Open Fields. (Social) Networks, Revolutions and 'New Real-life Cyborgs'

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to survey two major issues emerging from the recent waves of political upheavals both in the West and in North Africa: the role of self-mass communication and organized networks in building counter-power and that of the women of the Arab spring revolutions, the 'new real-life cyborgs' able to re-shape their bodies as places for semiotic writing and social mediation in order to encourage the rise of new social and political discourses. Making reference to a transnational postcolonial project, as well as to the Spinozan notion of affect, this essay will also try to investigate how global collective identities and subjectivities of the age of social media are shaped within the digital realm.

Contributor Note

Floriana Bernardi received a PhD in Theory of Language and Sign Sciences from the University of Bari 'Aldo Moro' with a dissertation on the huge media phenomenon developed around the Italian journalist-writer Roberto Saviano, author of the bestseller *Gomorra*. Her main research interests are cultural studies and socio-semiotics, with a special focus on gender and postcolonial issues. Her recent publications include 'Roberto Saviano: a Media Phenomenon to Recount the South', in *New Perspectives on Italian Cultural Studies*, (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, forthcoming, 2012); 'Gazes, Targets, (En)Visions: Reading Fatima Mernissi through Rey Chow' in *Social Semiotics* (Routledge, 2010), and her edited and translated collection *Studi culturali: Teoria, Intervento, Cultura Pop* (Progedit, 2011).

1. Introduction: a postcolonial perspective

In a recent interview for Al Jazeera news network, philosopher Slavoj Žižek commented on the momentous changes taking place in the global financial and political system by saying that Western democracies, based on the capitalist economy, have failed. Indeed, as Žižek claims, the 'system has lost its self-evidence, its automatic legitimacy, and now the field is open' (Žižek 2011). At the same time, the revolutionary wave of protests and demonstrations occurred in the Arab world (which have become known as the Arab Spring) shows that the end has come for several totalitarian regimes in North Africa and in other Arab countries as well. Despite the peculiarities of each different upheaval in the 'West' and the 'Rest',[1] such as the London Riots in July 2011, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the Indignados of Spain, the February 2011 Italian women's protests and the protests of October 15th, alongside the Arab uprisings, what is evident is that all these movements seem to share is a common ground of criticism based on the desire for a change. What all the protestors seem to be asking for is more economic justice, more work, more dignity, more human rights, and more freedom in undemocratic contexts. Whether in the West or in the Rest, the rebels appear to be reacting to the extreme concentration of power and wealth in a few hands, a

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[1] By using the terms 'West' and 'Rest', I am obviously using Stuart Hall's words when he theorized the discourse of 'the West and the Rest' as the dominant way in which the West represented itself and its relation to 'the Others' (Hall 2007).

concentration mainly caused by authoritarian governments and neoliberal policies. As Juan Cole states, the rebels

> have taken to the streets, parks, plazas and squares to protest against the resulting corruption, the way politicians can be bought and sold, and the impunity of the white-collar criminals who have run riot in societies everywhere. They are objecting to high rates of unemployment, reduced social services, blighted futures and above all the substitution of the market for all other values as the matrix of human ethics and life (Cole 2011).

In one sense, I want to argue, most of these uprisings can be contextualized within a *transnational postcolonial project* whose major objectives are to assert the right of all people(s) to have the same material and cultural opportunities and well-being, to promote the rights of all, including women and minorities, and finally – more generally speaking – to share a political perspective and an activist philosophy aimed at denouncing and challenging all kinds of imbalances, thus furthering the old anti-colonial struggles, although in different ways, and carrying out an ethical-political intervention in the real world (Young 2003).

As newspapers stressed in their articles and pictures narrating the events of these revolts, what is particularly relevant is that the people who started them are, in particular, young people, often with high levels of education and good I.T. knowledge and skills. Indeed, as I seek to show in this essay, what emerges and one thing to be learned from these

complex conjunctions of political, social and economic upheavals – in which media, cultural and political practice converge and operate in competing ways, both in the West and in the Arab world – is that *self-mass communication* and *affect* (which I will define fully in due course) have been crucial to the building of a certain kind of counter-power. Moreover, what is also noticeable, is the fact that *women* also seem to have had a relevant role in re-shaping their bodies as places for semiotic writing and social mediation in ways which encourage new social and political discourses. This is especially so in the case of the Arab Spring revolutions. Thus, given the arguably key role of women in this sense, it is possible to grasp the elaboration or reiteration of one of the most basic aspects of postcolonialism: that of a close and mutual relationship with feminism. Indeed, As Young points out, after the achievement of sovereignty of their homelands, in many new sovereign States 'women have had to demand again their political rights starting a new fight for liberation' as 'the independence of colonies from their homelands has often implied a transfer of power not to the people of the new sovereign States, but to the local élites who had inherited the whole structure of the colonial State'. As Young argues, 'for this reason postcolonial policies share many more things with women's fights than with those of the men of the colonial age' (Young 2005: 118-119; my translation into English).

As it will be shown in the last part of this essay, to use Spivak's words (and despite her own controversial argument), the Arab uprisings have proved that 'natives' and 'subaltern women' *can* speak (thus being not subaltern anymore), and that an 'ethical encounter' and 'profound engagement' between the West and the Rest can take place, at least on the social platforms of modernity where 'responsibility and accountability' may find their first expressions and may contribute to the ongoing success of political movements and dialogue. In Spivak's words:

> In this secret singularity the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides […] Most political movements fail in the long run because of the absence of this engagement […] This is why ethics is the experience of the impossible. Please note that I'm not saying that ethics is impossible, but rather that ethics is the experience of the impossible. This understanding only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for collective political struggle. (Spivak 1996: 270)

2. Self-mass communication, cyber-Islam, revolutions

As I stated before, the role of self-mass communication – defined by Manuel Castells as the activity and mobilization of thousands and thousands citizens within the realm of the digital public sphere made up of the Internet, social networks, mobile phones and satellite televisions – has been crucial in these uprisings, especially in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, which seem to have sparked off so many other movements. In a study titled *Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution* (2011), Eltantawy and Wiest maintain that new

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communication technologies and particularly social media like short messaging services (SMS), social-networking sites, and blogs, have been excellent resources with which to effectively and successfully organize and implement social movements around the world, thus fostering cyber-activism and citizen journalism. According to the two scholars:

> social media technologies have been used especially in organizing and implementing collective activities, promoting a sense of community and collective identity among marginalized group members, creating less-confined political spaces, establishing connections with other social movements, and publicizing causes to gain support from the global community. (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011)

Particularly, the protesters' usages of social media were aimed at drawing attention when they were in danger and generating international attention and interest in the revolution by posting pictures and videos depicting revolution events and updates. Moreover, Eltantawy and Wiest point out:

> it was the protesters themselves who disseminated information, pictures and videos – not just reporters and group leaders. When the government banned reporters from Tahrir square in an effort to prevent news from spreading to the world, social media technologies enabled protesters to become citizen journalists. (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011)

Even the regime's attempts to stop the protesters' fast and interactive communication flow via social media technologies by cutting off the Internet and mobile phones across Egypt in the days after the 25th January were subverted by the activists who alerted the outside world, turning to Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Here is an example of what a Facebook user wrote on Mohamed ElBaradei's[2] page on the evening of January 27:

> Starting tomorrow morning, all the foreigners in Egypt won't be able to communicate with their countries back home […] because the Egyptian president gave his orders to cut and stop all kind of communications (Mobile + Internet), he doesn't want the whole world to see what he will be doing to his own nation, what kind of president is this? Please spread the word. (Mohamed ElBaradei's Facebook page, quoted by Eltantawy and Wiest 2011)

Therefore, despite communication and information having always been relevant resources for ideology and power – in terms of the 'structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actors' (Castells 2007: 2) (think about the media used by regimes for propaganda) – at the same time they

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[2] Mohamed ElBaradei, the winner of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize and former chief of the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had been opposing the Egyptian regime for several years when the revolution started and he later became one of its leaders founding, in February 2010, the National Association for Change, that is a group of politicians, intellectuals, and activists opposing Egypt's government struggling for democracy.

can also be considered to be useful resources with which to build a new ideology and exert counter-power – or, as Castells puts it, 'the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized' (ibid.). Clearly, communication and information can be crucial resources for social changes given that in the network society both the production of meaning and power relations lying at the basis of all societies are shaped and decided in the pervasive communication realm.

Western media have often deliberately or otherwise obscured the existence of a cyber-Islam. Nevertheless a cyber-Islam has increasingly characterized a large part of the Arab world, since the last decade of the old century. Those familiar with the works of the Moroccan sociologist, writer and activist Fatima Mernissi will not be surprised to learn that the digital public sphere has exerted an important power in thee fostering of such revolutions. Indeed, particularly during the last decade, Mernissi has been stressing the 'mind-blowing civilizational shift' caused by the digital chaos and the new technologies which firstly, in her opinion, have destroyed the *hudud*, the borders, the frontiers dividing the universe into two distinct parts (close and sheltered spaces – like *harems* – where women and children were supposed to be protected, and public ones where adult males could exert their 'presumed problem-solving authority' (Mernissi 2005)), and secondly have worked as strong ideological factors in the process of women's empowerment.

As Mernissi stated in 2001, Western media did not seem to have the least idea of the digital revolution which was already modifying the balance of power in the Arab world, whose digital platforms could be accessed thanks to the widespread proliferation of Internet cafés (or cyber-Cafés) where people – and particularly the youth – debated over *ru'ya*, the visions of the future as key to empowerment. Furthermore, in 2001 Fatima Mernissi described the ways that the 'new' key value for the Arab world was Information Technology (IT) and not (as some American experts maintained) religion. The following excerpt from *Islam and Democracy* (2001) deserves to be quoted at length. In it Mernissi shows how IT skills and a knowledge of the English language (as a way to communicate worldwide), combined with Internet cafés and more or less globally shared sartorial/fashion conventions (jeans, t-shirts, and trainers, for example) were the essential ingredients or tools for the revolutions to come ten years later:

> Karim, who is a regular twenty-five-year-old *diplômé-chômeur* (an unemployed university graduate), left the Economics Department of Muhammad V University with a *Licence en Sciences Economiques*, a diploma no one even bothered to look at when he started seeking a job. […] Like most *diplômé-chomeurs*, Karim taught himself English by simultaneously doing three things Arabs of my generation would have regarded as unattainable science-fiction dreams. The first was channel-surfing for hours through Arab satellite TV channels such as Al-Jazeera, available since the Gulf War even to modest households via a hundred-dollar satellite dish. These dishes are often proudly displayed

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on the tiny balconies of houses in the shanty towns. The second was to learn by heart the multiple versions of 'English Without Teachers' booklets […], originally published in Lebanon and immediately pirated by Moroccans who offer them for 6 dh (50 cents) on the sidewalks by the mosque's entrances. The third was to find a justification for entering a cyber-café without having to pay the 1 dollar hourly fee for using a computer. […] Karim was wearing his generation's new 'traditional' outfit: blue jeans, a white t-shirt and a fake medina-made Nike. (Mernissi 2001)

It was only during the so-called Green Movement and 'twitter(ed) revolution' in Iran in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi and against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June 2009 presidential elections that the majority of Western mainstream media realized the relevance of the digital public sphere, not without putting up some bad shows like in the case of CNN. Indeed, in the same days in which bridge bloggers (namely Arab bloggers writing in English) and social media users were considered by several international journalists as the most important information sources, Twitter hashtag '#CNNFail' collected a lot of snarky complaints about the lack of coverage on Iranian protests by the world famous American cable news network that became renowned by having reporters on the ground during the first Gulf War (1990-1991).[3]

Some prestigious acknowledgements for the crucial role of blogs in defense of freedom of press and information in Tunisia were assigned to *Nawaat* in 2011 by *Reporters sans frontières*, the international non-governmental organization advocating freedom of press and information. As one can read on its website, Nawaat.org – a collective independent blog managed by young Tunisians aimed at granting freedom of expression to all people who see themselves as 'engaged citizens'[4] – won the Netizen Prize, because it

> played a crucial role in covering the social and political unrest in Tunisia that began on December 17 [2010]. The site created a special page for the WikiLeaks revelations about Tunisia, and another one about the recent events in Sidi Bouzid, which were not covered in the traditional media. It also warns Internet users about the dangers of being identified online and offers advice about circumventing censorship. (Reporters without Borders, http://nawaat.org/portail/about/)

In the same year, Nawaat.org also won *The Index of Censorship Award* for having helped informal media networks link communities that had been cut off by government censors and *The Electronic Frontier Foundation Pioneer Award* for having disseminated 'day-by-day user-

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[3] One of the tweets was 'Dear CNN, please check twitter for news about Iran' http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2009/06/15/twitters-protest-cnnfail-on-iran-coverage/ [Accessed 16 January 2012].

[4] Nawaat website is a 'blog collectif indépendant animé par des Tunisiens. Il donne la parole à tous ceux qui, par leur engagement citoyen, la prennent, la portent et la diffusent. Nos choix éditoriaux sont entre autres guidés par les préoccupations qui affectent le quotidien de nos compatriotes et de nos semblables'. (http://nawaat.org/portail/about/, accessed 20 January 2012)

generated news about the uprising and [for having] helped bridge the gap between international mainstream media and citizen journalists and activists by aggregating and contextualizing information spread through social media' (ibid.).

3. (Social) Networks, communities and multitudes' affect

While arguing for social media's ability to shape a new ideology and counter-power, I think it is also important to focus on collective identities and communities which are built in cyberspace and are shaped by what has been thought in terms of a Spinozan notion of affect. The Arab uprisings are possibly the most emblematic and striking examples of how the values of civil society in the network society, especially the defense of rights and freedom, are more and more 'immanent to the socio-technical movements of networks' (Rossiter 2006). As Rossiter maintains, the emergent civil society movements go beyond satisfying the self-interest of individuals and derive their *affective* and *political* power from a combination of formal and informal networks of relations. According to Rossiter, democracy in the Information Society needs to be rethought in terms of 'organized networks' of communication (i.e., 'informal social movements' and 'virtual organizations') which may be able to condition new institutions that are attentive to problems of scale and can address specific needs, desires and interests at different levels (supra-national, national, transnational, sub-national and intra-

regional). Within these digital realms, which are different from other modern institutional forms like governments and corporations founded on the principle of verticality and representation typical of liberal democracies, and yet 'institutional' for their ways of organizing social relations, people try to face (or they organize to try to face) the issues concerning the cultural, social, political and economic life of a community. As Rossiter suggests, in this way the civil society

> does not totally disappear, neither is it destroyed by the neoliberalism established since the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, the civil society has preserved itself within our current network societies, just because there has been this kind of desire and social need.[5] (Rossiter 2006: 80; my translation from Italian)

For Susca and De Kerckhove, on social media (expressive platforms of postmodern culture) several networks of techno-social subjectivities are built and these are able to engender a 'communicracy', manifesting itself as a 'postmodern liquid form of power moulded in every situation in which a *community* vibrates in unison in a state of communion, around a communication'[6]. According to the two

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[5] My translation from Italian: 'non scompare del tutto, né è distrutta dall'instaurarsi del neoliberismo a partire dagli anni '70-'80 circa del Novecento. Piuttosto, la società civile si è preservata all'interno delle nostre attuali società della rete, proprio perché ci sono stati un desiderio e un'esigenza sociale in questo senso'. (Rossiter 2009: 80).

[6] My translation from Italian: 'forma di potere liquida della postmodernità plasmata in ogni situazione in cui una *comunità* vibra all'unisono,

scholars, behind these 'technomagical bonds' one can see the 'erotic urge which moves the bottom of social life, the burning desire of joining the Other in a holistic way' and 'in this scenery the word "connection"' is not different at all from a cult through which every emerging culture shows its vocation to link one another in a state of communion by means of a communication' (Susca and De Kerckove 2008, p. 3).[7]

The people, or 'multitudes', of the Facebook and Twitter era build affective relationships within that intricate process of biopolitical production which is typical of the Society of Control – namely that society in which the 'mechanisms of command become ever more "democratic", ever more immanent to the social fields, distributed throughout the bodies and brains of the citizens' (Hardt and Negri 2001: 41). In the age of Facebook and Twitter (the major networks of biopolitical production), together with all other social media, the productivity of bodies and the value of affect play a crucial political role. This is true both as far as the exploitation of subjectivities is concerned and for their revolutionary potential. Indeed, in Hardt and Negri's opinion, these new

subjectivities, produced by great industrial and financial powers – which in their turn generate needs, social relations, bodies and minds (2001: 32) – live in the 'beyond measure' realm, in 'virtuality', namely the 'set of powers to act (being, loving, transforming, creating) that reside in the multitude' (357).

Nevertheless, how can one define an 'affect' structuring and determining relationships within the virtual realm? What does the term 'affective' mean when it is associated with the noun 'relationship'? One of the scholars who has theorized the notion of affect is Brian Massumi, who defines it as 'primary, non-conscious, subjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified'. In this, affect is unlike emotion which is, in his opinion, 'derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful', a 'content' which can be assigned to an already constituted subject (Massumi 2002). With reference to Massumi's theorization, Shaviro explains that

> emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions. (Shaviro 2010: 3)

According to Shaviro, in today's regime of neoliberal capitalism, we consider ourselves as subjects to the extent that we are autonomous economic units. For this kind of subject, 'emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as much return as possible' (3). Moreover, for Shaviro, what we mean by 'affective labour' is not affective at all, as it implies the 'sale of labour-power in the

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in uno stato di comunione, attorno a una comunicazione'.

[7] My translation from Italian: 'la pulsione erotica che muove il fondo della vita sociale, il desiderio ardente di congiungersi in modo olistico all'altro da sé' e 'in questo scenario la parola «connessione» non è altro che il culto tramite cui si manifesta la vocazione di ogni comunità nascente a saldarsi in uno stato di comunione per mezzo di una comunicazione' (Susca and De Kerckove 2008: 3).

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form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions (4). However, behind emotion 'there is always a certain surplus of affect that 'escapes confinement' and 'remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective' (Massumi quoted by Shaviro 2010: 5). Therefore, our life is always linked to an affective and aesthetic flow eluding cognitive definition or capture (Shaviro 2010: 4) and for Massumi 'it is precisely by means of such affective flows that the subject is opened to, and thereby constituted through, broader social, political and economic processes'. As the Canadian scholar maintains, in Spinoza's terms, affect represents a power or a potential of the human body and human being; it is an expression of its 'vitality' and 'changeability' (Massumi, quoted by Shaviro 2010: 5). On the basis of this deployment of the term affect, Shaviro uses the expression 'aesthetic of affective mapping' to describe the building processes of affective maps which he understands, by reference to Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari, not as static representations but as 'tools for negotiating, and intervening in, social spaces' (Shaviro 2010: 6).

4. Political bodies of new real-life cyborgs

The political notion of affect as a potential for human beings and bodies, understood as the 'tools' for effective intervention in the real world and 'changeability' of its cultural, political and social formations, is essential in the analysis of the way people have started to demonstrate their anger over the current state of things all over the world. Driven by *affect* and, at the same time, engendering new *affect*, men and women's bodies seem to be the most appropriate signs of fierce protest whether by burning, exposing, or simply demonstrating in the streets. From the fatal acts of self-immolation – as in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi[8] and other people in Morocco – to public gestures like that of Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, the Egyptian blogger who posted naked pictures of herself late last year on her blog to protest against violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy; and also, from the pictures of Neda Soltan's dying/dead body in Teheran (2010) to those of the young Egyptian woman being beaten and dragged by army soldiers in Tahrir Square, who was involuntarily exposing her body and underwear, and, still, to the pictures of hundreds Yemeni women burning their veils in public protest, it seems obvious that every shocking and upsetting act involving the body and its clothings 'disrupts the "normality" of socializing norms for a deliberate pause. It is the staging of the body for a momentary reflection', says Hamid Dabashi (2012). Particularly, as it was for Draupadi – one of the most awesome characters of Mahasweta Devi's fiction who fought unarmed against the cruelty of the army officers and Senanayak, their chief[9] – in the revolutions and

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[8] Mohamed Bouazizi is the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 thus catalyzing the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab spring.

[9] See Bernardi, F. (2007), Su Mahasweta Devi. *Plat. Quaderni del Dipartimento di pratiche linguistiche e analisi dei testi dell'Università degli Studi di Bari,* 83-115.

demonstrations of the last months, female bodies have played a crucial role especially in the struggle against military institutions and patriarchal authority, often raising fundamental questions about who owns and controls those bodies.

As I am going to explain, it could be said that digital technologies used by women during the revolutions have affirmed their role as 'poietical' prostheses able to contribute to the attempt of modifying individuals' approach to collective social and political life in demanding a radical transformation. For this reason, one can say that the link between the notion of body and new technologies hints at the theory of post-humanism and the notion of cyborg. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, that greatly influential essay on the discourse of post-humanism/post-humanity, Donna Haraway writes:

> A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction

and social reality is an optical illusion. (Haraway 1991: 149)

Thus, besides being a creature of fiction, the cyborg as a cybernetic organism is essentially 'a creature of social reality' whose possibility of 'liberation' in social and political reality lies in the 'construction of the consciousness', and particularly in the *affective* construction of the possibility of changeability and empowerment for (post)human consciousnesses. Earlier I referred to digital technologies as strong ideological factors in the process of women's empowerment in the Arab world (and not only there). Therefore, it may be interesting to focus shortly on how this process has started, which is inextricably linked to the work of satellite television. Indeed, before the rise of blogs and chats in the early 2000s and of social networks later, the digital television channel Al Jazeera, broadcasting both in Arabic and in English, has contributed to spread among its audience a democratic approach to reality since its foundation. Particularly, with regard to women, making reference to mass communication scholar Amin Hussein, Fatima Mernissi states that satellite television channels – especially Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – have challenged western stereotyped representations of Arab women as *just* daughters, wives and mothers, showing women's complex and often emancipated role in society to the world spectators:

> Female presenters of talk shows and cultural and news programs on Arab satellite television channels are very popular. Talk shows, news and programs feature interviews with

female leaders in business, government, politics and diplomacy […] rather than covering only their role in the household of food preparation and as sex symbols in television commercials and video-clips. (Mernissi 2004)

Moreover, Mernissi argues, among the several innovations that Al Jazeera has brought about since its foundation in 1991 (and later Al Arabiya), strong female stars have invaded the televisual public space. They are no longer 'belly-dancers' who have been for ages the only female representation on entertainment channels, but female leaders in business, government, politics, diplomacy, and also reporters, journalists, anchorwomen, interviewers who broadcast both from closed television studios and from 'open spaces', such as Iraqi streets, Palestinian territories and major international capitals. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya journalists' dress code, their ways of speaking and their methods of occupying the television screen space emphasize their freedom of thought, and this not only influences the representation that Arab women have of themselves, their spaces and roles, but also 'the idea-representation of women that men have' (Valeriani 2005, p. 72; my translation into English). Their 'aggressive style', as defined by Ahmed Ghanem in *The aesthetics of the private satellite channels* (quoted in Valeriani 2005, 75; my translation), gives women a special charm and 'a very distinctive kind of beauty', based on cerebral charisma, maturity, emotional equilibrium and audacity. All these qualities enchant the audience and, according to Mernissi (2004), they are not too different from

the ones owned by Shahrazàd in Arabic tales.

5. Conclusions

As one can infer from this paper so far, for different reasons digital textualities and corporeity are deeply interconnected in the network societies and have shaped the ideology of action of the people of revolutions. However, this is not to say that more traditional forms of writing, like handwritten placards, messages picked out in stones and plastic tea cups, leaflets and graffiti (which are deliberately written in English, as well, so as to be legible and intelligible internationally),[10] have not played their part in the uprisings, coexisting with the most innovative forms of digital writing and often penetrating those platforms thanks to the practice of file uploading and sharing. Indeed, as Patrizia Calefato suggests, in several cases digital technologies have proved to be the fields in which new transnational cultural identities are built and where fashion, analyzed from the point of view of *Fashion Theory* which allows the subversion of the very notion of fashion as an institutional social system, plays a major role too. According to Calefato, thanks to fashion, new 'street styles' can spread all over the world, thus no longer characterizing the pop subcultural universe of western countries solely – as

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[10] See the link to Jano Charbel's blog, a journalist from Cairo, Egypt, 'Street Art and Graffiti of the Revolution', http://she2i2.blogspot.com/2011/03/street-art-graffiti-of-revolution.html), March 26th 2011 [Accessed on 29 February 2012].

cultural studies scholars have been theorizing since the 1950s – but populating the entire global network where people adhere to aesthetic models and lifestyles following collective processes fostering an ideal and practical identification (Calefato 2011, p. 141). Calefato argues:

> Today like never before, written signs and oral words, literature and pictures, words and bodies, traditional methods of writing and reading and the most advanced technological forms of textuality contaminate mutually and show themselves as various and manifold performances of 'writing' in the most deep and philosophical sense of this word: namely the incision of a presence in the world, the rhythm and texture of relationships whose protagonists are bodies. (2011: 143)[11]

In conclusion, then, we should go back to the multitudes, the collective identities inhabiting the Empire, namely the 'political subject' of the globalized age, a '*decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' as Hardt and Negri define it (2001: xii). For

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[11] My translation from Italian: 'Mai come oggi, il segno scritto e la parola orale, la letteratura e le immagini, le parole e i corpi, le modalità tradizionali della scrittura e della lettura e le forme tecnologicamente più avanzate della testualità, si contaminano reciprocamente e si presentano come svariate e molteplici manifestazioni della 'scrittura' nel senso più profondo e filosofico che questa parola contiene: cioè incisione nel mondo di una presenza, ritmo e tessitura di relazioni che hanno come protagonista il corpo'.

both scholars, the Empire exerts enormous powers of oppression and destruction, but the political task of those inhabiting it is not simply that of resisting these processes, but to reorganize and redirect these processes towards new ends. Indeed, Hardt and Negri believe, the creative forces of multitudes are able to build a 'counter-Empire', namely 'an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges'. They believe that 'the struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself' and, in fact, it is just on this terrain that they have already begun to emerge, as social media and digital platforms are only a few of its manifestations. For Hardt and Negri, 'through these struggles […] the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond the Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2001, p. xv).

In this theory by Hardt and Negri, which is based on a micropolitics of affect and on the valorisation of the Spinozist 'power to act in terms of the singular and the common' (2001: 359), I think one can grasp the core of what Paul Bowman has termed 'alterdisciplinarity' (2008), here meant as the intervention in the spaces of production and legitimization of power, by such means as arguing using the same means and tools of Other's knowledge and power – namely the 'tools' of biopolitical production – in order to reach other conclusions and differences that matter, that is the renewal of the current political, economic and social order through the

renewed power of new multitudes and collective bodies. Whether this vision will actually be fulfilled, it is a matter of long-term results, the 'open fields' evoked in the title of this paper. For the moment we can just say that all the recent upheavals seem to have once more validated Castells' theory of the Network society: citizens' awareness – if not proper democracy – can spread through the nodes of network connections, those un-hierarchical spots of social and political mediation independently interdefined.

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