrator, who completes the footage by filming his friend being dragged by his feet and arrested. The footage is uploaded to an independent media site and the link is shared online. In minutes, the link is on Twitter, and the crowd in the demonstration can access it on the touch screen of their smartphones. The whole body is immersed in consuming these images, as opposed to only the visual system.

Even those who were not at the site at which these images were recorded could see something transforming the images into powerful instruments of affection. There is a collective feeling in the way they are shared, as well as in the body itself. It can be universal in many aspects and culturally relativized in others. Depending on the way these elements are presented, they can trigger certain affects, turning image reception into a collective experience.

Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the dynamics of such environments amplifies the meanings of these images. It transforms and disrupts them. Their poten-

tial for engagement can be understood better if the following three features are taken into account: aesthetic attributes, context of production, and digital networks. In doing so, the political potential of digital images in contemporary society can be considered. In addition to thinking about the semiotic aspects of these images, the effort here is to amplify the level of understanding of a given political visual culture. To this end, images should not be comprehended only in terms of their visual aspects. They have to be put in a context in which other senses are awakened during the process of production-consumption. Surrounded by screens, one has to understand these images as part of a whole, were the body is activated by the senses.

In the following analysis, I will consider the elements that compose images in analogue–digital environments, which means that I will deal with amateur or witness images, whose meanings are expanded and transformed by network information flow and because of the manner in which they are produced.

By representing the body along with tension, motion and pain, many of the pictures to be analyzed have attained wide circulation or have even been transformed into icons, as shown by Mortensen (2011). Our argument will be that body images generated with digital equipment by eyewitnesses (either professional journalists or amateurs) and uploaded to digital communication networks generate emotions that contributed to the levels of social mobilization in the aforementioned movements as well as toward global projection of said movements.

Our reflections will be similar to the approach suggested by Stage (2011), who examined the global recontextualization of Neda Soltan's images. Although I noted what led to local social mobilization, I analyzed these images from a global perspective. In this sense, I focused on the human being connected to these images rather than a deep regional approach to the area.

## Poignant Images

We begin our analysis reminding the process by which images stimulate emotions. How an image, produced by a technology requiring no effective participation of hands in its creation, relates to the human element? Barthes (1984) tried to understand the human features present in the chemical–mechanical photography process. To this end, the author identified two elements: *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* refers to public interest in a photograph. It is linked to the photography theme and is generated by the culture of the one who is before the photo. It refers to human interest in what is close, pleasant, or relevant. It is, in the words of Barthes, an average affection (Ibid:45) to generate interest without causing intense emotions.

The other element is *punctum*, which captures viewers' attention poignantly. It is an intense attribute, leaving the picture "like an arrow" to "hurt, sting, mark" the viewer (Ibid:46). Because of this intensity, *punctum* is able to break *studium*,

thus filling the entire picture. It is attached to the individual and, therefore, changes from look to look. *Punctum* is capable of remembering a past, creating identifications or referring to other people and places, thus producing the effect of an intense relationship of affection. In addition to the detail, Barthes also attaches to time the ability to produce *punctum* because time emphasizes the past element of the picture, the "it-was." This element is shown in historic photographs, where there is a "smashing of the time" when we read them: "it is dead and it will die" (Ibid:142).

Figure 1. Mobile phone and wounded hand during demonstration (Credits: KHALED DESOUKI/AFP/Getty Images).
Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/39700167@N05/5471113226/

We can apply Barthes' concepts to the above image (figure 1). It is very meaningful to what is being argued up until here. It was captured during the February 2011 demonstrations in Egypt. It shows a wounded hand being treated in the middle of the crowd, while being illuminated by a mobile phone light. The scene reminds one of a surgery room and reproduces a level of intimacy that is interrupted by the camera. The photographer, in spite of the seriousness of the wound, breaks into the scene. This seems to be the intention behind this picture. The camera shows the human body as being powerful and vulnerable all at once. The hand heals, illuminates, and records. At the same time, it is wounded and immobilized (as suggested by another hand grabbing an arm in the back of the scene). The intromission of the camera reveals it all. Technology and flesh are placed close together to denounce upheavals of violence from an authoritarian government.

The *studium* of this photo is the cultural interest generated by the Arab Spring protests, political dimension of the events, and perhaps, the viewers' interest in technology and new media. In our view, the *punctum* is activated by the composition of surgical elements and the mobile phone, which work together in a scenario of instability and strange symbiosis. The mobile device provides another perspective because one of its main functions (talking) is hardly remembered in the scene. All these elements point out to the same center where the flesh bleeds. The needle and the light emitted by the phone pulsate along with the wounded body.

In addition to these two possibilities of interpretation presented by Barthes (1984), I would like to propose another element that influences our understanding of that picture: the collective dimension represented by the spatial sphere where these images were circulated: digital communication networks. I believe the manner in which this picture (and others related to the events analyzed) was shared on networks stimulated affection, transforming the received image into a collective experience. In addition, this dynamic helps expand and transform the meaning of images.

With this perspective in mind, we can better comprehend the reason why our viewing here is somehow sensitized by other stimuli such as touch and hearing. Pain, fear, and affect are all in the scene. This feeling of other senses being activated by images is even stronger with video footage. Entitled "The most amazing video on the Internet #Egypt #jan25", this video[1] is one of the most popular on the subject. It includes a variety of scenes recorded during demonstrations. It shows people shouting and screaming, revealing their wounded bodies to the camera, attacking and being attacked by the police. Suffering is felt by the sound of screams and bombs, but also through the urgency in blurred and disrupted videos. In contrast, joy is felt in scenes where people jump together, hold hands, and throw rocks at oppressors.

This example places the images in an environment where they are meant to produce political affection, contributing to reorganization of the relationship between the subject and the image. It is an aesthetic experience produced by digital communication devices. To understand better the content of these statements, I will now continue our argument by introducing the concept of political aesthetics followed by an overview of the relationship between image, its affects, and technology.

## Political Aesthetics

In one of his last papers, Rancière (2009) investigated possible relationships between aesthetics and politics. According to him, both have the potential to rearrange a given established system. They can operate in the distribution and redistribution of places and identities, suspending normal coordinates of sensory experience. The author believes these concepts are connected because both of them

refer to everyday experiences. Aesthetics, when it operates at the level of everyday; and politics, when it takes place at the same level through micropolitics practices.

The interplay between these two areas took place during the development of art. After a series of changes, art became a practice more connected to ordinary life, distinguished not by technique, but by sensorial intentions. As modernity takes hold, art, to be understood as such, will no longer be based on rules, whether moral (e.g., religious values) or technical (ways of doing). Thus, art will no longer exclude but include and legitimize the opportunity of expression. This shift in the way artistic practice is understood brings together life and artistic creation. In this context, the ordinary becomes a relevant issue. Art takes part in the narrative, while mixing with historical data.

Unlike other authors, Rancière understands politics as a practice of expression that can be done by everyone. When art is connected to everyday life, room is given to the rearrangement of political regimes, by which the "invisible" and the "unheard" find ways of expressing their practices, contributing to the shift of a given paradigm. Rather than struggling to achieve power, politics can be defined as an open space for expression based on ordinary experiences. Such a practice produces what he calls the distribution of the sensible. According to the author:

> This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech, constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible. Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible, which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had been perceived as mere noisy animals. (Rancière 2009: 24-25).

If artistic practice is removed from a special place in which practitioners need time to exercise their tasks, it becomes closer to the common. Thus, a considerably higher number of agents can contribute to the distribution of the sensible, to the reordering of visibilities via expression. Rather than thinking about the use of aesthetics for mass mobilization (as in Russian Realism and Nazism, for example), it is understood as a practice that can contribute to the distribution of the sensible. As a result, it can be said that aesthetics inherently has the potential to become political in cases where the common is expressed.

The interest in ordinary life emerges in XIX$^{th}$ century literature, which has since spread to other arts. Rancière (2004) considers literature a means of creating this disruption in the sensible. This is because fiction has the potential to read signs sent by people and places in many ways. Literary works act as blocks of speech circulating in society. They take ownership of bodies and divert them from their original track. They can disembody the collective body. Yet, such particularity of literary works provokes fear among those in control, those who are afraid of the consequences of a pre-established system of classification being disorganized. According to Rancière, literary products form "uncertain communities

that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2004: 40).

This being considered, it is possible to bring Rancière's ideas to the realm of images in the digital networks mentioned above. Political aesthetics is an important aspect in the complex environments in which modern political insurgences take place. This, added to the fact that potential political images are circulating in digital networks, turn the subject presented herein into a matter of attention for contemporary society. Apart from the issues considered here, other issues can be brought to the debate about the environment where these practices occur.

Given the fact that we live in a world where display interfaces are becoming ubiquitous in daily life, it is clear that the way our senses react to images is also in an ongoing transformation. Panagia (2009) believes that such change has broader outcomes, including, for example, a rearrangement in the democratic realm. According to the author, "the citizen subject of modern democratic politics is not a reading subject, but a viewing subject" (Panagia 2009: 120).

To understand the role played by sensation in modern democracies, Panagia affirmed that society has been tied to, what he calls, a narratocracy. In such an environment, our subjectivities are submitted to a narrative that provides little room for independent thought or independent organizations. In our society, democracy was built based on a discourse, which has a temporality and provides a pattern to be followed. This narrative attracts senses, whereas viewing is guided to interpret the world in a certain way. One of his examples is the way in which the Bible is read by evangelical Christianity, where culture is "rooted in reading scripture" (Ibid: 122).

Panagia uses the ideas of Rancière, Kant, and Deleuze about aesthetics and its potential to create new forms of perception as the basis for his argument. According to the author, aesthetics can be used to interrupt narratives and create new forms of meaning, as well as to rearticulate the senses. Panagia's ideas about the senses are central to the argument presented here. He understands viewing as part of a broader regime of perception, where "the citizen subject is a viewing subject, but viewing is not limited to mere seeing. Rather, viewing is a relay-practice at once internal and supplemental to the regimes of perception that govern visuality" (Ibid: 120-121).

Therefore, bringing aesthetics and politics to the context of image production in digital communication networks requires effort to think about how these images act in a given political arena where aesthetics plays a significant role and where sight and other senses are activated as well. Intensity, immediacy, and the close contact with the body bring the contemporary production of engaged images to an interesting debate about the effects of such aesthetic experiences. These features of images are considered in the following analysis.

## Aesthetic Implications of Images Produced by Mobile Devices

Because the majority of the images analyzed in this work were produced using mobile devices and shared through social networks, in this section, I discuss a few specifics of these media, such as the type of images produced, their sociability, and their closeness to the body. The intention is to emphasize how image production in this environment differs from other ways of image making.

### Sense of Urgency, Immediacy, and Collaboration

One first argument concerns the civic responsibility of images captured using mobile devices. They represent important agents in the dissemination of information in favor of a given cause, as well as a means for producers and their audience to feel politically engaged with movements.

Yochai Benkler (2002) talks about the reasons that drive peoples' participation in collaborative projects. He points out three major rewards: monetary (financial return on time spent on collaboration), hedonic intrinsic (personal satisfaction), and socio-psychological (social and psychological motivations). Considering the last one in particular, there are possible connections that might reflect the impact of images on motivating people to participate in political movements. The author describes this type of reward as "a function of the cultural meaning associated with the act and may take the form of actual effect on social associations and status perception by others or on internal satisfaction from one's social relations or the culturally determined meaning of one's action" (Ibid:59-60).

If we take the images captured by mobile devices into account, we can see that they fulfill this dual societal role of collaboration noted by the author. On the one hand, the demonstrator transmits images to the world. S/he witnesses a moment that can become part of history. Moreover, the immediacy of the events makes the camera an indispensable device that helps capture every moment, in a state of constant vigilance and alertness. Distributed as a mass weapon, a camera can be operated by anyone near a relevant event. It is a possibility created by the multitude. On the other hand, the audience shares the same pictures received, either directly through digital reception or indirectly through later transmission via TV channels or posters posted/carried on streets. The power of images contributes to the socio-psychological aspect of collaboration. More power is given to events through their dissemination over social media and through effective street participation.

This particular pleasure of collaborative participation is amplified by mobile communication devices. The immediacy, sense of presence, and constant vigilance transform participation into something more urgent. These strategies have long been observed in actions of political activism, such as the emotional appeal of independent audiovisual productions, utopian and optimistic speeches, or even shock and violence as an aesthetic appeal. From our viewpoint, what distinguishes

these images from others is the time short interval between their recording and circulation. Sontag (2003) pointed this aspect out in comparing pictures of atrocities in the concentration camps in the World War II and the photos of the Bosnian War in 1992. In the second case, people had access to the photos right after the events, while in World War II, photographs were available only much later. This relationship between recording and seeing generates an effect described by the author as follows:

> (…)Therefore one could feel an obligation to look at these pictures, gruesome as they were, because there was something to be done, right now, about what they depicted. Other issues are raised when we are invited to respond to a dossier of hitherto unknown pictures of horrors long past. (Sontag 2003:77).

The feeling that something needs to be done is intensified with the immediacy enabled by digital communication networks. The installation of a "media station" in the center of Tahrir Square in Egypt during the 2011 events, for example, is related to this matter. Photos and videos recorded by protesters were uploaded from this center and shared via the Internet (some of these pictures are mentioned later in this work).

## Phonebook Reliability

A second point concerns the meaning given by the users to their mobile phones. Aiming to identify connections between the use of mobile phones and civic engagement, Kwak and Campbell (2010) pointed out that younger generations are more familiar with these technologies, which increases their level of response when asked to participate in mobile civic actions. According to them, "mobile communication is the embodiment of personalization because it tends to involve contact with known others with fixed and identifiable account numbers" (Kwak & Campbell 2010: 548).

In the light of this fact, mobile phones have an aesthetic potential in terms of media. This potential lies precisely in close human relationships originating from "fixed and identifiable account numbers". People tend to have more reliable contacts on their phone, which is not always the case their contact lists on popular social networks such as Facebook. Therefore, receiving a piece of information via SMS, for example, means that this information can have a higher impact on the phone user owing to the higher probability that s/he would be trustful of the contacts in her/his list. Accordingly, content received by this means gains an extra level of meaning owing to the social connection behind it. Just to mention a few data, the number of subscriptions per 100 habitants in 2010 was 75.78 in Iran, 87.1 in Egypt, and 106.04 in Tunisia (Itu 2010).

Castells (2013) agrees that the Arab uprisings emerged from the Internet and wireless communication networks, but he also believes in the power of preexisting social networks. Since the phonebook is created mainly by social relationships made outside the Internet, preexisting social networks are used during for com-

munication process via mobile phones. Therefore, important steps for social mobilization pointed out by the author, such as the increasing level of emotion and necessity of identification among participants, are observed better when mobile phones are used.

## Body Proximity

The use of body images in the events mentioned above was one of the main strategies for subverting the standard type of image reception in contemporary global society. Images that show bruises, torture, or death serve to disturb the sensible. They go beyond the narrative levels of interpretation owing to their aesthetic aspects, whereby vision, touch, and other senses have a stake in their creation.

This argument is central to understanding the perspective from which I introduce the body is this discussion. In the past, digital communication technologies have been considered tools for escaping from the real world. Kevin Robins (1996), for example, believed that these technologies promote indifference and disengagement because they create a sense of reality connected to images and disconnected from touch. In his opinion, such technologies mediated body relations with the real world, keeping reality at a distance. To that end, cyberspace could be a utopian environment where one can deny reality, be perfect but not real. According to the author:

> New technological developments continue to respond to this desire to enter into the space of the image. Now, with digital image technologies, it seems possible to make a complete escape from the limitations of real life by entering into the ultimate illusion, that of virtual life in a virtual reality. (Robins 1996:22)

Unlike the author, I believe that the development of digital communication technologies has contributed to bring the body into an organic technological environment in which political actions are performed.

For instance, studies reveal that the level of media interaction increases if touch is involved (Bales et al.:2011). Developers of applications and advertising for mobile phones have long discovered this condition provided by touch screen technologies. Mobile phones are also related to touch if the way in which they are closely connected to the body is taken into account.

When using a mobile phone, one can deal with three senses simultaneously (sight, hearing, and touch), which turns device usability into a haptic experience. According to Oakley (*apud* Paterson 2007:132), "haptics is always that larger human system of perception that deals with touch, and so human haptic system consists of 'the entire' sensory, motor and cognitive components of the body–brain system".

Mark Paterson (2007) also understands haptics in terms of its relationship not only with touch but also with all other senses. He argues that tactile sensibility provides a sense of nearness and intimacy. It can emancipate the eye, taking it from the abstracted gaze to a participatory or empathic gaze. According to the

author, "it is through haptic experience that we feel engaged in the world and through affect that the world and its objects touch us" (Paterson 2007:101).

The author believes that haptic devices are becoming more popular nowadays and are being included in everyday technologies, such as mobile phones. These devices become haptic by the multiple possibilities provided by touch-screens when geographically guiding our bodies through GPS technology and feeding the social networks we belong to with geodata. When one "checks oneself" on Foursquare,[2] one gains a sense of location, a map of our body position being written over the city gradually.

According to Paterson (Ibid:173), when touch is involved, the self is overcome by a notion of intercorporeality, where there is no singular consciousness. To some extent, the feeling of having the being expanded when sharing and consuming images by means of touch screens is also related to the user's subjectivity and his connections with a countless number of people. In other words, the possibility of being part of a collective intelligence (Lévy 1993) is amplified when mobile devices are connected to some type of network.

Given these particularities of visual elements produced in digital communication networks, I will now examine other images that stood out over the course of events in the Arab Spring. I will focus our analysis on images linked to the body and the aesthetic elements that turned them into symbols of the era in which they were generated.

## Ubiquitous Presence of Face

Among the strategies used by activists in the examples above, the use of the face stands out. Images of faces in all kinds of situations have been appearing constantly in material published by digital media activists. Anonymous faces are depicted as martyrs or villains. Why have they become so relevant in such environments? Is there anything particular about this sphere that gives room for such sudden appearance of faces?

Judith Butler, in an attempt to understand the role of broadcast media in covering the events following Sept. 11, shows the different values given to life. In the referred case, she cautiously inquires why only American deaths are shown and mourned, while Iraqi deaths are mentioned only as faceless numbers. According to the author "certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold" (Butler 2004:xviii).

In the following analyses, I observe the manner in which faces can personify social movements, the potential of their political aesthetic elements, and their function as sensing agents for activist causes worldwide.

## Face as Shame

During the manifestations in Egypt in 2011, a media center was created in the Tahrir Square camp to collect media produced by protesters. In a photo gallery on Flickr (Egypt Revolution 2011), where pictures uploaded by the center are listed, there is a strong sense of presence with a variety of elements pointing out to a kind of a signature of participation in the events. In figure 2, the photographer is holding a bullet with one hand and taking a picture with the other. Meanwhile, a man in the forefront witnesses the action. People chat in the background as if they were used to the violence represented by the bullet in their everyday life.

Figure 2. Tahrir Square (Credits: Ramy Raoof). Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/ramyraoof/5401157289/in/set-72157625805754031/

For those participating, it is important to know exactly what is going on, where, and how. The outcome is the production of up-to-date content that intensifies network communications. A detailed description of the scenes via blogs, short text messages on Twitter, and pictures captured in the middle of the crowd (figure 3) are powerful weapons for catching the attention of the members of public not present at the event.

Figure 3. Picture taken during demonstration in Egypt shows the ID of one of the pro-government protesters. Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/56458828@N02/5412363784/in/photostream

The power of the picture above lies in the struggle behind it. It denounces a face. The opposition face. Since an object was seized, I assume that a fight took place moments before. The picture is a sign of victory: a sort of demasking of the enemy to expose the enemy's face. The rolled up newspaper suggests that it could have been employed as a weapon against the enemy, while on the right, other demonstrators doing the same with other ID cards can be seen, suggesting the idea of mutual interest.

Face exposure is the weapon itself here. Many activists have used this strategy, the so-called "naming and shaming," to despise publicly individuals who have been identified as criminals of some kind. This is the case of Piggiepedia[3], a photo group on Flickr for identifying staffers of Mubarak's Interior Ministry by publicizing their faces. Politicians and soldiers' pictures were posted, and people were encouraged to identify them and share what they know about those men and the crimes they were involved in.

Aesthetics in this case is not necessarily in the beauty and quality of the pictures themselves. Most of them are amateur, taken by chance from not so privileged angles. On the contrary, the meaning is derived from a particular political view of the facts. One has to have a basic level of understanding of the situation in Egypt at that time to understand why it was so bad to work or fight for the government. Considering Rancière's understanding of politics mentioned before, pre-

cisely, the politics of those who have no place to share their thoughts comes into play in this case. The attempt to destabilize the sensible here is made by a type of politics that had little room for expression in the media thus far.

Viewed on Flickr almost 3000 times, figure 4 has been shared all over the Internet, which shows its potential to affect. It is described in the group as follows: "According to an eyewitness, this general (on phone) was the one in charge of securing Tahrir area during the conducted virginity checks on female protesters & torture on March 9 in the Egyptian Museum"[4].

Figure 4. Military General (Credits: Gigi Ibrahim). Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/50037840@N02/5905297168/in/pool-piggipedia

Again, I identify here the "name and shame" strategy that gains strength through a variety of meanings included in the caption to the image. The scene shows a soldier on the phone as the center of the image at that moment. However, despite this clear main character, there is an apparent stability overrun with images of rape and torture of the female body brought by the caption text.

This information-based sentence changes, subverts, and brings violence to the image. In addition to this semantic strategy, it is interesting to observe the activist effort to amplify the political meanings of the picture by means of face identification. The identity trace of the real body on social networks transformed into a resistance element.

## Fearless Faces

The pictures of those killed fighting for a cause act as a face for demonstrations. Young students are transformed into martyrs, and their faces are ubiquitous: online, on placards, press, and television. These ordinary faces function as a means of garnering attention from an inattentive audience. Neda Soltan (Iran 2009) and Khaled Said (Egypt 2011) are two of the most famous examples.

The transformations of these two characters into symbols of revolutions in their respective countries are related to the events that led to their deaths. Neda, an Iranian student, was killed by a shot fired by a pro-government militiaman[5] during the demonstrations that took place in Iran in June 2009. At that time, the population protested, alleging fraud in the Presidential elections. Khaled was an Egyptian young man accused by the local police of having posted on the Internet a video in which police officers are seen sharing the drugs seized in an operation. He was caught by the officers in June 2010 from a cybercafe in Alexandria, beaten in front of the place, and then being declared dead when he was finally found. (Sutter 2011, online)

Figure 5. Neda Soltan. Available at: http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_qu97vVnoSKc/Skve6wvyYoI/AAAAAAAADU8/Ecv5ZKWmqXQ/s400/Neda+Soltan+portrait.bmp

Figure 6. Khaled Said. Available at:
http://globalvoicesonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Khaled-Said.jpg

Their faces, once hidden in anonymity, are shown as truth by exposing bare life in its most elemental relationship of biopolitics: the decision of the sovereign "to live" and "let die" (Foucault 2005:287). They are pure images of life/death in the contexts of struggle and violence. They show us the fragility of our bodies and how we are connected socially by this condition. As Butler (2004:20) pointed out "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies." For this reason, they are recognized universally as symbols of resistance to totalitarian governments in the Arab world.

Agamben (2000) discusses the political role played by the face. For him, exposition is the location of politics. Exposed as such in communication networks, these faces politicize the body identity, either through purity or violence. They connect our faces to another reality and show what terrifies most of us – death itself – hence provoking reaction.

Robins (1996) says that fear is what keeps us away from reality. Here, the only ones who have no fear are the dead. As Agamben puts it "the only face to remain uninjured is the one capable of taking the abyss of its own communicability upon itself and of exposing it without fear or complacency" (Agamben 2000:95). The

dead, having no fear, function as role models for those who still have fear, namely, the alive. The peaceful and good-looking faces above provide contrast to the images of violence that have accompanied them. There is a deconstruction of these images due to violence.

There are two video clips showing Neda's death. The longer[6] of them captures the moment when she is shot fatally in the chest. The filmmaker gets closer to the scene where Neda is seen surrounded by people trying to help her. He tries to find room among the demonstrators, filming their despair at the moment they realize what had happened. The footage ends focusing on her unconscious face, while blood oozes from her nose and mouth, covers her face, erasing her identity.

Khaled's face is shown completely unrecognizable after being beaten and killed by the police. His brother took the photo with a mobile phone camera when his family visited the morgue. Realizing the political meaning it could have, Khaled's brother posted the photo on the Internet. The disfigured face presents the shocking level of violence Khaled was subjected to before his death. In figure 7, this photo is shown with an image of his (figure 6) from better times. Here again, death is exhibited by focusing on the face. The disfigured face is shown as a revelation; a flagrant indicator of what should have been hidden, revealing the police violence in the country.

Figure 7. Demonstrators carring photos of Khaled Said.
(Credits: REUTERS / Mohamed Abd El Ghany). Available at:
http://newyork.ibtimes.com/articles/173895/20110704/egypt-khaled-said-protest-july-8-eight-new-york.htm

Life and death placed so close together are an inspiring subject to think about; what types of aesthetic choices have been made by activists in order to amplify the meaning inherent in these images. What makes them so intense and significant? How can violence be raised to the political-aesthetic level? What is its relationship with digital media?

## Aesthetics of Face

We understand that the images analyzed carry two forces that contribute to the analysis of their meaning and impact on events. The first one is linked to aesthetic politics that can be connected to some artistic practices. The second one is the result of the associated historic moment. The aesthetic features of the first force are modified and extended according to the mode of production and reproduction of images in digital communication networks. Thus, I intend to show the dialog between the representation of these faces and the historical political culture of the image. In parallel, I show the relationships of the images with the digital environment, where meanings are transformed and expanded.

For Panagia (2009), the political act is precisely in the capacity of breaking with the narrative, which is a heritage of the linguistic tradition prevalent in contemporary image culture. The author rescues the work of two well-known painters who have also incorporated this narrative/non-narrative shift in their creations. These examples contribute to the point being argued here because they clarify our understanding of the aesthetic politics of the contemporary images analyzed in this article.

The first artist mentioned is Caravaggio. Panagia talks about the painter's obsession with decapitation, a scene represented in many of his paintings based on biblical and mythological characters. The painter is accused of having killed painting because he breaks the narrative in his paintings. Decapitation becomes the most important motive in his canvas, and it is shown as a photograph, an instant image. The viewer is caught by a face in shock, which disconnects him from trying to comprehend the narrative behind it. Medusa or Saint John's beheaded figures would have, in this regard, the same impact. Instead of taking the viewer to the mythical tale, the paintings keep the viewer staring at the face itself. According to Panagia, the faces in Caravaggio's paintings "represent the immersive moment of shock when one's life literally flashes before one's eyes" (Panagia 2009:103). Life and death are together in the same painting, traced on the same face.

Similarly, in Neda's footages we cannot trace a narrative. The images are the outcome of a moment, a necessary immediacy. In the footage showing her death, as mentioned before, what strikes us is the experience of watching her face disappearing in front of us, the moment when life fades away to meet death. The instant at which Neda falls down is recorded from another angle.[7] In the midst of the confusion, the cameraman desperately sets his camera as we watch his finger on the

lens. He rushes to the scene, shoots Neda falling, runs down the back of a person to help, while we get to see her focused bloodied face for a few seconds, and then we are taken to a terrible surprise that partially reveals her beautiful face covered in blood.

All the urgency of the scene is recorded by amateur cameras, which captured the drama among those who are physically present. Panic is exhibited through the lens, which invades the scene without seeking permission. At that time, we follow the activist's body carrying the camera and we feel close to the event owing to the effort of the person who recorded the scene. From that viewpoint, the wounded body, the body-witness regarding and the body that fights for the best pictures affect us deeply. The activist pursues a political aesthetic strongly seduced by body representation.

Panagia's attention was also caught by Francis Bacon´s paintings. He believes the power of this artist's work, too, lies in the deconstruction of narrative. The disfigured faces and disorganized bodies depicted by the painter direct the viewer to a kind of interpretation other than a storyline. Lacking representation, Bacon´s paintings create room for other levels of perception. A disfigured body instigates perception toward different moods and feelings. It dehumanizes and reveals to the viewer her/his animal nature.

In his analysis of Bacon, Deleuze (2005) talks about the deconstruction of human. In *Painting 1946*, for example, the painter manages to confound the human and the animal conditions. Depicting a faceless figure surrounded by a crucified body, the painter dehumanizes the human figure and humanizes flesh. According to Deleuze, the politicization of the images lies precisely in this indiscernibility between humans and flesh. The dehumanized body talks about flesh, the raw material of humans:

> (…) the man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man. This is the reality of becoming. What revolutionary person – in art, politics, religion, or elsewhere – has not felt that extreme moment when he or she was nothing but a beast, and became responsible not for the calves that died, but *before* the calves died? (Deleuze 2005:18).

The impact of the disfigured face of Khaled can be ascribed to this aspect. The police brutality imprinted on the young man's face withdraws his identity and what remains is a body, a disfigured corpse. It reveals to the viewer the fragility of the body, which is reduced to a carcass if its identity is suppressed. The affective function caused by Khaled's body can be better comprehended when we relate violence to its relational power. According to Butler (2004:27), "violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another."

Deleuze thinks about the mouth and faceless heads in Bacon's paintings. According to him, "the mouth then acquires this power of nonlocalization that turns all meat into a head without a face. It is no longer a particular organ, but the hole

through which the entire body escapes, and from which the flesh descends" (Deleuze 2005:19).

The photographed remains of Khaled's head reveal a dreadful image of a hole where once face and mouth were. The beautiful and humanized face has been turned into flesh. It reveals our fragile animal condition, in which pain and suffering operate. A depersonalization takes place where non-narrative faces are deconstructed. The photographs of both alive and dead bodies placed together in figure 7 show this deconstruction.

Simultaneously, these pictures invite the viewer to reconstruct Khaled's being by realizing his animal–human condition. Showing the body at its basis, the power of these images relies on this comprehensive approach that takes identity to the level of flesh, an action that aims to produce response in the audience.

Additionally, the images presented point to a shift in the role played by a dead body in global politics. In the past, a dead body (or a severed head) of someone who had been judged and punished used to be exposed on the streets as an example of misbehavior and as a symbol of government power. In times of global trade, the reputation of a modern State lies on its level of violence toward citizens – the lower, the better. Thus, if violated bodies are shown as an open sign of local repression, the state's global economic interests are threatened.

Khaled's violated face also represents an attitude. The picture was taken in June 2010, the same month when many demonstrations were being organized in Egypt. Initially meant to be a virtual memorial to Khaled, a Facebook page named *We are all Khaled Said*[8] was launched, and it was used as an anti-government space for activists. Six months later, the Egyptian revolution broke out on the streets. In a sense, the name of the page reflects Khaled's picture itself. Disfiguration had transformed his flagellate body into anyone's body. Anyone can be Khaled Said and protest with the body, networks, and technology.

Carsten Stage (2011) describes a similar process in the case of Neda Soltan. He talks about the "thingification" of Neda's image. He analyzes this process of materialization in three different situations: as the sacral figure (transformed into sculptures in the USA), political commodity (products printed with her face), and tangile mask (when appearing in demonstrations). In this last case, the author also interprets the mask as a visually uniform figure translated into a performatic action.

## Iconic Pictures

Taken as isolated examples of a common phenomenon in the analyzed conflicts, the photographs of the two young martyrs went through canonization and iconization, which are connected to the way their images were used by activists and broadcast media, as well as the endless reproduction of their faces. This intensity made them reach a level of iconic significance. Being everywhere, they became information in themselves, adding meaning to different kinds of speeches and, at

the same time, being disconnected from their original context. The phenomenon is not exclusive to digital media, but it is intensified by it, as Andén Papadopoulos (2008) and Yasser Abdul Aziz (Images 2011) have pointed out.

Mortensen (2011) talks about how Neda's figure became an iconic symbol right after the footage of her death was released. Because Neda's images were shown constantly by digital and broadcasting media, they ended up being considered instantaneous icons. The author compares her images to other famous iconic pictures, saying the footage shares "with other icons an inciting combination of affective, appeal, semantic, openness and rich intertextuality" (Mortensen 2011: 13).

Still according to the author, Neda's images play with the way Middle-Eastern women are seen in the West. They also create a dialogue with classic images of demonstrations from the 60s and bring back the idea of martyrdom, presented in Christian and modern Islamic iconography. To that end, the images had in themselves a potential to become iconic globally.

The analysis presented by the author contributes to our goal here because it mentions other aspects worth noticing. Whereas the young martyrs' images bring aesthetical features inherent in themselves, as has been suggested, they are, nonetheless, transformed in this iconization process. The endless reproduction of pictures and footage (or even a printed frame of a video) can be explained by their iconic potential, which Mortensen considers an issue, because this process tends to reinforce existing ways of seeing in contemporary visual culture.

## Conclusions

This work has shown that owing to the high use of digital communication technologies during the conflicts in North Africa in 2011, a large number of powerful images have been produced. These images, in turn, played an important role in the way people were affected both locally and globally.

The purposed debate had as a starting point the ideas of Rancière and Panagia, authors who believe in the power of cultural products to rearrange contemporary political fields by means of their aesthetic elements. Politics comes closer to image production whenever the democratic potential is observed in a collection of visualities, such as the images produced during the Arab Spring. The analysis of this environment contributed to a better comprehension of the role played by visual content in recent insurgent actions and how images can be used as a political strategy.

We intended to show that owing to changes in the system of perception due to new media technology and socio-economic pressures related to biopolitical forces, body image appears as a complex and significant element for understanding the flow of images in the addressed context. The body acts as a sensing agent for pro-

ducers and receptors. Body image, as presented, establishes the link between the screen and the biological, surpassing mediation, reaching the senses.

To better comprehend this potential of the body image in digital media, I have pointed out some peculiarities of the images captured and shared by digital devices in the mentioned events, such as the sense of urgency, strength of phonebook contacts, and proximity to the body.

Finally, the debate proposed an approach between democracy and visual culture. The predominance of the latter in contemporaneity does not undermine the importance of the former. On the contrary, it offers new ways of thinking, of controlling politics in a realm overwhelmed by traditional forms of iconography.

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## Notes

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThvBJMzmSZI
[2] http://www.fousquare.com. Application for mobile phones where users can identify (or "check") places they have visited and share this information with other members of their network.
[3] http://www.flickr.com/groups/piggipedia
[4] http://www.flickr.com/photos/50037840@N02/5905297168/in/pool-piggipedia
[5] The man accused, Abbas Kargar Javid, is a member of Basij, an Iranian paramilitary militia. Abbas shot Neda when passing by the local on a motorcycle. He was promptly chased by people who managed to pull out his identity showing his name, photo and the militia membership. The "name in shame" strategy was also applied in this case. The image of his identity was uploaded on the Internet (Fletcher 2009).
[6] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JlZnvs1tl0
[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7lVRT8wWpk
[8] http://www.facebook.com/#!/elshaheeed.co.uk

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