Media Augmentation in the Arab World: The Return of the Repressed

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When the revolutions in the Arab world erupted, media augmentation was the sole direct reporter of the events happening in the street. It was the image of the revolution and, at the same time, the revolution of the image, an image that had exploded into the reporting of the explosion. What is manifested from all those revolutions is a violent brut image that does not care about the high definition of its resolution but about how real and genuine it is and therefore rough and pixelated. Media augmentation becomes the violent and aggressive reporter of the violent event themselves, the context as well as the content of that media are both violent and aggressive by default, and when it is presented into a plastic and synthetic façade for entertainment purposes, it remains violence and aggressive latent beneath all the layer of the spectacle, or even violent because it is hidden under the postcard-image of the spectacle. Revolution by itself is an act of violence, and the augmented image by itself is an act of violence; the result is a spectacle of violence for an audience that can only be entertained with such acts of brut violence. With media augmentation, the multitude are themselves the perpetrators, the victims and the perceivers of all that violence with all its types and all the complexities of its layers and variations, through enacting it, watching it, consuming it or just living with it as a normal quotidian.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The most flagrant signs of the beginning of the age of augmented reality is the explosion of the Arab revolutions, the eruption of the Tunisian revolution marked the first blatant blast that exemplifies augmentation. The period of implosion in virtual reality has served its purpose as an incubator and the explosion was the only way out of a schizophrenic condition that the Arab masses lived, between freedom and oppression, between the fantasia of the virtual and the nightmare of the actual.

The revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests started in Tunisia on the 18th of December 2010 with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi who was selling fruits at a sidewalk when a police

officer confiscated his carriage as illegal, he then drenched himself with gasoline and set himself in fire. This incident was the direct catalyst for a series of demonstrations that ravaged the country and thus the beginning of the Tunisian revolution. This had led eventually to the fall of the regime and Bin Ali, the Tunisian president, was forced out from power. Eventually the revolution started to pick up speed and spread into several other Arab countries like Egypt, Libya and Yemen and later on in Syria where the peaceful demonstration were crushed by the regime and the clashes quickly transformed into a civil war that is still going up until now.

In most of the Arab spring countries, demonstrations were met with violent reactions from the ruling regimes that are mostly dictatorships. Although all the civil upheavals

started as peaceful demonstrations calling for small changes on the social level, they quickly transformed into huge protests waves demanding the fall down of the dictator's regime, when peaceful demonstration were met with violence this did not force the people to retreat, like it is usually the case in so many previous occasions, but on the contrary this time it escalated into an explosion of demonstrations that have now a more of political demand, mainly to end up with dictatorship and have freedom, and this was actually the main slogan in all different countries: "the people want to bring down the regime" (Abulof, 2015, p. 1).

Many believed that these demonstrations all around the Arab countries were instigated by a major dissatisfaction with the rule of governments that are exemplified and directly ruled by one person on top of the system. A ruler that forbid freedom of expression or any sort of political freedom or activity, totalitarian regimes that are the results, in many cases, of a military coup d'états that took place in many Arab countries in the 60s and 70s and that resulted into the rule of a single political party headed by one person for life and that forbid political power devolution. Also another factor that helped triggering the revolution was the economical crisis that hit the world in 2008 and had a tremendous effect on the Arab countries that were already suffering of a misdistribution of wealth. This economical crisis contributed in widening the gaps in income levels between the politically privileged and the "normal" citizen. This situation contributed in the economic decline and the raise of the rate of unemployment leading in so many cases in different Arab countries to extreme levels of poverty. In addition to a high level of violations of the human rights that was taking place on different level through imprisonment for political purposes and illegal detentions for the smallest of reasons as part of the enforcement of martial laws that was genetically implemented as a state of emergency to protect the so called "revolution" or this coup-d'état.

Along all these socio-political reason for an upheaval the situation remained calm all over the Arab world up until the advent of new technologies of mobile connectivity that eventually allowed people to break this schizophrenic situation they are in between the two realms of the virtual and actual. With mobile Internet connection people were able to take their virtual fantasies with them to the street of the actual where they exploded as acts of revolution, in many of the cases, without the knowledge of the masses that they were contributing in a revolution, a revolution without leaders, (Arendt and Schell, 2006), it was so much an act of an improvised demonstration demanding little changes in freedom of expression or economical situation. The revolution in the Arab

world was a surprise to its conductors as much as it was a surprise for the media and the international politics and mostly a surprise to the Arab dictators themselves who never thought that the masses that stayed under oppression and control for so many years were able of such an act of rebel. The new technologies of mobile communication allowed the masses the same freedom of expression that they experienced in the virtual as incognitos in the privacy of their homes but this time it a new experience, an experience of the public space that they never before had, for the first time the public space gained back their role as spaces for encounter and communication, "hyper-modern spaces" of interaction and freedom of expression (Virilio, 1993, p. 2); and thus eventually spaces for change.

2. THE FORBIDDEN TRIAD

In the introduction of his book "The forbidden triad, studies in religion, sex and class struggle" Bou Ali Yassin (Yassin, 1978) described the political situation in the Arab world of the early 70's in relation to three main variables that are forbidden and used for political oppression; religion, sex and class struggle. The study, as he puts it in the introduction, is an analysis of the "Forbidden triad; (first) religion as a subject of scientific study, (second) sex as a field of enlightenment and culture, (third) class struggle as a theoretical and practical tool for social change. The governing and oppressing classes forbids those acts and only attack atheism, erotic and communism" (Yassin, 1978, p. 6) for him those three aspects are used by the ruling classes to maintain power and to oppress any possibility of social change:

"It is easy to use religion as an unconscious tool of oppression against social struggle. From one hand, religion deviate people's fixation from material salvation to spiritual salvation, from actual life to heavenly promise beyond death. From the other hand, religion justifies misery and injustice for the oppressed as a test of faith, punishment for their sins, a rage from God, earth life is for the rich but heavenly life is for the poor, and God only gives the rich to mislead them into sins; religion promises salvation, promises all what it forbids on earth in real life, but in return it asks a lot, it asks for subordination, patience, surrender to fate, spiritual satisfaction and so on, and asks the rich for charity and sympathy towards the poor" (Yassin, 1978).

For Bou Ali Yassin religion is an alternative for class struggle and thus forbids social change and normalizes misery and social injustice, it also encourages patience and forgiveness. And in so many cases religion becomes a tool for persecution

against the multitudes when its rules and teachings becomes the civil laws and social boundaries, when atheism becomes a crime punished by death no one would dare speak against religion or even be neutral towards it. Another pressing factor used for oppression is sex, or the idea of sex understood through religion, as it becomes the greatest sin when it is outside wedlock. Even when it is accepted by religion, sex is only a technical process for procreation and not for pleasure fulfilment, and it would be much better without it since it is directly linked to the original sin, from here came the idea of virginity as a holy and sacred status. Under such conditions sex becomes associated with impurity and sin and thus restricted and conditioned to many boundaries and regulations that would channel the instinctive desires into frustrations and obsessions.

But political oppression in the Arab world does not stop here, in most of the Arab countries it is most forbidden to talk politics, to talk about the authority, to talk against the president or the king or the leader. The waves of revolution that hit the Arab world in the 50's and 60's up until the 70's brought about new political systems of hegemony. Mostly based on a military coup d'états, the so-called revolutions led to dictatorship under the cover of democracies or socialist states.

The situation varies between the different Arab countries but still the result is the same, totalitarian political systems that retain political oppression on its citizens. For several years this political totalitarian hegemony dominated the Arab world and kept the Arab multitude under heavy embargo of oppression and tyranny. The mass media that dominated the scene were governmental and manipulated according to the will of the sole ruler, and freedom of speech was equated to null. The urge for an alternative media was pressing and the level of oppression and frustration was accumulating until the advent of the Internet and the implosion of all that political and social frustration into the virtual realm of the World Wide Web. All that political and sexual frustrations, when accumulated from one generation to the other, will need to explode somewhere somehow, and they did in so many violent occasions all around the Arab countries, but with virtual reality people found the resort to express their desires openly without the fear of persecution. But of course this was not enough and was only possible in a parallel level of the masse's life that eventually caused a cleavage between the two realms of actual and virtual. Media augmentation and the mixed realities that it allowed created a space for the explosion, a new formula of an actual space-time that took people back to the street and away from their umbilical cord to the computer screen, the explosion of the masses in the political manifested itself on several levels

namely the burst of the revolution in the street and the beginning of the Arab spring.

This shift of the relations between private and public spaces was adjusted after being reversed for so many years of the virtual, where the private became public and vice versa. The notion of public space in the Arab countries is a peculiar one, there is no total public space as such, there always existed a second layer of restricting any public space from becoming totally public, a religious layer sometimes, a sectarian layer, a political or gender layer so many times. This latent layer of restriction always excluded an individual or a group of people from entering one space or the other, in most of the demonstration of the Arab revolutions there lacked the female presence, women were not allowed to demonstrate along with men, they either have their own demonstration or their own block in a demonstration, only in Tunisia women were marching along with men in the demonstrations but they were few in numbers. In Egypt sexual harassment is a systematic weapon to prevent female from participation in the demonstrations. In Bahrain the demonstrations were totally sectarian of Shiite demonstrators against the Sunnite regime, in Syria demonstration are sect pure, gender pure and religious oriented. Even before the explosion of the revolutions the Arab public space always excluded a certain group of people doomed as unaccepted for many reasons related to their social status, their sect, their clothing, their behaviour or companion.

3. REVOLUTIONS AND MEDIA AUGMENTATION

The image that results from the new technologies of media augmentation is an image of revolution by itself; it is an image that exploded in the actual reality after spending so many years loose but enveloped in the virtual. After a hideous implosion in the realm of simulation it exploded in the realm of the actual overlapping the physical with a wrap of virtuality. It is an image that exemplifies revolution by the mere fact that it breaks the virtual boundaries of static, catatonic, digital existence into a mobile, kinetic, mixed existence. It is an image of revolution because it is the way out of the dream-like reality that was created by the digital technologies to relief the burdens of the actual. The incubation period of virtuality was by itself a space for oppression, although it allowed the creation for a utopic reality of unlimited capabilities, but all its competences were handicapped and limited to a specific space and specific time of the realm of the illusion and fantasized world of the virtual. This has created a anxiety of separation disconnecting people from essential parts of their lives namely the physical and instinctive parts. The new image that resulted from media augmentation and mobile

technologies is an act of destruction against the previous image of isolation and cocooning, an image that erupted from the nullification of actuality in favor of virtuality to regain the space-time relation to regain the five senses and the instinctive drives that were partially gone or put on hold. Physical aggressiveness is regained with the mobile image of augmentation, the indolent body is now awakened and the wired mind is relaxed. The marginalized senses of touch, smell and taste are back but this time they are equipped with all the capabilities and fantasies of the imagined construct (Khbeiz, 2003, p. 43). The return of the repressed is inevitably an explosive return, it is not just a continuation of the period of the pre-virtuality but more a violent act against both the image of conventional representation and the image of simulation, a hybrid monstrous image of combinatory assemblage. The physical body is back mutated with cybernetic elements that render it into a Frankenstein of aggressive physicality augmented by a plastic façade; "Its alive" (Shelley, 2003). The image of representation is also back but transfigured into a mixture collage that transforms its digital parameters into transparencies that filters the actual and masks its appearance with an instantaneous, continuous, interactive and mobile layer of virtuality. This augmented image becomes an omnipresent image that will explode in the actual with an obscene urgency never before seen juxtaposed in two different realities at the same time.

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4. MEDIA AUGMENTATION AND VIOLENCE

The concept of violence has been studied so many times along all major historical catastrophes, so many authors wrote about it describing so many types of it and did so many discussions around it. Such an unidentified, or better to say extensively identified, concept becomes more of a riddle for any researcher wanting to study it. In the popular mind it is known that "violence engenders violence", some sociologists claim that it is part of human nature, it is human's animal instinct and it will never fade. Furthermore, violence cannot be understood only on the level of physicality as savageness, it can also be civilized and latent, symbolic and blatant, systemic and institutional. Violence can be an assault on people's personhood, individuation, personal dignity, sense of worth and sovereignty. To study violence only through its apparent manifestations of physical assault, force, terror or pain infliction can be a dubious matter that will only state the obvious and misses the point. It is rather a work of an anthropologically conversant anthology that would go deeper in the multi-layered social structures, economical drives and power relations. However, violence as a concept can never be categorized and framed, it can be almost everything and everywhere, legal or illegal, appropriate or inappropriate, rational or irrational, it can be perceptible or covert, active or dormant, definite or unlimited; what comprises violence is forever an uttered and implicit dichotomy. Slavoj Žižek tried to pinpoint this paradox and to find an alternative way in looking at violence and therefore to try to really define its borders in order to find a violence to "fight violence and promote tolerance" (Žižek, 2008, p. 1).

"If there is a unifying thesis that runs through the bric-a-brac of reflections on violence that follow, it is that a similar paradox holds true for violence. At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a dearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance" (Žižek, 2008, p. 1).

For Žižek violence should be dealt with in an indirect manner, the horrific nature of violence and the empathy it generates renders it immune to be

confronted as it becomes too aggressive to be challenged with mere sympathy or peaceful activism, it prevents from thinking:

“There are reasons for looking at the problem of violence awry. My underlying premise is that there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking. A dispassionate conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact. Yet there is a sense in which a cold analysis of violence somehow reproduces and participates in its horror.” (Žižek, 2008, pp. 3–4)

All humans are capable of violence as much as they are capable of rejecting it, but civilized humans are forbidden of acting out their violent instinct, forbidden of committing atrocities without any motive or sense. But unfortunately, not all violence is senseless; the most horrific of violence acts are the ones enacted from a premeditated rationality and are intended to inflict pain and harm to the other or others. Cultures and social structures are the origin of intentional violence or intentional prohibition of violence. For Scheper-Hughes the family is the most violent of social institution, (Scheper-Hughes, 1993) and long before her Sigmund Freud emphasized the prominence of violence in ruling interfamily relations (Freud and Strachey, 2001). And later on in his work on collective psychology and the effect of civilization on the human psychic in “Civilization and its Discontents” he investigates the biblical commandment of “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Freud, n.d.) correlating it to “Love thine enemies”, he goes on to say that:

“men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him” (Freud and Strachey, 2001, p. 68).

In that sense, the first impression one has to others around him in a civilized society is that of aggressive hostility and the other is always an object to exploit and mean to fulfil instinctive desires and drives of sex and violence.

Violence in that sense becomes one natural drive like love or empathy, a human instinct like food and sex. Violence becomes a crucial part of life when it becomes an element of its circularity of life. It engenders acts of aggressiveness and eventually, when it becomes a collective it leads to wars. In his “The Crowd: a study of the popular mind” Gustave le Bon associated violence with any psychological crowd movement, (Bon, 2013) for him an agglomeration of people can only react in a violent manner when triggered as they are not able to reason and therefore will directly react from their unconscious without any filter of the mind and the social restrictions enforced by reason. As natural as it is, violence becomes entangled with the process of life, with the all other elements that serves into the human evolution, with the psychological drives of survivor and the rational problem solving tools to overcome nature’s distresses. The link between violence and technology becomes one major aspect of survival. Most of the technological tools evented by humans from their early existence were weapons, weapons that enabled them to have control over the animals kingdom and later on to have control over other humans. Up until now the advancement in technology is mainly driven by researches conducted for military purposes in the objective of creating weapons, or in certain cases, the other way around; civil technologies that are eventually used as weapons. The new technologies of communication owe its existence to military projects that the US government developed in building its nuclear arsenal. The jet engine that enabled the invention of the rocket that enabled the humans to put a satellite in the orbit that eventually enabled instantaneous communication were all military technologies developed at the end of the second war and during the cold war. Nuclear technology itself is a of course first and foremost a weapon and then becomes a civil technology when used to produce cheap electricity and later on even used in medicine.

Media augmentation and its related technologies cannot be separated from violence like any other previous technology throughout the years. But what is different now with those technologies is the new realm that it opens in the field of space and time. Augmented technologies are becoming more and more the norm everywhere, the minimum requirement to create an augmented space are easy to achieve worldwide, even in the most remote countries and even under abnormal conditions of war and instability the creation of an augmented space proved to be easier, and some times more important, than providing drinking water. The mere fact that any wireless internet connection is available make the space an augmented space whether it is Wi-Fi, 3G, or any kind of direct satellite

connection which is available without the dependency on any local infrastructure. And this augmented space is a space for violence in many ways depending on the condition of use of it. In Syria, for instance, an augmented space takes a lot of cumbersome work to be created and is used in the war effort as a weapon, in fact it became the most influential weapon in that war. Very basic augmented spaces in Syria are created by media activists under heavy circumstances of embargo and shelling for the sole purpose to show the images of the atrocity of the war, or from another point of view to create propaganda for the revolution. In any case these augmented spaces that are the backbone of the alternative media are becoming one major weapon that the ruling regime is not able to shut down even after cutting all the basic infrastructure. This media becomes a space of violence in what is presenting and in the way it is used by the revolutionary forces and the regime as a weapon of war and also a space of violence in how much efforts and sacrifices it requires to be created under the difficult situation of war, many activist were killed while installing an internet antenna or while making videos or taking photos, for the Syrian army of the regime a camera is considered more dangerous than a gun.

An augmented space is also a space for violence even in the most civilized cities and under the most peaceful conditions as it is a space full of information that circulates between the users of that space, and a space of surveillance and monitoring exercised by the servers operating that space to collect information about the end users that can be utilized in so many ways of advertising and marketing or even for security purposes invading the privacy of the individual and affecting they way people conduct their lives to the smallest detail. In Korea, for instances, augmented spaces are everywhere in the cities, all sorts of wireless Internet connections, giant screens covering the building facades, and small one on every corner, in the public transportation or shopping malls, surveillance cameras, movement sensors and interactive devises like vending machines or vending walls. An individual is overwhelmed by information even without having any communication device on her/him; no one can escape the exposure to advertising and marketing or monitored positioning. This space is a panoptical space par excellence, a space to monitor and enforce "discipline" (Foucault, 1995) in a Foucauldian sense; in short, it is a space 'of violence'. And also a space 'for violence' in so many cases were the spectacle on site is most of the time coined with aggressiveness and action, what is worth showing is a freak show. What this media augmentation is doing is banalizing any act of violence and normalizing atrocities and flagrant

inhuman acts through transforming them into entertainment shows.

5. CONCLUSION

Freud's concept of the "return of the repressed" (Freud et al., 1962), the return of desires that, being socially unacceptable or the return of the repressed traumas into the unconscious to resurface again in another form under different circumstances, this concept is now exemplified in what happened in the Arab world or what is happening worldwide with augmented media.

The Arab masses lived a long period of dichotomy between two realities of virtual and actual, realities that are so contradictory in so many aspects of freedom of speech and freedom of expressing political and religious views beside a basic freedom to interact with the other sex and freedom to chose and express sexual orientation. All those freedoms were not possible in actual reality and were repressed until the new technologies of virtual reality allowed them to express themselves in a contained environment of the Internet. The implosion of all those freedoms in virtual reality allowed for an incubation period until the advent of yet a newer media that added a layer of mobility to virtual. In this sense, what was latent and repressed in the virtual realm of expression has now returned with media augmentation. Mobility was added to connectivity and the result is explosive.

Media augmentation is a clash between the two realm of actual and virtual and this can be seen on so many level of image production whether direct violence or indirect and symbolic. Although its name suggest augmentation as an addition asset or enhancement of quality but what is actually happening is a violent explosion. This can be obvious when talking about media augmentation in the context of the Arab revolutions that has transformed into violent civil clashes especially in the Syrian and Yemeni cases, and it can be less obvious in so many other contexts where violence was symbolic or latent. But this explosion did not came from a void, the signs of the fragility of virtual reality were apparent in so many situations, like the event of 9/11 that was considered a symbolic event against the simulation (Baudrillard and Turner, 2012) and the virtual reality that the western masses were living in, a wake up call from the desert of the actual, or like the global economical crisis that is considered a crack in the quasi perfect crust of virtuality as the international economy inflated with virtual money transfers and e-commerce that it eventually burst into nothingness. This is yet another symptoms of the collapse of the illusion of well being that the

masses lived in the virtual era, in the matrix of a capitalistic pseudo heaven that started to shake under the pressure of social media activism and augmentation.

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