Sophie J Williamson on the case of Khaled Mohamed Saeed

Viral Images

Mosireen Collective's Tahrir Cinema was founded in July 2011 in order to present censored footage of the Egyptian army's human-rights violations

On 6 June 2010, Khaled Mohamed Saeed, a young Egyptian, died at the hands of police officers after a brutal beating in a suburb of Alexandria. Subsequently the image of his disfigured corpse, released by his family, spliced alongside his passport photograph, was vigorously redistributed by online networks throughout Egypt, inciting widespread rage against endemic police brutality. It was this single striking image that inspired the first Egyptian protests, in both Alexandria and Cairo, and marked the rapid countdown to the revolution.

In his seminal text *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord writes that 'the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by image'. Debord was writing in the context of the May 1968 protests in Paris, where distributed posters depicting simple yet striking iconography played a major role in uniting workers. Throughout the so-called Arab Spring the use of iconic posters has continued to play a part, with an abundance of artists turning their hand to producing them; and new networks have emerged, such as the poster blog The Syrian People Know Their Way, which uses digital networks more effectively to collate, produce and disseminate imagery. Moreover, the image is at the heart of political dynamics in the Middle East. Spectacle is employed by all sides – the state, oppositional groups and ordinary people are all utilising the image to exert political influence. Images such as that of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire, or Hamza Ali Al-Kateeb, the 13-year-old Syrian boy who died while in government custody, are familiar worldwide. As Lina Khatib has recently outlined in *Image Politics in the Middle East*, the construction of social and political reality throughout the political struggle has been an inherently visually productive process, with an endless process of competing images battling, reversing, erasing and replacing one another.

The Egyptian revolution is often misleadingly referred to as the 'Facebook Revolution'. It is important to recognise the wider media context of independent online news channels and online activist forums that, coupled with the infrastructure of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, were integral to providing material and information to Al Jazeera and other international media. Importantly, however, the redistribution of the image does not only exist online; images, and their associated commentary, also spread materially and in person through mosques, cafes, squares and other public meeting places. Throughout the revolution and the continuing political struggles, images have circulated cyclically from online to the streets, then back to mass media and online media. A Google search for Khaled Mohamed Saeed will produce numerous rehashings of the original image, from YouTube montages to photographs of graffiti, from Twitter meme to documentary footage of protesters' placards.

At least since the elections of 2005, when protesters, attacked by thugs and the riot police, responded by photographing incidents of state brutality and later integrating the imagery into their demonstration banners, the camera has been a potent weapon of resistance to political oppression. The photograph is commonly seen to evidence history visually; however, as Susan Sontag reminds us, 'to photograph [is] to compose'. In Egypt, in an atmosphere of acute visual awareness, no single image, however amateur in its production, can be seen to represent an objective truth. The decision by Saeed's family to capture and circulate the image was a highly politicised act; what has become clear is that reality and consciousness are not only reflected but also produced by images and screens. What is so poignant about the image of Saeed is not the initial intention in its creation but how the image was received by its audience. As Roland Barthes has written, 'the language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted ... It is also the totality of utterances received.'

While the redistributed image of Saeed remained largely unchanged, the supporting story that circulated with it varied considerably. Seized from an internet cafe, some accounts say that he was left dead in the street after a brutal beating in a doorway, while others claim that he was bundled into a police van only for his corpse to be dumped minutes later. Official police reports say that, as a regular drug user arrested for theft and weapons possession, he choked to death while trying to swallow hashish. His family, however, claims that he was uploading video material that implicated members of the Egyptian police in a drug deal. The photo itself was taken after an autopsy, which sparked disputes about whether some of the injuries seen in the image were delivered before his death or were the outcome of postmortem examinations. Saeed's neighbour, Amro Ali, has since published an in-depth critique of the events, *Saeeds of Revolution: De-Mythologizing Khaled Saeed*, which gives an insight into Saeed's somewhat dubious past. However, the discrepancies in these details were not important to the thousands of Egyptians who redistributed the image through their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The image quickly became independent of any objective retelling of its story; it stood for itself as telling of a seemingly objective reality of police brutality and the loss of individual dignity prevalent across the country. As it reached epidemic circulation, the image reflected a desire for political action within the population, creating new social and political dynamics in its path. A Facebook group, We are all Khaled Said, set up by Google executive and internet activist Wael Ghonim, attracted hundreds of thousands of followers within weeks, creating in turn a human rights outcry across the globe. Within weeks Saeed was elevated to become a national rallying point within Egypt itself. It was through this Facebook group that the first calls to protest were announced. Whether he was an online activist uploading incriminating footage or just another of Eygpt's disaffected youths, Saeed became the revolutionary poster child who inspired the masses.

protest to mark the 2nd Anniversary of Khaled Mohamed Saeed's death, Cleopatra Hamamat, Alexandria, 9 July 2012 photo by Amro Ali

Khaled Mohamed Saeed graffiti in Cairo photo by Amro Ali

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In Hito Steyerl's insightful essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', she describes the life of the online image as one of acceleration and deterioration; 'a copy in motion'. The 'poor image' is one which has been 'thrust into digital uncertainty' – somersaulted through successions of uploading, downloading, reformatting, re-editing and redistribution; quality is transformed into accessibility. In turn, image-value is defined not by resolution and content but by velocity, intensity and spread. This is not only true of the physical quality of the image, as Steyerl speaks about it, but also of the depth of meaning, understanding and context of the image.

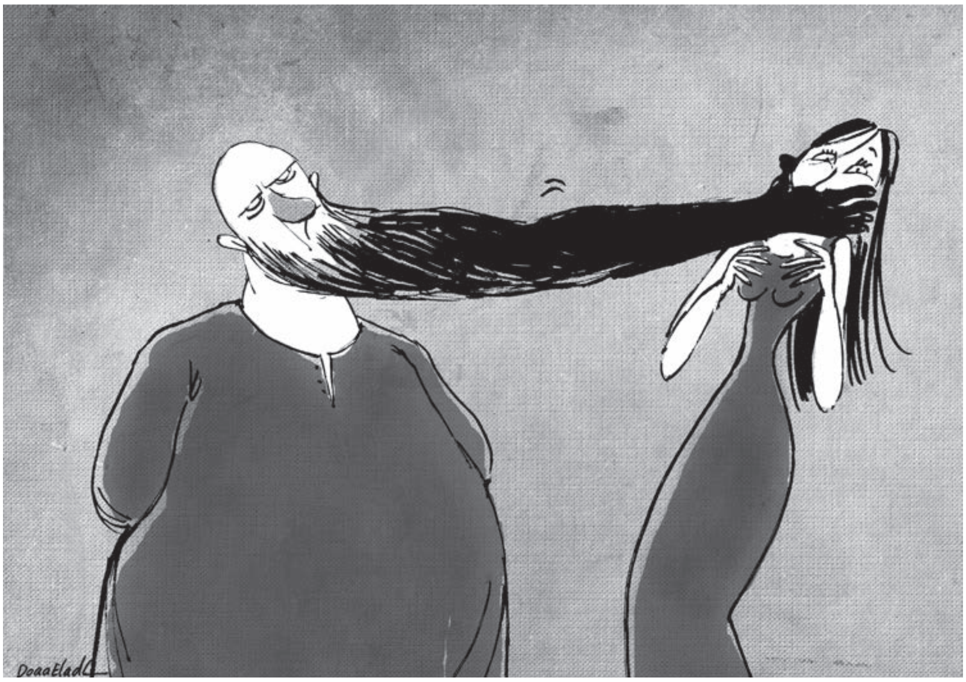
Steyerl reflects on this development in relation to Juan García Espinosa's manifesto for the Imperfect Cinema, written in Cuba in the late 1960s, in which he claims that perfect cinema while 'technically and artistically masterful is almost always reactionary cinema'. According to Espinosa, imperfect cinema, by insisting on its own imperfection, strives to overcome social division and – as in the economy of the poor image – merges art with life, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author.

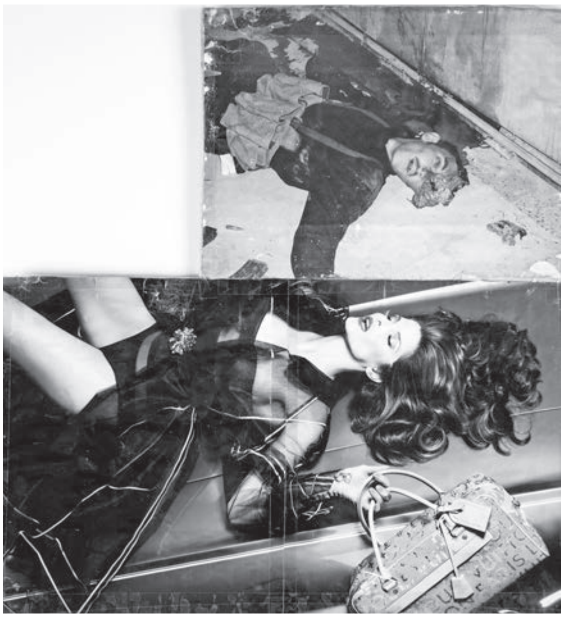
Espinosa predicted that, as video technology developed, the elitist position of traditional filmmakers would be undermined, enabling some sort of mass film production to emerge: an art of the people. The outcome has been much more widespread and affective than even Espinosa had anticipated. The economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution within a structure that facilitates almost instantaneous appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. Users become the editors, critics, translators and (co-)authors within a constant frenzy of imagery production and re-production.

For Steyerl this is a transition from 'contemplation into distraction'. From an art perspective, we regularly see artists appropriating this kind of imagery in order to present a coherent argument for contemplative consumption. In the context of the explosion of citizen journalism over recent years, we need only to think of artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn or Rabih Mroué to have flashbacks of shocking imagery imprinted onto our memory. There have also been numerous cultural groups, born out of the Arab Spring, that have attempted to navigate the sea of imagery proliferating through the internet. From Egypt, two prominent examples come to mind: the Mosireen Collective's video blog, representing perspectives not covered by the mainstream Egyptian press, is the country's most-watched non-profit YouTube channel, and the group holds workshops on video editing from its Cairo-based media centre; and Wael Abbas's Misr Digital blog collects stories that the press would not otherwise be able to report on directly but is able to sidestep censorship by reporting instead on his coverage of events.

While these practices are extremely effective – both Mosireen and Misr Digital have been avidly followed by an international audience and their stories re-reported by worldwide media – their organisation nevertheless places them in a precarious position. State-sponsored art played little or no part in the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the artists being fearful that involvement could affect their standing, future funding and livelihoods. Among the more daring independent organisations there have already been casualties; the non-profit art space Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum closed in January due to 'heightened political and social transitions' and prominent cartoonist Doaa Eladl, supposedly 'freed from the censorship of the past', is currently being sued by the secretary-general of the National Centre for Defence for her allegedly blasphemous depictions in the daily newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.

In an atmosphere where the image plays such a powerful role in translating political sentiment, there is little doubt that established and highly visible artists, collectives and cultural organisations will be easy targets. The vague language of President Mohamed Morsi's new constitution, especially with regard to freedom of expression, inevitably reinforces concerns over the growing tyranny of the permanent state of emergency declared since the revolution. Using Giorgio Agamben's definition of sovereign power as the ability to decide on the state of exception, to define what is permitted – who is included and who is not – Morsi effectively places himself outside the law. Agamben argues that sovereignty is therefore based on the ability to impose exclusion and is 'the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested'. While for Morsi, and Hosni Mubarak before him, this is possible with established figures and organisations, it is much harder, arguably impossible, to censor in its entirety online activity which is spearheaded not by an individual but by the masses; as Deleuze and Guattari argue, 'sovereignty





Doaa Eladl
The Voice of Egyptian Women
2012

Thomas Hirschhorn
'Ur Collage' series B *IX* 2008

only rules over what it is capable of interiorising'. Within a networked society, the power of the political institution is undermined, giving way to the power of instrumental flows and cultural codes that are embedded in networks. As Franco Bifo has argued, the internet can no longer be viewed as purely an instrumental tool, but as a sphere or an environment where the 'anthropological mutation produced by digital media and by the acceleration of the Infosphere is the most relevant effect from the point of view of social and political effects'. Furthermore, cultural memory is increasingly taking on a more visual form, as Sontag has outlined: 'in an era of information overload the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorising it.' Citizens are therefore able to reclaim a national memory independent from the authoritarian state. The image of Saeed exemplifies the state's powerlessness to have full biopolitical control over its people. The viral image is outside the scope of the law so it facilitates the construction of anonymous global networks and a shared history that political institutions are incapable of regulating. As the image travels it builds alliances, provoking translation or new readings, and in doing so creates new publics and debates. Each individual that cared enough to redistribute the image – whether digitally, in printed form or by word of mouth – became an active player in the growing catalytic potential of this single image to realise the ideology it represents.

There is no doubt that the proliferation of iconic imagery in the public realm has acted to enhance, consolidate and articulate public opinion across the Arab world. The image of Saeed proves that the digital image is not as ephemeral as we might commonly think; as Steyerl argues: 'just as a photograph is lodged in paper, the digital image is lodged in a circulatory system of desire and exchange.' With this transient form, the viral image comes to encapsulate moments where politics and representation have collided and subsequently affected one another. Bifo has claimed that 'history has been replaced by the endless flowing recombination of fragmentary images. Political awareness and political strategy have been replaced by the random recombination of frantic precarious activity.' However, as the image of Saeed exemplifies, it is precisely because of this 'frantic precarious activity', without any curatorial control, that the viral image has the potential to become a powerful and democratic political catalyst. ▮

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