The Resisting Power
of the Archival Multitude

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The misleading conception that the archive can be considered as a passive and inert collection of documentation –visual and non-visual- has been repeatedly challenged by several philosophers, theorists and artists who, throughout their analysis of this indeed complex structure, have articulated the real nature of the latter, underpinning the theory which sees the archive as an active and empowered medium. But the static nature of the archive has become even more questionable by the acknowledgment of the digital and virtual storage model –the Internet- as the ultimate archival apparatus.

The collaboration between the storage characteristics of the online realm and the technological reproduction of traces such as photographs and videos, means that portable cameras and smartphones have activated an archival system with an unlimited yet problematic potential.\(^1\) Due to the recent expansion of the definition of ‘archive’, contemporary artists and activists have engaged with the archival logic of the Internet and its channels in order to address issues of participation, counter-hegemonic narrative productions and eventually the political and social intervention that such mediums can enact.

Within this essay I will articulate a discussion around the media phenomena that occurred during the Arab Spring of 2011 in Egypt, where the representation of the revolution was actively

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informed by the stream of messages, photographs and eventually videos constantly uploaded by the protestors; producing what the Palestinian contemporary artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme define as an *archival multitude*\(^2\), “the instant networked archival activity of social media and mobile phones”\(^3\) or in other words, the creation of an alternative depiction and archiving of the revolution accounts, enacted by the same participants of the protests. Throughout the essays I will unpack the dynamics of resistance implied within this practice, by analysing the artistic and activist responses informed by the *archival multitude* produced during the Arab Spring - particularly looking at the Mosireen Collective and the on-going art project of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Future Archivist(s)* (2011).

In order to understand the specific case of the *archival multitude* and its embodiment during the Arab Revolution, it is fundamental to recognize the peculiarities of YouTube as an archival platform; the technical, cultural and power related conditions in which this new archival practice works compare to the traditional structure of the conventional archive system.

When considering the proliferation of amateur and semi-professional moving images and the popular accessibility of both tools of production and promotion, digital platform such as YouTube have revolutionised not only the concept of moving image, but also the notion of the archive itself. Although still in the process of being defined, YouTube has become a space where the archival activity has encountered the technology of social media,\(^4\) evolving in a huge, complex and fragmented infrastructure where the traditional notion of the archive is altered by the accesses

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\(^3\) Abbas and Abou-Rahme, “The Archival Multitude,” 347.

\(^4\) Ibid., 345.
offered to those people who are themselves participating in the production of this networked archive.\(^5\)

As articulated by Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau - the think-tank of YouTube theoretical notions - YouTube is the biggest archive of moving image materials in the world, thanks to the constant sharing of new content by individuals.\(^6\) On the subject of the platform’s archival potential YouTube, Pelle Snickars writes, “Protecting and keeping digital content requires public interest - which only comes from various forms of access. This is why YouTube, with its binary cloud of content, is an important archival media phenomenon. The site, in short, offers completely new ways of thinking about both storage and distribution of information.”\(^7\)

As Snickars describes above, YouTube has subverted the modes of accessibility of information, opening the boundaries of both preservation and circulation of the latter by allowing individuals to create, broadcast and receive knowledge. Threatening the institutional informational media and expanding communication channels, YouTube has become a potent alternative to the hegemonic informative system. Compared to the traditionally constituted archive - whose creation is subjected to a system of power that occurs throughout an establishment of rules and methodologies that influences what type of sources are gathered and limit the accessibility for people to interact and intervene - the YouTube archival system is instead collectively built; it gives the tools for the voices of the multitude to speak.\(^8\)

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida within the book *Archive Fever* (1995) wrote: “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Abbas and Abou-Rahme, “The Archival Multitude,” 352.
access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”\(^9\) Considering this statement in relation to YouTube as an archival system then, ‘effective democratization’ is undoubtedly emphasized by people’s agency of both participation and the easy access that this virtual platform allows. The *archival multitude* – as will be critically articulated later in the essay - subverts the politics of power embodied by the traditional archive, modifying its hierarchical structure in which specific narratives or voices are considered and preserved, while others are not.

But despite its democratic potential, it is important to consider that YouTube is owned by a private corporation with specific regulations and a constant scanning of the materials, with total rights to censure.\(^10\) Throughout the following discussion it is indeed necessary to remember that the first ‘libertarian’ impact of the YouTube platform is indeed a controlled and highly regulated medium.

The notion of the *archival multitude* - as stated in the introduction - has been defined by multimedia artists Abbas and Abou-Rahme while discussing the impact that the Arab uprisings of 2011 had on their artistic practice.\(^11\)

The historical event of the Arab revolution and its media practices was an overwhelming and subverting moment: the representation as well as the narration of contemporary events such as the revolution has thus shifted, not belonging exclusively to the official and institutional media but


circulating throughout new communicational channels that allow individuals to intervene within visual narratives concerning this specific event in which they were active participants.

Throughout the constant uploading of Twitter messages and through the flourishing of visual accounts that the protestors were producing and uploading, the Arab revolution became a worldwide phenomenon; the speed in which information was updated made the protest in Tahrir an almost ‘live’ event that people could have follow moment to moment.12 Within this process, the two Palestinian artists have seen the archival multitude appearing, and morphing into a living archive: “For us the vitality that turns the archive into something living is fundamentally connected to a moment of political becoming, when the individual, through a subjective gesture or act, becomes part of a common moment and articulates the potential of the multitude.”13 While conventional types of archives aim to reactivate static sources often produced in the past, within the archival activity of the Arab revolution, the sources are alive; archived in the same moment in which they are produced and intervening within a present political debate.14

This political and radical intervention of creating a counter-archive of the insurrection able to resist the fragmented and misleading representation enacted by the regime, had empowered the voices of the protestors and created a double act of resistance. Producing visual and written testimonials became - during the revolution - an essential part of the protest itself. But the archival multitude produced during the protests does not exclusively resist, because of its contribution to the revolt; on a cultural level, it resists the power structure of the traditional archive by allowing the individual to become a spontaneous archivist, thus creating what Abbas and Abou-Rahme

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13 Ibid., 353.
14 Ibid.
defined as a horizontal archive. The horizontal composition, opposite to the vertical one typical of a hierarchical structure of power, means that the production of the archive is not imposed by one institution or individual that selects, collects and organizes the data according to specific hegemonic impositions.

The vertical nature of the traditional archive can be understood by looking at its original meaning: as explained by Derrida, the word archive derives from the Greek word *arkhéion*, a domicile or a house where the *archons*, the representative of the law, those citizens who had within the antique Greek society a powerful political role, were physically protecting the official documents that were gathered in their domicile. Apart from the role of supervisor, the *arkhons* were also the figures in charge of the interpretation of the documents. From here Derrida extrapolates the power of imposing narrative of the archive itself: “Entrusted to such *archons*, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.”

In order to avoid this position of power Abbas and Abou-Rahme made a stance within their approach toward archival materials and their position as artists/archivists. Their artistic research previously engaged with the reactivation of archival footage, in order to create destabilization within the stagnating representational narratives produced around the Palestinian political and social situation. Their aim was to create a ‘critical archive of the now’ by challenging the archive of documentation produced by the Palestinian authority and the western media, in order to activate an alternative perspective of Palestine and the Middle East. Interested in marginalized materials,

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15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
forgotten films and ‘poor’ images, in their installation *Lost Objects of Desire* (2010) for instance, the artists duo sampled sections of archival footage portraying a secular Arab world and activating it through unconventional editing and a rough musical composition, with the aim of making previously hidden connections visible.\(^{21}\)

In 2011, when the Arab uprisings began, and impressed by the previously described flux of visual information, Abbas and Abou-Rahme began a process of collection of the visual accounts uploaded to YouTube by the protestors. They realized that the political potential of the latter was threatened by the ephemerality that each source was subjected to by entering the immense network of YouTube. Abbas and Abou-Rahme started the still on-going project *Future Archivist(s)* (2011) with the aim to preserve those radical moments before they became lost in the network.

But within this process of collecting footage of the protest, they realized that their position as artists/archivists needed to be re-discussed. In creating an *archive of the archive*\(^{22}\) their position as artists mirrored the roles of the *arkhons*, those who’s role, as articulated previously, is to interpret the archival materials, influencing its narrative potential by the act of reorganizing them according to a subjective or political stance. Their approach to the *archival multitude* shifted, readdressing it towards the individuals themselves and their spontaneous role as archivists, a stance which resists

\(^{21}\) Abbas and Abou-Rahme, “*The Archival Multitude,*” 351.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 353.
the hegemony of power by creating their own digital collection and narrative of the revolution.\textsuperscript{23}

As mentioned above, the conscious agency of the protestors as active archivists was therefore influencing the act of protesting itself. The two agencies within this specific historical moment are inseparable; within one of the videos that Abbas and Abou-Rahme collected for their project, it is possible to visualize this reciprocal connection. It shows a moment where some protestors are leaving Tahrir Square to go back to their houses, and in the background is possible to hear the voice of a man saying “Don’t forget to upload online everything you filmed before you sleep, before you sleep – so we can wake up to a new Egypt without Hosni Mubarak.”\textsuperscript{24}

The action of preserving visual documentation of the protest was made in order to resist an expanding obsession with the now, what Abbas and Abou-Rahme defined as the impulse to produce witness of the moment, without considering the future potential of the latter. The problematic of the \textit{archival multitude} is therefore concealed within the speed in which those materials and voices are so rapidly lost; the political effectiveness of those sources is destabilize by the same system that allows them to enact a political stance. It could be argued that the potentiality of the \textit{archival multitude} can be jeopardize by the lack of a coherent narrative that bind together the sources. The fragmented collocation of those and the speed in which they are substituted by new ones, impact the capability to retrace the chronological succession of the events.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

In order to resist the ephemerality of those digital witnesses and to hold on to the moment of the protests that occurred in Tahrir Square, a group of filmmakers and activist based in Cairo called The Mosireen Collective, initiated an archive of collected videos uploaded by protestors, together with their own accounts on the revolution. Their archival practice was therefore not made from an outsider’s perspective but rather created from within: The Mosireen Collective engaged with the revolution as activists as well as archivists. The non-profit collective was open to people to participate in their practice and they offered the technical tools - such as editing, sound workshops and facilities for filming – in order to improve the effectiveness of the video sharing. They organized screenings during the protest in Tahrir Square, showing the same videos produced throughout the same days.\(^{25}\)

On the YouTube page for The Mosireen Collective, it is possible to watch an immense amount of videos that they have published throughout the protests, most recently concerning the several debates around the on-going political instability of the country. Not all of the videos they have been collecting are retraceable on YouTube, but they are hosted within their workspace which can be visited and the videos freely downloaded.

Aware of the fragmentation and ephemerality of the traces they were producing together with the other protestors, The Mosireen Collective aim to preserve and archive the moments of visual witness so radically fundamental for the political and social changes to which they aspire. The *archival multitude*, originated within the days of the protests, has been used by the collective as a powerful tool for resistance; they had participated in its production, managed to limit its fragmented nature and had empowered it further by acknowledging its potential and emphasizing its dynamic. Foucault remarks,

> To be brief, then, let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities.  

By applying the statement of Michel Foucault, it can be stated that through producing an archive of the multitude the Mosireen Collective aimed to produce a monument of the revolution, a fixed recognition of their fight against the Mubarak regime. By gathering those videos together they have produced a radical narrative of the protests and they have valued the agency of the individuals by relating to each other separate elements.

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The resistant potential of this archival activity lies precisely within the agency of a subject within a common political becoming. Like a physical protest or a revolution, the *archival multitude* is effective in the moment in which the individuals gather together to form a collective that shares the same ideals and that stands for common political changes. As critically discussed by Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, and practically embodied by the project of the Mosireen Collective, the *archival multitude* is a practice that - considering the limits imposed by YouTube as a private corporation and the risks generated by the apparently infinite digital world - resist hegemonic narratives and traditional cultural systems of archiving, through empowering individuals to participate in the narration of the event and the realities that surround them.

Finally the above analysis of the *archival multitude*, originated during the Arab Spring, draws a broader understanding of the shifting terrain of digital culture and the constant tension that it produces: it opens up questions concerning the political potential of digital platform such as YouTube, underlying the problematic that this media conceals, particularly in relation to the

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democratic accessibility of the Internet, whose limits are imposed by national regulations and by private corporations.

However, acknowledging the deceptive freedom that the Internet entails can allow for a critical discussion of the *archival multitude* and its political effectiveness. The horizontal structure of the *archival multitude* resists hierarchical modes of narration and demonstrates how virtual technologies can be utilized to produce counter-narrative and empowering form of resistance.
Bibliography


Websites


Artwork:


Images


Figure 4: Screen shot of top page of The Mosireen Collective’s Youtube channel. Accessed on 22 April 2015. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/user/Mosireen.