

REVOLTING SENSES

The Contrapuntal Aesthetics of
Revolt in Tunisia



Joachim Ben Yakoub

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For Vida-Lucia and Maya-Eleni,

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SUMMARY

Combining key insights from aesthetic theory and various postcolonial critiques, this research looks into the aesthetics of revolt. Taking the recent and exceptional sequences of revolts in Tunisia as a case study and thus starting from an extensive and unique fieldwork, it follows the aesthetic turn in political science and wants to contribute to the further development of an epistemologically more self-conscious and recognizable academic field of study that engages with aesthetics, politics and revolt in the region, the continent and beyond in the Global South.

By unraveling contrapuntally the complex entanglement of processes concerning the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics, revolting senses show how state aesthetics are always historically formed and how the sensible, or that what can be seen, imagined or embodied, is consequently shared, divided and distributed, but also how accumulated aesthetic agency can question and possibly alter this shared distribution in times of revolt.

Attention is directed on the aesthetics of revolt, especially on the visible and corporeal or embodied qualities of sense experience. This study apprehends revolt in a phenomenological way as a lived, embodied and visual experience and thus as a process of diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power. It contends that revolt has the potential to alter a given police order, its properties of space and possibilities of time, to re-determine the distribution of the roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and thus to restructure the shared division of the sensible.

Nevertheless, the often too precipitated contentions that the moving body politic would have radically altered the order of the sensible, during the latest

sequences of revolt in Tunisia, is altogether tempered. This dissertation points at the intricacies that accompany the processes of revolt against a firmly seated police order, especially the difficulty of creating different conditions of intelligibility and possibility that entail a fundamental transformation of what appears to sense experiences. These particular intricacies could somehow have been foreseen as aesthetics was explicitly grasped as a historically formed contrapuntal ensemble or as an all-encompassing realm that is made of different intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories traversed by a colonial divide.

SAMENVATTING

Deze studie combineert belangrijke inzichten uit de esthetische theorie en verschillende postkoloniale kritieken om de esthetiek van revolte te onderzoeken. Door de recente en uitzonderlijke opeenvolgingen van opstanden in Tunesië naar voor te schuiven als casestudy en te vertrekken van een uitgebreid en uniek veldwerk, volgt het voorliggend onderzoek de esthetische wending in de politicologie en wil het bijdragen aan de verdere ontwikkeling van een epistemologisch meer zelfbewust en herkenbaar academisch vakgebied dat zich inlaat met esthetiek, politiek en revolte in de regio, het continent en het Globale Zuiden in het algemeen.

Door contrapuntisch de complexe verstrengeling van processen van politisering van esthetiek en esthetisering van politiek te ontrafelen, laat deze analyse zien hoe een zekere staat esthetiek altijd historisch wordt gevormd en hoe het zintuiglijk waarneembare, of datgene dat kan worden gezien, ingebeeld of belichaamd, diens gevolg wordt gedeeld en verdeeld, maar ook hoe een zekere geaccumuleerde massa esthetische handelingskracht deze gedeelde verdeling kan bevragen en eventueel kan veranderen in tijden van opstand.

Het onderzoek is gericht op de extra discursieve dimensies van esthetiek, vooral op de zichtbare en lichamelijke of belichaamde eigenschappen van de zintuiglijke ervaring. Deze studie vat revolte fenomenologisch op als een beleefde, belichaamde en visuele ervaring en dus als een proces van afleiding of re-appropriatie van spectaculaire macht. Het betoogt dat revolte het potentieel in zich draagt om een bepaald politiek order, haar ruimtelijke eigenschappen en tijdsmogelijkheden te veranderen, om de verdeling van de rollen en modi van participatie, de dynamiek van inclusie en uitsluiting opnieuw te bepalen, en zo de verdeling van het zintuiglijk waarneembare te herstructureren.

Desalniettemin wordt de overhaaste bewering dat het bewogen politiek lichaam de orde van het zintuiglijk waarneembare radicaal zou hebben gewijzigd tijdens de laatste opeenvolgingen van opstanden in Tunesië, geheel afgezwakt. Dit proefschrift wijst op de fijne complexiteiten die gepaard gaan met processen van revolte tegen een stevig gezeten politieke order, vooral de moeilijkheid om alternatieve mogelijkhedenvoorwaarden te creëren die een fundamentele transformatie zouden meebrengen van wat de zintuiglijke ervaring kan waarnemen. Deze specifieke complexiteiten konden worden voorzien, aangezien esthetiek expliciet werd begrepen als een historisch gevormd contrapuntisch ensemble of een alomvattende sfeer dat is gemaakt van verschillende in elkaar grijpende, overlappende en onderling ingebedde geschiedenissen die worden doorkruist door een koloniale kloof.

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Joachim Ben Yakoub
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1 DREAMING OF A SUBVERSIVE GESTURE

Tunis, May 2006. Selma and Sofiane Ouissi, now a renowned choreographer duo in the world of performing arts, were invited on radio RTCI to present their creation *STOP... BOOM*. Appalled by the current state of the arts in her country, during the interview Selma Ouissi spontaneously felt the urge to call out artists for a pacific march in the streets to express the magnitude and potential of the staggering number of people involved in the arts outside official and formal structures. The moment she uttered this invitation, red lights in the studio abruptly interrupted the talk and a stripe of music ended the live broadcast. The radio host was fired on the spot.¹

This direct confrontation with the limits of the political system Selma and Sofiane Ouissi were inhabiting and working in, rendered legible and even tangible how artists could simply be barred from a public space that is almost fully controlled by a firmly seated authoritarian regime. Dismayed by the severity and violence of their lived confrontation with prevailing censorship, but also more conscious of the subversive nature of their public call on live radio, sister and brother Ouissi translated their spontaneous demand into an artistic intention note in which they proposed a dispositif consisting out of different artistic interventions that invited an interested audience to collectively meander through the winding alleys at the heart of the capital. The duo surrounded itself with different artists, philosophers and art critics to facilitate relational and oneiric in situ creations, installations and performances in yet to be encountered places, leading up to a collective march in the streets of the medina of Tunis. The imagined dispositif finally materialized in 'Dream City', a festival for contemporary art in the city.

The first edition of the festival was tactically planned on November 7, 2007, knowing the police would have their hands full securing the annual theater of the regime adherence that day, celebrating the anniversary of 'change' and 'progress' president

1. This genealogy was reconstructed through various conversations and interviews with producer Béatrice Dumoyer and the artist duo Selma and Sofiane Ouissi.

Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali had supposedly brought to the country twenty years earlier. It was set up and produced without any official application or permit, which in itself was particularly valiant in a context where it was allegedly forbidden to move in the heavy controlled streets in groups of more than three persons at a time. The police temporarily arrested and harshly interrogated Sofiane Ouissi, but the strength of the revolted gesture that crystallized in a full-fledged festival had mobilized too many people to be stopped by any force. The transdisciplinary collective formed in the wake of the Dream City festival found a fissure or a line of flight to escape the control of an omnipresent and omniscient regime and a police state tightly holding its grip upon public space, and succeeded in facilitating its collective march.

The festival was well received by many as a welcome respite in the suffocating routine of authoritarian conformity, but also as a clear opening and a breakthrough in an otherwise also relatively obedient and closed artistic landscape. Even though Dream City was first conceived as a one-off artistic intervention and thus having no intention of growing into a recurring festival, a second edition imposed itself in November 2010 out of the artists' growing demand for a federating and reflective platform outside existing official structures. What initially started as a revolted gesture on live radio, slowly grew out to become a festival of reference that genuinely programmed reflective in situ installations and performances, facilitating different marches in the public space of the medina.

After Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi put his body on fire, a feeling of revolt – very similar to the one actuating the conception of the festival – arose from a dead angle, spread out, accumulated and reached its tipping point. The spectacular sacrificial gesture set the country ablaze from the interior-south city of Sidi Bouzid to the capital of Tunis, purging the land of its authoritarian inheritance.

The next and first edition of the Dream City Biennale since the start of what is now commonly referred to as the 'Tunisian Revolution', took place in October 2012. After the revolted body politic had converged and managed to jointly wipe the crusted autocrat off the map, various controversies surfaced, related to the newly acquired freedom and the lingering and still unanswered demand for dignity. The profoundly altered political situation compelled the festival to rethink the structure of its

praxis in quite a profound way and asked out loud whether artists could still dream about their world as their very (well)being is physically being threatened. Since 2011, the life of some artists has indeed been endangered by various violent attacks by Islamist activists, coloring outside the lines of the nation and eliciting again the notion of the caliphate. In the wake of these threatening attacks, the binary division between secularism and Islamism settled as the main frame in which the political situation was generally understood. Artists were moreover a priori pigeonholed in the secular cubicle, which only seemed to confirm the supposed incompatibility between art and Islam, modernity and tradition. By contrast, Dream City thrived in diverting the polarizing secularism-Islamism divide by bringing to the fore a critical, hybrid and sensible third space in which the social and political causes and consequences of revolt and its relation to liberation and dignity could be continuously reconsidered and rearticulated aesthetically, all the while keeping at its core the subversive agency of the revolted gesture it originated from. Consequently, the multi-faceted drive behind the first edition of the festival in November 2007 was picked up again in the discourse around the festival, as it could easily be reframed as a successful 'artistic coup' post-factum.

The genealogy of the Dream City Biennale outlined above speaks to different fundamental questions that I encountered while making sense of the sequences of ongoing revolt in Tunisia. The premonitory agency of the artistic sphere since the 2000s, the practice of subversion of spectacular power engrained in state aesthetics, the contestation of the underlying possibilities of time and properties of space and the embodiment or performance of revolt in public space are central elements in the way I conceptualize – following Edward Said (1993) and Jacques Rancière (2004) – contrapuntal aesthetics, i.e. a historically formed ensemble that is made of different intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories that determines what in a certain time and space appears to sense experience and thus what is sensible, intelligible, and thus imaginable in a given polis. Looked at from this perspective, politics relates to aesthetics and vice versa, as in principle all politics is aesthetic as much as all aesthetics is political. Nevertheless, both constellations will be analytically disentangled, considering the mutually entwined processes of aestheticization and politicization that together keep the tonicity between the different oppositional concepts in our theoretical frame in balance.

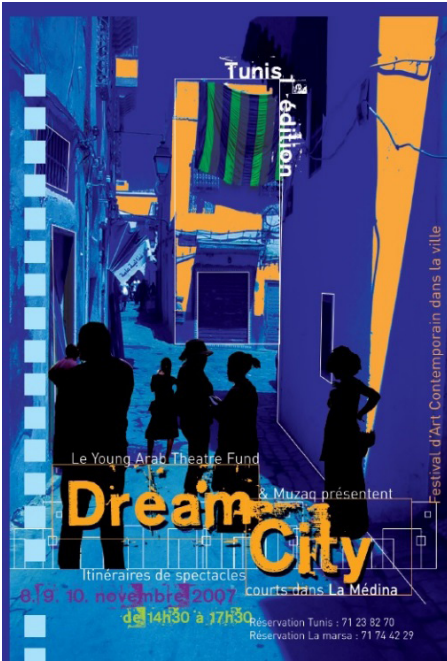
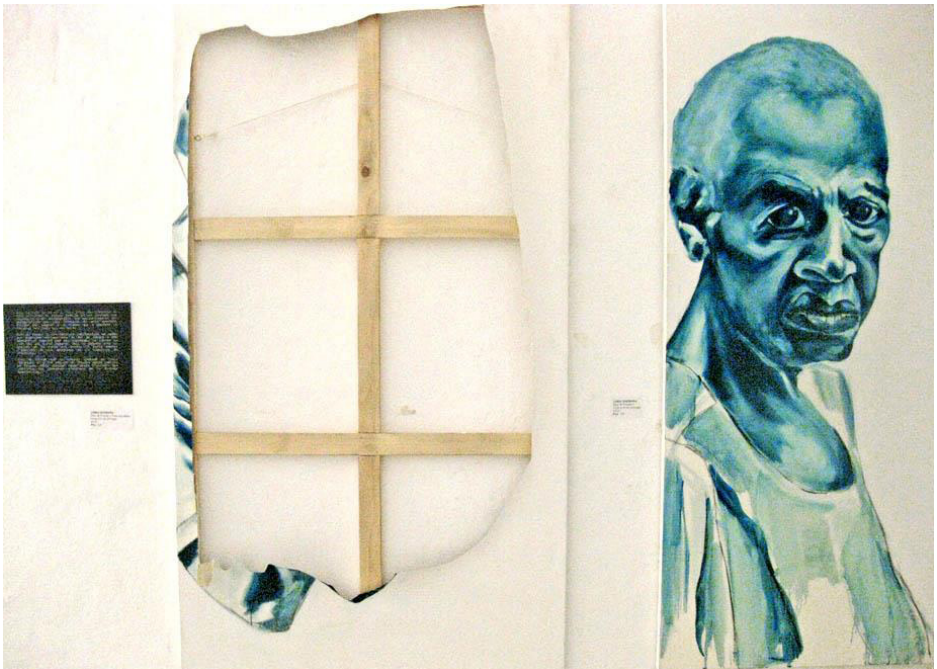


Figure 1. Purple Poster Dream City 2007

Figure 2. Bleu de Prusse I, Lamia Ghemara (Canvas ransacked at El Abdelliya, June 2012)



Profoundly inspired by the critical and poetic position of the collective behind the Dream City biennale, this research is confidently settled in a self-assembled third space to analyze the revolting senses, or the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia, going beyond the prevailing binary-oppositional divides. As I will demonstrate, the different sequences of revolt in Tunisia will together prove to be the accurate case to analyze the aesthetic agency necessary to challenge a firmly seated authoritarian regime that came to imagine itself in various original ways through a well-delineated and historically formed state aesthetics. By closely scrutinizing the mutual entanglement of the processes of both aestheticization and politicization in a given authoritarian regime, I will deepen the existing understandings of the various ways power can be structured and possibly restructured, elaborating on the numerous different ways the sensible is distributed in a given police order and perhaps how it can be redistributed as the body politic decides to revolt.

2 CONTRAPUNTAL AESTHETICS

Before going deeper into the case of the Tunisian Revolution, I will first set out the different dimensions of the theoretical frame that will be used for the analysis. An increased scholarly interest in politics from an aesthetic perspective and the consequent proliferation of more fundamental accounts on the relation between aesthetics and politics, provoked what Kompridis (2014) called 'an aesthetic turn in political science', bringing about a substantial change in our understanding of both politics and aesthetics and most importantly of their mutual entanglement. A critical apprehension of this aesthetic turn will create space to make sense of revolt and revolution in the context of postcolonial authoritarian rule as a historical process contesting a given police order shaped by the circulation of what I will conceptualize as spectacular power in a dynamic and entangled relation between aesthetic agency and state aesthetics. To do this, I will first position my own understanding of contrapuntal aesthetics in the light of the way aesthetics was conceptualized in eurocentric thought. I will then legitimize my choice to

work with a critical approach of the concept of aesthetics by contrasting it with the – as I will show – flawed concept of culture. The contrast between both concepts will then lay the ground for a deeper understanding of contrapuntal aesthetics as a notion that can precisely grasp the way state aesthetics and aesthetic agency are mutually entangled. Through the conceptualization of contrapuntal aesthetics it will be possible to have a closer look at how – through the aestheticization of politics – spectacular power circulates in a given police order and by doing so, structures the shared division of the sensible. At the same time, the conceptualization of contrapuntal aesthetics, will also allow us to see how – through the politicization of aesthetics – the contestation and more precisely the diversion or reappropriation of that very spectacular power can contest that same police order, facilitate a redistribution of the sensible and finally prescribe a liberated body politic and a dignified political order.

2/1 **DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS**

Even though this research is heavily indebted to and inspired by the Foucaultian understanding of Kantian aesthetics by Jacques Rancière and the debates provoked by Walter Benjamin's reflection on the aestheticization of politics, it is worthwhile to first pause on the fact that it is hinged on a euro-centric genealogy of the concept of aesthetics. Clive Cazeaux (2012) insightfully ascribes three interrelated meanings to the idea of aesthetics. A first meaning can be found in ancient Greek philosophy, pre-Socratics, but also in Plato and Aristotle, where 'aisthesis' or insight that is gained through the senses, lived and felt experience, is contrasted to 'eidos', or knowledge acquired through reason. Through his cogito, Descartes later reaffirmed and hierarchized this dichotomy by separating rationality from the religious sphere and by emphasizing the primacy of the ratio over the sensuous. A second meaning can be distilled from the emergence of both capitalist modernity and the individualized bourgeois class-consciousness in the 18th century, with the romantic appropriation of aesthetics by amongst others Alexander Baumgarten to designate the study of beauty or the beautiful in art. In contrast with the classicist interpretation of beauty, which defined beauty in relational or mathematical terms, the romanticist version underlined the exclusive and autonomous relationship between artist and nature over prescriptive rules or criteria as an expression and most importantly

as a legitimization of capitalist bourgeois class identity (see also Eagleton 1988). Finally, a third and contemporary sense to aesthetics is given since the founding father of German Idealism, Immanuel Kant, who considers it as a sphere of thought that is closely related to everyday experience and goes beyond words and description, but not beyond understanding. In this vision, aesthetics is no longer an isolated sphere, but a sensuous one that intersects with epistemological, ethical and even ontological spheres, thus forming a critical domain of thought for our cognitive and moral understanding of the world.

Since the Enlightenment aesthetic questions thus became central to the history of European philosophy. In this regard, the third critique of Immanuel Kant *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) and later *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) can together be considered a turning point for the eurocentric understanding of contemporary aesthetics.² Debates on the relation between politics, ideology and aesthetics, however, only gained centrality with the elaboration of Marxist reflections and critiques on the Bolshevik Revolution and the November Revolution in Germany, as well as on the ensuing emergence of totalitarian regimes in the 1930's. These debates returned after the Second World War to make sense of the atrocities committed (Virmani 2015). Consequently, contemporary scholarly discussion on the relation between politics and aesthetics are too often grounded in the politicized aesthetics of these totalitarian systems, more precisely in the visual and architectural aesthetics of Nazi Germany or Europe and to a lesser extent in that of communist Russia or Germany. Reflecting on the politics of aesthetics almost seems to be an impossible endeavor without first engaging with the nature of the cinematic work of Leni Riefenstahl or the architectural vision of Albert Speer or even the aesthetic visions on revolution by Richard Wagner or Anatoly Lunacharsky for that matter. Whether through the writings of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt or later Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière, the autonomy of aesthetics was questioned and the relation between aesthetics and politics was conceptualized from an eurocentric perspective. It was also applied to a wide range of histories and divergent geographies, outside its place of enunciation, in the Third World or in the Global South and thus overlooking fundamental historical power differences. The concept of decolonial aesthetics was therefore introduced in Anglophone literature with the publication of the *Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto* by the Transnational Decolonial Institute (2011).

2. Charles W. Mills (2017) is one of many authors who convincingly unveils the eurocentric racialization processes and racist ideas central in Kant's work on political philosophy and aesthetics. By focusing on the central idea of the "(un)ermensch" in Kantian thought, he challenges us to radically rethink our relation to Western liberal political philosophy.

After pointing to the coloniality of knowledge (Lander 2000, Escobar 2007) and the coloniality of being (Wynter 2003, Maldonado-Torres 2007), the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000, Grosfoguel & Georas 2000) was complemented with the coloniality of aesthetics. The idea of decolonial aesthetics was first coined by artist and activist Adolfo Alban Achinte in 2003 and later conceptualized in Spanish by Zulma Palermo (2009) and in English by Mignolo (2010). It refers to the sensuous aspect of the process of epistemological and ontological decolonization (Lockward 2014). It positions itself as an option against the presupposed universality of the codified and normative contemporary concept of aesthetics and proposes to subvert it by reappropriating the premodern Greek idea of 'aesthesia' but without contrasting it with 'eidos'. In this light, 'aesthesia' is understood as "an unelaborated elementary awareness of stimulation" or a "sensation of touch" for the liberation of the senses, perceptions and embodied sensibilities trapped by modernity, postmodernity and altermodernity and thus coloniality (T.D.I. 2011:*unpaginated*). Decolonial aesthesis is then conceptualized as a movement from and beyond the margins "that is naming and articulating practices that challenge and subvert the hegemony of modern/colonial aesthesis" in both time and space, and "contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities" (Mignolo & Vasquez 2013:4). It was first coined by the Modernity/Coloniality working group, but recently also found entrance in the French academic debate, where it was introduced by Zahra Ali and Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun (2017) and further elaborated by the collective *Décoloniser les Arts* (Cukierman, Dambury, Vergès, 2018). Even though the conceptualization of decolonial aesthetics is new, the practices that this concept describes are as old as the history of colonization itself (Lockward 2014). In other words, for our study it is important to bear in mind that ever since the French sat foot in North Africa, there were practices that aesthetically contested the transformation processes this colonization entailed.

However fundamentally convincing the critiques rooted in the concept of decolonial aesthetics are, I will refrain from throwing the eurocentric aesthetic baby out with the bathwater. A constant reference in the body of literature around decolonial aesthetics or aesthesis to the structures of modernity or coloniality and the subjectivities of the colonizer or the colonized, at times tends to fix both positions, eventually reinforcing the duality that is fundamentally being questioned. In the postcolonial historical

reality of Tunisia, it is by contrast key to start from the ambiguous processes and sometimes contradictory relations and mutual entanglements, hybridisation or creolizations of both power structures and subject positions and thus to take into account processes of defensive modernization and Islamic reformism. Hence, the importance of breathing life into a ambivalent third space of enunciation. Building on Fanon's vision of revolutionary change as a fluctuating movement, Homi Bhabha (1994:55) conceptualized that third space, as an "indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation" that "though unrepresentable in itself [...] constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew". In the context of our case study, speaking from a at times seemingly contradictory and ambivalent third space of enunciation will complicate our understanding of the subjectivities of (Islamist) activists and artists as a priori modern or colonial, subversive or anti-colonial or neither the one nor the other. Indeed, as stated by Bhabha (1994) "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' [...] are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity". To keep the tonicity between different oppositional concepts in this dissertation in balance, I will articulate my theoretical frame from what Chokri Ben Chikha (2017) named that "in-between-space", in which the politics of polarity can be ontologically thwarted, or in the rather poetic and promising words of Fanon (1961:227) in that "zone of occult instability where the people dwell" and where "our souls are crystallized and [...] our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light".

Whether through eurocentric thought, orientalist critiques, subaltern, decolonial or postcolonial streams of thought, I will further engage in formulating my own conception of aesthetics. Instead of adhering to a specific intellectual tradition, I will commit my work to the task of postcolonial critique and thus follow the proposition of Olivia Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam (2018) to conceive of the postcolonial as a "heuristic device". Assuming the mutual entanglement of these different intellectual traditions, I will further delineate my conception of contrapuntal aesthetics in what follows. Knowing that our understanding of both politics and aesthetics is historically constituted through the legacies and the ongoing struggles over colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism and settler-colonialism, I will propose a contrapuntal conceptualization of aesthetics.

The musical term of counterpoint was originally introduced in the humanities by Edward Said. It was briefly mentioned first in a musical reflection on the contrapuntal vision of pianist Glenn Gould and in his essay *Reflections on Exile* (1984), but only further conceptualized in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Over time it has been picked up and reworked into a concept that calls “for aesthetic sensibility and hermeneutic balance” (Hohold 2012:187). When writing about counterpoint as a musical term central in Western classical music, Said (1993: 59) explains how “various themes play off one another [...] yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay”. Drawing a parallel with his domain of expertise, he discerns a similar phenomenon in the field of literature that helps to make sense of Western novels, as through a contrapuntal reading of these novels it becomes clear they are “shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism”. Said’s contrapuntal thinking aimed at unveiling the imperial world map that is hiding behind the idealist historicism that fuels Western metropolitan literature, and intended to disentangle the deep imbrication of the development of comparative literature with the emergence of imperial geographies. Inspired by Gramsci’s analysis of the ‘Southern Question’, Said (1993:56-59) underlines the importance to build upon “organic breaks” or “fissures”, as they have the potential to link, in a dynamic and organic way, “disparate, apparently autonomous regions of human history”. Said cannot read Western literature without organically connecting this reading to the emergence of imperial geographies, both must be articulated together “as an ensemble, as having a relationship that is more than coincidental, conjunctural, mechanical”. This ensemble then has to be reinterpreted “not univocally but contrapuntally”, i.e. “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts”. The imperial divide has to be made visible from the perspective of the variety of local engagements on the peripheral side of this divide that resists domination, with each “its own possibilities and conditions of knowledge” and from where “a particular type of research and knowledge begins to build up” (1993: 60). For our conception of contrapuntal aesthetics, I will thus extract the term from its musical and literary ecosystem to enlarge it for and apply it on existing sense experiences that constitute the sensible, more precisely on the visual and embodied mediations of the sensible. Conceptualizing contrapuntal aesthetics thus entails

understanding politics and aesthetics as a “contrapuntal ensemble” (Said 1993:60), that reveals its “wholeness”, i.e. “the intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories of metropolitan and colonized societies and of the elite and subaltern” (Chowdhry 2007:105). When politics and aesthetics are understood as a contrapuntal ensemble, there is no pre-existing essence to aesthetics. It is in this light problematic to reduce aesthetics to what Rancière (2004:24) calls “a-priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience”. When grasped as a contrapuntal ensemble, aesthetics is the result of historical contingencies that form certain power structures and subjectivities. Political aesthetics is an ensemble traversed by not only an imperial or colonial but also post- or neocolonial divide. It is then through a contrapuntal interpretation of aesthetics, that its distinctive “topography” can be rendered visible, its “structures of attitude and reference” or – referring back to Raymond Williams – its “structures of feeling” (Said 1993:61). Without directly referring to it, Said’s contrapuntal interpretation echoes the task Benjamin (1940 [1969]:257) ascribed to historical materialists – in the conclusion of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – to “brush history against the grain” as “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”. Without fully reducing imperialism to barbarism, the demand to brush history against the grain can be appreciated as a demand to make sense of the dominant form in which that history is transferred contrapuntally, i.e. to trace the crack or to figure out the mediation between its topography or structure of feeling and imperialism or colonialism (Honold 2012). In the same vein as Benjamin has allegorically transformed Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* into the *Angel of History*, Said too invites us to turn our senses towards or at least listen to and read into the past and to take into close consideration the piled debris of the colonial devastations and catastrophes of the last two centuries.

2/2 AGAINST CULTURE

While the work of Edward Said (1978, 1993) and its sustained poststructuralist commitment to culture as analytical category remains essential to our understanding of what I termed ‘contrapuntal aesthetics’, the advice of Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) will be followed to deliberately leave the concept of culture behind. From a critical third space, the political dynamics in

Tunisia will be disentangled in the way they are sensibly structured throughout different power mechanisms, relentlessly avoiding the possible reproduction of historical dualities revolving around the Occident and the Orient, modernity and tradition, secularism and Islamism, and other dualities that are closely tied to the ways the world is understood culturally. Through its use over time, the concept of culture became a myth that embraced processes closely akin to race and in which – for the study of political issues in Muslim-majority countries – Orientalism is never too far away. By contrast, the notion of aesthetics has not yet turned into a polarizing vehicle with great political magnitude.

According to Raymond Williams (1983:87) culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words”. Geertz (1973:31) already positioned himself against the “theoretical diffusion” or “conceptual morass” theorizing about culture in anthropology leads to, by caricaturally citing Kluckhohn’s 27-page-long attempt to define culture. By contrast, Geertz self-confidently presents his own Weberian semiotic understanding of culture, which was very influential in the adoption of the category of culture in political science. For Geertz, culture is the self-spun web of significance where we have suspended ourselves in. The analysis of culture would therefore not be a positivist experimental method in search of objective structures and scientific laws, but an interpretive method in search of meaning. Central in this semiotic understanding is the metaphor of ‘culture as text’ and thus the insight that culture is structured through signs, and thus constituted by meaning and interpretation (Bachmann-Medick 2012). In this interpretative account, culture is an arrangement of texts, a semiotic construction that fabricates readable symbols, expressions and representations. Geertz inspired political analysts to look into culture as a system of symbols from which meaning can be read, but many of the glitches engrained in this particular semiotic understanding of culture seeped into political science (Wedeen 2002). Culture was employed to analyze how certain nation-states or political cultures and their constitutive values and norms can facilitate or hamper progress, modernization and transition to democracy. Moreover, as aptly summarized by Hoffman (2009), Geertz’s interpretative understanding of culture is at the same time strongly criticized for its cultural relativism. From a materialist and Marxist perspective, Geertz’s idealist position tends to ignore broader historical forces that shape the symbols under scrutiny, i.e. the production and the relations of power that produce culture in the first place. Culture is not so much a clear-cut

product or outcome that can be separated from its context, but rather a dynamic and ambiguous process engrained in this very context. Moreover, the role of ideology as a determining factor, together with the agency to change political and economic realities, is largely overseen. Lisa Wedeen (2002) also tackles Geertz's definition of culture as a system of symbols that has the tendency to enforce a kind of prefigured semiotic coherence and assert a reified, essentialized system of meaning. Political dynamics are elucidated through presupposed ossified cultural differences. These deterministic understandings of culture tend to neglect not only the dynamic and diffuse processes by which symbols change and are interpreted over time, as they are loci of political contestation and struggle, but also overlook the difference between the way rituals, practices, symbols are represented and the way they are received, interpreted and sometimes even contested (Wedeen 1999). Most importantly, power is relegated to the purely symbolic sphere and culture becomes a determining and determinated intelligible system or coherent master narrative, where there is no place for agency. In sum, it does not account for "process[es] shaped by historical contingency as well as by a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure" (Cerwonka & Malkki 2008:12) and thus between the practices of certain agents and the related systems of signification, like language but also other symbolic systems (Wedeen 2002).

After Bernard Lewis (1990) had already portrayed the political tensions between 'Islam' and 'the West' as a 'clash of civilizations', purportedly dating back to the rise of Islam in the 7th century in an article entitled 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', Samuel Huntington reinvested the concept of culture as a constitutive element of civilizations, seeing culture, instead of ideology or economy, as "the fundamental source of conflict" and thus as the locus of "the great divisions among humankind" (Huntington 1993:22). From the fall of the Berlin Wall on, differences in political and economic development among different nation-states would be determined by their different cultures and larger civilizations. This underlying rigid interpretation of culture as a static collection of ideas immune to any form of change or internal difference and ignorant of any kind of power relationships is not only empirically untenable (Wedeen 2002) but also analytically and historically flawed (Van Nieuwkerk, Levine & Stroke 2016). In short, "cultural essentialist explanations of political outcomes such as ethnic or religious violence tend to naturalize categories of groupness, rather than exploring the conditions under which

such experiences of groupness come to seem natural when they do" (Wedeen 2002:715). They nevertheless enable the inferiorization of other religions or cultures as monolithic entities presumably hostile to "Western Civilization" and modernity in its totality (Van Nieuwkerk, Levine & Stroke 2016).

What is still too often overseen in the critiques against essentialized interpretations seeping into political science through the proliferation of the concept of culture, is that the relentless labor of defining culture – as reminded by Talal Asad (1975) – is still structured by the colonial encounter. By giving access to knowledge about dominated societies, this encounter reinforces inequalities not only between for instance the European and non-European world, but also between what Asad (1975:16) calls "the Europeanized elites and the traditional masses of the Third World". In other words, academic inquiry has not only contributed to the cultural archives of the societies it researched, it has also helped maintaining colonial power structures, through the objectivation of the cultures under study. Edward Said (1993:vii) consequently breaks the modern concept of culture down into two distinct meanings. In the first sense, culture can be seen as practices often existing in aesthetic and narrative forms that are opposed to or at least have "a relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms". He relates the idea of culture to that of a nation that delineates the area within which different narrative and artistic practices compete on the imperialist battlefield over land between the colonizer and colonized. For the second meaning, Said relies on the palliative interpretation of Matthew Arnold who famously defined culture as "the best that has been known and thought". Palliative, because as stated by Said (1993:xiii), it sheds an encouraging light on the humanist self, its people, society and tradition with its own poetry, fiction and philosophy while simultaneously throwing a shadow over the severe and brutal repercussion of modern and urban life, for instance the callousness of slavery, colonial and imperial domination. Culture is in this sense a combative but bifurcating source of identity, which violently demarcates the enlightened insider from the barbaric outsider, 'us' from 'them' Culture is then again a battleground or a theater on which political and ideological causes are argued upon and compete and sometimes even collide against each other. The main problem for Said (1993:xv) is then that these general conceptions of culture are too often dissociated and surpass the everyday world and are thus "anti-septically quarantined from [their] worldly affiliations".

Notwithstanding this critique, Said (1993) embraced the concept of culture but always connected his impressive body of literature under scrutiny with its worldly and thus its colonial and imperialist affiliations, whereas others – following the proposition of Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) – decided to “write against culture”. The main reason why the concept of culture is put aside as a flawed concept is that it can be grasped as a vital instrument for prevailing historical processes of othering. It naturalizes contingent differences and hierarchical distinctions and by doing so enforces deceitful ontological separations. As sharply and brightly pointed out by Frantz Fanon (1956), it functions much like its antecedent, the concept of race. Even though, in contrast with race, culture is something learned and thus changeable, even though it thus allows for a multiplicity of dissimilarities instead of dualistic differences and removes difference from the sphere of the innate, the concept of culture has, in a colonial context, the tendency to ossify difference, or to paraphrase Fanon (1956) to imprison, mummify, freeze and encyst this difference in such a way that cultural difference acquires the aura of a natural given. The reason behind differences in development, economic performance and government are then determined by presupposed cultural characteristics. While Fanon still believed and even saw the very proof of universalism in a possible gesture of reciprocal relativism and enrichment between two politically opposed but independent cultures, Abu-Lughod (1991) decides – and rightly so – to write against culture altogether. She demonstrates her critique by clarifying how Edward Said (1978) saw ‘Orientalism’ as a discursive formation based on a fundamental distinction between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’. Through a structural confusion between geography, race, and culture, Orientalism rigidly freezes differences between ‘the West’ and ‘the East’ in such a way that these presupposed distinctions start to feel like natural. By freezing difference, it objectifies and detains a fossilized interpretation of the Orient and the subjectivities that are contained by this presupposed Orient in time and space. It not only denies the same capacity for movement, travel, and geographical interaction, but is altogether denied history in its whole. Said (1978) therefore proposes nothing less than the abolition of both ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’. By this he does not mean the obliteration of all differences, but rather the acknowledgement of more differences, the recognition of the complex ways in which these differences intersect and a certain attentiveness for how and when these differences are caught up in processes of domination.

It is exactly at this point that Abdelkabar Khatibi's (1983) thought of difference proves productive. In *Maghreb Pluriel*, Khatibi (1983) literally begins where Frantz Fanon (1961:312) ended by quoting his last call to leave Europe behind: "Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different." While endorsing the still urgent call for decolonization, Khatibi engages in a thorough questioning of the conception of this "European game" that has apparently "definitively ended". As the 'Occident' to which that European game refers inhabits Khatibi's most intimate being – not as an absolute and devastating exteriority but as a conglomerate of difference – he reclaims an inalienable right to this difference. Khatibi (1983:39) stresses the necessity "to find something different" and elaborates on this to underpin his proposition to move towards a "thought of difference", creating the possibility to listen to the Maghreb resonating in all its plurality. So for Khatibi, as the European game has not ended, but continues to play a fundamental role, inhabiting his most intimate being, it is necessary to stand up against what he considers a dynamic of alienation through a fundamental form of self-questioning and even transgression. Echoing Fanon's (1956:131) idea of "reciprocal relativism", Khatibi formulates a double critique not only against this exogenous but internalized occidental game, but also his endogenous theological charismatic and patriarchal heritage. Embarking on a process of deconstruction that goes beyond totalizing dichotomous binaries, he deconstructs on the one hand the self-sufficient logocentric and ethnocentrism that the West imposed on the world, and on the other hand the knowledge and the discourses elaborated by Arab societies on themselves. This "double criticism", in the words of Khatibi (1983: 63), "opposes the occidental episteme to its unthought outside, while radicalizing the margin, not only in an Arabic thought, but in a thought of difference that speaks in languages, listening to every speech – wherever it comes from".

Tarik Sabry (2012a) situates the necessity of a double critique within the nascent field of Arab Cultural Studies as an anti-essentialist position that delimits itself against more historicist/Marxist schools of thought (represented by scholars such as Abdallah Laroui), rationalist/structuralist positions (deeply influenced by pan-Arabist ideology and pushed forth by scholars such as Mohammed Abed al-Jabri) and finally against the more cultural Salafist-oriented positions (related to scholars such as Taha Abdurrahman). Central in this anti-essentialist position, represented by thinkers like Abdelkabar Khatibi,

but also Fatima Mernissi or Edward Said, is the idea of 'tajawuz' i.e. a thorough philosophical engagement to go beyond and 'transcend' the duality between modernity or the exogenous obstacle of imperialism on the one hand and tradition or the endogenous obstacle of Salafism on the other. It refutes "ideological discourses of identity, and situate heritage, and even modernity, within a position of difference, where both tradition and philosophy become objects of critique and subversion" (2012:8). It "engage[s] with both local and universal concepts in a relation of difference, submitting both to a continuous active process of destruction and rebuilding" (2012:17). Contrary to the dominant (historicist, structuralist and culturalist) stream of Arab thought, the anti-essentialist one, from where the double critique is formulated, does not articulate culture within a frame that legitimizes a clear-cut ideological position. It advocates "otherness, alterity, pluralism, fragmentation, non-linearity and the constant questioning of essentialized Arab discourses around becoming" (2012:8). Nor does it fall in the intellectual and theoretical pitfall to a priori alienate or exclude others, as it pushes forth a "radical ethics of otherness/difference/exteriority" (2012:17).

The movement of transcendence described above is saddled with the "archeological task" to question, disturb and even subvert "the continuities, totalization and teleologies inherent to Arab discourse on culture and identity" (Sabry 2012a:13). This process of questioning, disturbing and subverting is what Sabry calls a process of "dislocation/deterritorialization" that opens up new spaces of resistance that can facilitate the emergence of less totalizing articulations of culture. Rather than provoking movements of dehistoricization or depoliticization, this process of "dislocation/deterritorialization may lead to the creation of new and alternative discourse of becoming" (Sabry 2012a:13) or what Abdelkebir Khatibi (1985:10) calls the movement towards a "thought of difference" ("pensée-autre"). Khatibi's plea for double critique has to be read as a plea for a double death, i.e. a death that implies "the birth of difference as the source of new questions, new écarts and new ways of knowing" (Sabry 2012a:8). It therefore always keeps a line of flight away from different forms of ontological imperialisms as well as from the many teleological and petrified discourses of becoming, a priori excluding certain others, "ensuring that both endogenous and exogenous cultural phenomena, forms of knowledge, their interpretation and the types of conjectural immanence/metaphysics they produce, are always subjected to a distantiated double-refutation"

(Sabry 2012a:3). While Khatibi's (1983) proposition to see double critique as a precondition for a thought of difference to come into being, proofs to be productive in the conceptual abolition of both 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', I will – without losing the fundamental assumptions of Khatibi's double critique – follow the advice of Abu-Lughod to write against culture and to follow the aesthetic turn contrapuntally in our analysis of revolt in Tunisia.

2/3 (RE-)DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

Culture and aesthetics are obviously two different concepts. Contrasting aesthetics with the analytic concept of culture, will enable a deeper understanding of aesthetics as a nonlinguistic or extra-linguistic structure that cannot be reduced to one out of many presupposed autonomous spheres of a given culture. By contrast, aesthetics is grasped as an all-encompassing realm inherently interlaced with the political. In this sense, and following Rancière (2004), aesthetics is understood as the foundation of a police order, i.e. a set of implicit rules and conventions that determine the distribution of the sensible. The political in the aesthetic then refers to the haunting possibility of reflective re-disclosure, or the prospect of recasting the sensible, of altering what appears to sense experience. However, this Rancierian understanding of aesthetics is often understood as being opposed to Benjamin's supposedly reductive understanding of aesthetics, not in the least by Rancière himself, in a next step, an analytically productive tension between both perspectives can be found that will allow to sharpen two different but again intermeshed and ambiguous dimensions distinguishable in aesthetics and that are fundamental for our analysis, namely state aesthetics and aesthetic agency.

Analytically opposing the concept of aesthetics to that of culture facilitates a more thorough understanding of aesthetics as a nonlinguistic structure. Referring back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Crispin Sartwell (2010:2) reminds us that aesthetics can be understood as exactly that what "cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language". This sharply contrast the semiotic and interpretative understanding of culture, as already pointed out before, as an arrangement of texts structured through signs, readable symbols, expressions, representations and meaning. When looked at through culturalist glasses, political systems and ideologies are often reduced to their presupposed

essential textual structure, overseeing the fact that they are systems of which text forms only one segment and that can thus only partially be grasped through textual structures. When conceived as aesthetic environments, political systems are not merely textually structured. Through aesthetics nonlinguistic or extra-linguistic phenomena induce meaning, reflection and knowledge. This elucidation of aesthetics challenges the false opposition, division and duality between on the one hand rhetoric, text and language as the realm of rationality and persuasion and thus as the cognitive dimension of politics, and on the other hand the aesthetics as the emotive, affective dimension of politics. Such a duality completely disregards the aesthetic characteristic of linguistics and the cognitive structure of aesthetics. As I will show throughout the case study, aesthetics bypasses the normative linguistic and symbolic conception of political realities and its associated dualities, to refocus political theory on non linguistic modes of political expressions and the more imaginary characteristic of ideologies or political systems. As I will elaborate further below, this dissertation is less interested in political discourses than in how these discourses are being reproduced through the spectacular power that circulates through the images and monuments that constitute the state aesthetics.

When looking at the notion of aesthetics in contrast to that of culture, it becomes increasingly difficult to reduce aesthetics to one of the assumed autonomous spheres of a particular culture. From a Weberian and Habermasian perspective, the boundaries between aesthetics and politics seem at first to be very clear. As ethics and politics, science and art are rationally disentangled and institutionalized in autonomous categories, aesthetics is understood as one out of many different autonomous spheres of culture (Kompridis 2014). Jacques Rancière (1999: 58) by contrast, rejects “the autonomization of aesthetics as a new nexus between the order of the logos and the partition of the perceptible” and thus as a “part of the modern configuration of politics” simply because “politics is aesthetic in principle”. As stated by Sartwell (2010:1) “all politics is aesthetic” and “at their heart political [...] systems, [...] are aesthetic systems”. Central to the aesthetic analysis of political systems is thus the assumption that the aesthetic realm is inherently entwined with the political, the ethical and the epistemic spheres, in the same way as aesthetic values like beauty are intrinsically connected to justice, goodness, or truth. This indubitably holds as much for the aesthetic of a given regime as for the aesthetics of possible resistance to that

same regime. Tackling the aesthetic claim to autonomy, contemporary approaches to aesthetics have broadened, exceeded their original disciplinary delimitations and surpassed reflections centered on art for itself. By doing so, aesthetics was altered into an analytical concept for understanding political phenomena (Virmani 2015).

Politics is thus principally aesthetics, insofar as politics always implies a shared distribution of the sensible (“un partage du sensible”), i.e. a common fragmentation of the properties of space and the possibilities of time and through this fragmentation a shared delimitation of who and what can be seen, heard and said but also felt, embodied and visualized, that determines what appears to the senses, makes sense or is intelligible, and possible at a certain moment in a given polis (Rancière 1999, 2004). In any given society, a shared distribution of the sensible limits who and what can appear to our senses and who and what cannot, what and who is visible and what or who is made invisible, who and what makes sense and is intelligible and who and what is incomprehensible or nonsensical. It is a regime that encompasses a worldview that legitimates a given police order. The idea of police order refers to an organizational system structured by a set of implicit rules and conventions which determines the distribution of roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as it divides collectivities in smaller entities, positions and functions. In short, the police order lays the foundation of the shared distribution of the sensible, and is thus, following Rancière (2004:12), “based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution”. What is called “the partition of the sensible” thus suggests “the distribution of what is seeable, hearable, and sayable as legitimately political in a given social order”, maintained by “the “police principle” that strives to maintain the fixed roles, positions, and identities on which the functioning of the state depends” (McKee 2016: 22). In sum, through a Foucaultian lens, Rancière understands Kantian aesthetics as “the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2004:12). Even though aesthetics can

be grasped as an all-encompassing realm deeply entrenched in and interlocked with the political, it is necessary to reiterate my persuasion that there is no pre-existing essence to aesthetics or “a-priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” as argued by Rancière (2004:24) but that – when grasped as a contrapuntal ensemble – aesthetics is the product of geopolitical and historical (imperial, post- or neocolonial) contingencies that shape given power structures and subjectivities.

What can be shared and distributed can also be redistributed. The insuperable political dimension of aesthetics thus brings about the challenge of what Kompridis (2014:18) calls “reflective re-disclosure”, i.e. the task “to open up and re-disclose these historically structured conditions of intelligibility and possibility, creating alternative possibilities for thought and action”. This re-disclosure necessitates “a transformation of perception and the conditions of perception, a transformation of sensibility as well as of rationality”. Here I touch upon the heart of what Rancière calls ‘politics’, namely a process, moved by dissensus and rupture that challenges – through acts of subjectivization – the natural order of bodies and things in a delineated space and time and thus disrupts a given police order and by doing so enables a reconfiguration of the shared distribution of the sensible. Revolution then, is nothing less than “the global reconstruction of the visible and the thinkable” (Rancière & Jdey 2018:21). Contrasting “the discussable” of the police order with the “the inexpressible” of political art, Stalpaert (2010:91) also points to the possible sensible disruption of the relation between what is visible, sayable and thinkable. The distribution of the sensible can thus be interrupted and reconfigured, when claims to public life constituted within the police order are contested through a perpetual movement that dislodges the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the social (McLagan & McKee 2012). Recasting the distribution of the sensible then implies an intervention that “removes the conventions of sense experience” and “gives new form to and deforms the network of connections between time and space, subject and object, what is social and what is individual” (Stalpaert 2010:92). Politics emerges when the police order is dislocated, transgressed and thus necessitates the “opening of a void of possibility in the partition of the sensible wherein new political subjects emerge” (McKee 2016:22) and draws from “the ability to rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects and to generate new forms of political subjectivity” (Salih & Richter-Devroe 2014: 17).

Already in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin (1936 [1968]:241) warned us for the aestheticization of politics by stating that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war”. During the interwar period of the 20th century, Benjamin seemingly intuited the way in which new technological developments of mass reproduction in media and arts would have serious implications for the way politics functions. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin fundamentally questioned the principle of aesthetic autonomy, as through the aestheticization of politics, collectivity transforms into “a spectacular harmonious totality of sensory experience” (McLagan & McKee 2012:14). When in the mindset of the French slogan ‘l’art pour l’art’, an autonomous aesthetic realm is differentiated from the cognitive, religious, ethical or economic sphere, the claim of what Martin Jay (1992:43) calls “absolute autonomous and autotelic self-referentiality”, excludes any cognitive, religious, ethical or economic matter from the aesthetic sphere. Therefore, when politics is aestheticized in this absolutist sense, it will be apathetic to any criterion or value other than a purely aesthetic one, suppressing more sensuous and bodily aesthetic aspects that link art to the more mundane aspect of political reality. Benjamin’s analysis in a way foretold the way in which Fascism in the 20th century infused politics with aesthetics or aestheticized its politics and by doing so even made war an appealing force in the eye of the body politic. The response and alternative Benjamin proposed to this totalitarian aestheticization perspective was – from a communist perspective – the politicization of aesthetics as a means of resistance.

Rancière (2004:13) distantiates himself however from Benjamin’s idea of an aestheticization of politics as “the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art” because, as already stated above, “politics is aesthetic in principle” (1999:58). For Rancière, the aesthetic at the core of politics is irreducible. Both politics and aesthetics cannot be broken down to two different autonomous realms that could mutually invade each other. Nevertheless, it might make sense analytically in the context of an authoritarian regime, as I will show throughout this study, to look at the mutual imbrication of both processes of aestheticization and politicization as different dimensions of a given police order, but also as different dimensions of the politics of what I – with Kompridis (2014) – came to name as “reflective re-disclosure”, i.e. the various ways a police order can be dislocated, transgressed and disrupted to facilitate a reconfiguration or recasting of the shared distribution of the sensible.

To get a grip on the way aesthetics is structured contrapuntally in the context of a postcolonial authoritarian regime, it is clarifying to shortly look at the way Arundathi Virmani (2015) prolongs Benjamin's proposal by defining the relation between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics as a dialectical relation. Virmani (2015:4-7) unravels a dialectical relation between "the highly regulatory forms of state aesthetics oriented to the production or display of power" and "practices of dissent". Emphasizing this dialectic does not only mean analyzing "how systems of aesthetics that are imposed can trigger critiques" but also shedding light on the ways in which critiques on these aesthetic systems, "in their turn may become part of official discourse". It will prove to be important to underline this relation, whether it is dialectic or more diffuse or opaque, certainly in the wobbly and dynamic context of revolt or revolution, as images, symbols and embodied movements of contestation can quickly become instrumentalized as dominant images, symbols and movements perpetuated by the formations of power that were initially contested. It is not her aim to demonize state aesthetics or the "aesthetics of demagogic, dangerously seductive power", nor to romanticize aesthetic agency or the "aesthetics as protest with a potential of emancipation". Virmani (2015: 22-23) rightly argues that "there can be no permanent, definite status of aesthetics as power or protest, dominating or dominated, central or marginal". It is thus necessary to keep in mind that both aesthetics and politics are mutually irreducible, indissociable, and interdependent and thus constantly nourish each other and by doing so structure a certain police order.

More than looking for a dialectical relation, this research is, as I will show below, concerned with the intricate nonlinear relations and diffuse entanglements between the processes of politicization of aesthetics that through sometimes violent processes of diversion or reappropriation contest prevailing processes of aestheticization of politics and thus contest prevailing state aesthetics. Shedding light onto the aesthetic agency engrained in the dynamics of reception, i.e. the manifold ways in which these state aesthetics are not only interiorized, consumed and reproduced but also refused, resisted, destroyed or diverted and recoded to signify dissent, means making sense of a historically formed police order and the potentialities of reflective redisclosure, or the possibilities to redistribute the shared distribution of the sensible when contesting a firmly seated and resilient authoritarian regime. To make sense of the intricate relations between on the one hand aesthetic agency that lives on its potential to politicize

prevailing aesthetics and on the other hand state aesthetics produced by a thorough aestheticization of politics, it is necessary to take a closer look at the various convoluted ways spectacular power circulates in a given police order and thus the various ways certain power constellations structure the shared distribution, and potentially also the redistribution, of the sensible.

2/4 THE CIRCULATION OF SPECTACULAR POWER

Before addressing the different power dynamics proper to the aesthetic agency of the revolting body politic and the way prevailing state aesthetics were diverted during these revolts, it is essential to underline that both aesthetic agency and state aesthetics are not mutually exclusive. They paradoxically operate in and are constitutive of the same police order. Aesthetic agency is shaped by existing power relations, as much as state aesthetics is shaped by resistance. As I will show more concretely in the first chapter of this dissertation where I address the premonitory sensibilities of aesthetic agency, for Fanon (1961:53) “symbols of social order [...] are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message ‘Don’t dare to budge!’; rather, they cry out ‘Get ready to attack!’” Also Foucault (1978:95-96) insisted that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”. As power encloses within itself the framework of its own resistance, state aesthetics not only produces political power, but also invites transgression and thus forms the aesthetic agency of the revolting body politic (Wedeen 1999, Tripp 2013b). Both aesthetic agency and state aesthetics are interconnected and entangled in the same way that power and resistance are interconnected and entangled. Thus both exist in a mutually constitutive relationship (Lilja & Vinthagen 2014). Pointing to the relational character of power, Foucault made it clear that power has no absolute outside. In this light, resistance is not subordinated to power nor is it a consequence or negative form of power, it is in itself a heterogeneous form of power that is characterized by multiplicity, as it consists of various spatial nodes that structure relations in given a territory. Resistance is in other words not “a radical break at the one site of a great Refusal, not [...] a massive disruption that establishes two fundamental oppositions, not [...] an antagonism, but rather [...] an unevenly distributed multitude of points [...] in an equally diverse landscape of shifting splits and boundaries” (Raunig 2007:49).

As suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), processes of resistance will be analyzed as a diagnosis of power in this study. In this way, Foucault's assertion to look for resistance where power manifests itself will be inverted and the transformations of power will be analyzed by looking into dynamics of resistance as a starting point. By doing so, the romantic aura of resistance will be punctured. It is in other words through the meticulous study of resistance that I want to elaborate on existing theories of power and aesthetics. Foucault himself (1982:780) already hinted at this reversal when proposing to take these practices of resistance that are shaped against different forms of power as a starting point and thus to use resistance "as a chemical catalyst [...] to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used". This reversal can be used "to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them" and to trace "the complex workings of social power" and analyze "how power relations are historically transformed, especially with the introduction of forms and techniques of power characteristic of modern states and capitalist economies" (Abu-Lughod 1990:42).

2/4/1 STATE AESTHETICS

To study how in a given police order state aesthetics produces power and socializes collectivities but at the same time how the power enmeshed in these structures is contested and diverted and thus has the potential to always provoke a redistribution of the sensible, a new understanding of power is needed, in which sovereign power coalesces with disciplinary power (Fujitani 1996, Wedeen 1999). Foucault (1977) describes sovereign power as a uniform legislative form of power, negatively characterized by its prohibitive, censoring and repressive structure. Disciplinary power on the other hand is a productive and normalizing power that multiplies, articulates and divides and that is thus characterized by segmentation, "an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way" (Foucault 1977:197). This new understanding of power as a fusion of sovereign and disciplinary power, will – echoing Guy Debord (1967) – further be conceptualized as 'spectacular power'.

When Foucault (1977: 217) states that "our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance" and that "we are neither in the amphitheater, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power", he is implicitly positioning his

concept of disciplinary power against the way spectacular power is understood by Debord (1967). The spectacle is not only an architectural form but also a concept that facilitates our understanding of the circulation of power in a given society (Harcourt 2015). Spectacular power circulates in a police order as a technique of state power that permanently enforces the spectacle of authoritarianism, while throwing a shadow on material and violent processes of exploitation. Or, in the words of Debord (1967:31), spectacular power “imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system’s totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute star or disappear. This master of everyone else’s non-consumption is the heroic image that disguises the absolute exploitation entailed by the system of primitive accumulation accelerated by terror”. Nonetheless, as stated by W.J.T. Mitchell (cited in Harcourt 2015:89), both spectacle and surveillance are not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary, have to be seen as mutually entangled “forces in the exertion of power and resistance to power”. State aesthetics thus functions as a spectacular disciplinary mode of ideological and political interpellation that delineates the contours of the official national imagination. As convincingly argued by Lisa Wedeen (1999), the political power that circulates in the architecture of the spectacle and performs state power, combines a shared desire for stability with images of the sovereign’s omnipotence to discipline its citizens and facilitate political obedience.

Within spectacular power, as that specific articulation of sovereign and disciplinary power, a central aspect in the structuring of state aesthetics can be distinguished, an aspect Fujitani (1996:25) aptly calls “ocular domination”. As I will further argue in chapter 2 and 3, the central Clock Tower on the January 14 Square in the capital of Tunis – the last monument standing – can be unraveled as the central tower of the panoptic dispositif of the Ben Ali regime. Through its imaginary structure, this dispositif facilitates the circulation of disciplinary and spectacular power and by doing so enables surveillance. The omnipresent gaze of the sovereign in public space can be understood as a constant reminder for those moving in this space that the regime is keeping an eye on them. The pervasive image of the all-seeing autocrat central in state aesthetics produces in other words a kind of constant suspicion that one might be the object of surveillance. Through the repetition of the difference between those who see and those who are seen, the users of these spaces where state aesthetics

materializes have incorporated a form of visual domination and “internalized their own surveillance” (1996:25). Walking through public space in this context becomes a disciplining process that facilitates the symbolic structuring of a nation-state as a space “within which the people could imagine themselves as objects of observation” (1996:25). The materialization of the all-seeing regime in the urban fabric can thus be understood as a panoptic dispositif that “allows the police to be ‘present’ even when one knows that they are not” (Wedeen 1999:147).

Panopticism is concerned with the perfect arrangement and government over a given space. Central in this dispositif is the dystopic image of a city or a town immobilized by the functioning of an all-encompassing power that prevails in a discrete way over all subjected bodies in that space. When circulating through a panoptic dispositif of a given police order, spectacular power is visible but unverifiable, as the see/being seen dyad is dissociated. A condition for spectacular power to circulate, lies in its capacity to make this dissociation permanent, exhaustive and omnipresent by rendering the governed visible and the governor invisible, paradoxically through the endless reproduction of the hegemonic representation of power or what Foucault described as the way “the sovereign’s surplus power was manifested” (1977:202). The question whether presidential charisma is founded on different forms of legitimacy of the state, or the legitimacy of the state is founded on the charisma of the president is thus not relevant (see for instance Khiari & Lamoum 1998), as the mechanism of state aesthetics overall does not rely on the charisma of the authoritarian president that is being portrayed and endlessly reproduced, but on the circulation of automatized and disindividualized disciplinary power through its panoptical structure. In the words of Foucault (1977: 202) “[p]ower has its principle not so much in a person as [...] in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up. The ceremonies, the rituals, the marks by which the sovereign’s surplus power was manifested are useless. There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power [...] a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation.” Seeing state aesthetics as a disciplinary structure does not only make sense of the superfluity of the supposedly indispensable charisma to construct an imaginary around a given authoritarian leader, it also illuminates the mechanism of spontaneous reproduction of state aesthetics and thus the internalization of disciplinary power by the body politic.



Figure 3. January 14 Square, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 4. Statue Bourguiba, Tunis Afrique Presse



Figure 5. Monument Jules Ferry, Postcard from author's collection



Figure 6. Statue Cardinal Lavignerie, Tunis - Wikimedia commons

Beatrice Hibou (2006) challenges the Machiavellian image of the prince and the pertaining myth of a centralized omnipotent power. Power is never absolute nor indivisible, let alone unconditioned, but always mediated by a web of intermediaries, entangled in nepotistic and clientelist networks encompassing nearly the whole of society. However convincingly criticized by Mahmoud Ben Romdhane (2011) for its empirical flaws and its preoccupation with authoritarian resilience, the core of Hibou's theoretical understanding of the ambiguous way power is structured through its underlying mechanisms of voluntary servitude still holds for the analysis of the aesthetics of revolt central in this dissertation. Blinded by the power of state aesthetics, modes of governance that rely on mutual dependencies and relational forms of dominance are too often overseen. Debord (1967:4) already stated that "the spectacle is not a collection of images" but "a social relation between people that is mediated by images". Power is thus not systematically exercised from above, not from the presidential palace of Carthage or from the Ministry of Interior. Such a vision moreover approaches state aesthetics as a historic, fixed, determined, predictable and eternal external given, confounding the exercise of power and political imaginary. Focusing on the images and representations that constitute state aesthetics, one can overestimate the direct master-slave relation, as if power is linear, unidirectional and bluntly imposed by the head of state to the body politic. It makes one blind to the multiple, deep and diffuse forms of domination and to the prevailing relational processes of subjugation. The state thus exercises its power inside society, in a network of relations, in a social organization that allows it to be exercised. There is no outside of spectacular power. State aesthetics nevertheless upholds the illusion of absolute control and total discipline, instrumentalized by those in power as a technique of power, surveillance and normalization. In short, the spontaneous reproduction inside and inherent to state aesthetics shows how the body politic became the principle of its own subjection. Aware of its subjection to a given field of visibility, the subject assumes its presupposed responsibility and makes the limitations of power spontaneously play upon itself. The subject actively inscribes itself in prevailing power relations, within a certain distribution of the sensible, simultaneously playing both roles of governor and governed. By the very process of incorporation or internalization, spectacular power "may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects" (Foucault 1997:203).

By this spontaneous and voluntary repetition and reproduction, the gaze of the head of state “transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert” (Foucault 1977:214).

State aesthetics are not structured overnight. The “thousands eyes” that constitute state aesthetics in Tunisia are historical constructions and thus characterized by a palimpsestic structure that reveal its postcolonial disposition. As reminded by Johnson and Ray (2015) in the context of India and South Africa, freshly independent states always seem to operate in and to be legitimized by polysemic and layered symbolic orders. Polysemic and layered, because they are marked by traces of previous forms of rule or older political orders and their historical contestations. When a new postcolonial elite takes over existing political institutions, it engages in a material and symbolic process of reappropriation, and thus in an “aesthetic struggle of nation-building” (2015:14). Through the self-conscious, ostentatious and aesthetic gesture of over-writing one symbolic order by another, the site of former colonial power is marked with a counter story of national becoming, that is never spared of political processes of rearticulation, revision or even erasure, making a new but more complex and multilayered site of postcolonial power.

However, the first political images glorifying the image of the leader already made their appearance in Tunisia during the period of what Lisa Anderson (1986) aptly calls “defensive modernization” or what is generally referred to as the period of Islamic reformism and thus before the time of French colonization. The efficient disciplining and controlling techniques engrained in state aesthetics are only fully developed during the French colonial civilizing missions and improved and advanced after the liberation of the nation-state through the reproduction of the image of the head of state. Inspired by paintings of European leaders sent as diplomatic gifts, the Husainid leader of the Tunisian province of the Ottoman Caliphate – Ahmed Bey – was the first one to rely on the power engrained in the reproduction of his portrait by the local elites to symbolize prestige, autocracy and authority (Moumni 2016). It was only with the consolidation of the French protectorate however, that this practice found its way outside the confined walls of the palaces of the royal ruling class. As I will demonstrate in chapter 3, the colonial statue of Jules Ferry on what used to be the ‘Marine Avenue’, the boulevard now known as the Avenue Bourguiba,

can thus be acknowledged as the historical pedestal of current state aesthetics. Jules Ferry was the main personality immortalized and venerated by the French colonizers, next to a sculpture of Cardinal Lavigerie at 'Bourse Square' now renamed 'Victory Square', a sculpture of Paul Cambon at 'Pasteur Square' and a monument for Philippe Thomas at 'Station Square' now 'Barcelona Square' (Sebag 1998). Cardinal Lavigerie was one of the most important missionary figures in Tunisia, the founding father of the 'Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique', commonly known as the Pères Blancs or White Fathers. He was guardian of the Saint-Louis chapel in Carthage and eventually became cardinal, archbishop of Carthage. Paul Cambon was French minister plenipotentiary at Tunis, fulfilling two terms as Resident-General. Phillip Thomas was a French archeologist and geologist, particularly known for his 'discovery' of the phosphate deposits, until today one of the most important Tunisian export products. Jules Ferry is commonly considered the founder of the second colonial empire of France, the man behind the first overseas thrust of the Third Republic and prime minister of the French republican government during the establishment of the French Protectorate in Tunisia in 1881. Ferry was one of the most important inspirations of the colonial doctrine of the Third Republic. As argued by Luizard (2006), the colonization process was not only driven by a strong economic and patriotic vision, but also by a civilizational determination. Inspired by the theory of the civilizing mission in *Les Colonies et la Colonisation Moderne* by Lavollé (1871) and further elaborated by Lerroy-Beaulieu in *La Colonization Chez les Peuples Modernes* (1887), Ferry legitimized the French colonial enterprise "[i]n the name of the greatness of France" and "the duty of superior races to civilize inferior peoples" (cited in Luizard 2006:89). To legitimize the fierce bombardment of the city of Sfax to counter the resistance against French occupation in 1881, Jules Ferry (cited in Luizard 2006:109) again invoked the higher sentiment that goes with the achievement of the predestined and glorious national task to achieve: "the triumph of civilization over barbarism, the only form of the spirit of conquest that modern morality can admit".

What will interest us in this dissertation is not so much the discourse of the civilizing mission, but how this discourse is being reproduced in the spectacular power that circulates through the images and monuments that constitute the state aesthetics. These images and monuments can, in the light of the civilizing mission described above, indeed be considered the "sculptural extension

of racial terror” as suggested by Achille Mbembe (2013:188). The presence in the public space of colonial or neocolonial monuments is far from trivial. According to Mbembe, these vestiges are the signs of a domination and of a physical and symbolic struggle of power. To be effective, domination must not only be inscribed in the body, it must be anchored in the living space and imagination of the oppressed, leaving indelible marks. This subjugation must permeate the daily routine and the very structure of the unconscious. In this perspective, monuments in public space are not merely appealing artifacts intended to beautify life in the city but monuments that cast a shadow over the consciousness of men and women. The political and historical power relations, of which these statues are the materialization, are symbolically expressed and determine the reading of history. Their perpetual presence is a daily reminder of what should be remembered and what should preferably be forgotten. These monuments neglect the lives of already damned populations and haunt their memories. Mbembe (2013) sees in these public artifacts a morbid glorification of the imperialist spirit, a form of necromancy, keeping alive colonial and postcolonial racism, and an inherently tight inferiority complex, as I will elaborate on later in this introduction.

2/4/2 AESTHETIC AGENCY

State aesthetics is imbued with power but it is not a natural given. It is rather a handmade collective, a relational and historical construction and thus an edifice that can – no matter how difficult it may seem at times – in some way be challenged and maybe even fundamentally altered. John Chalcraft (2016:18-19) rightly warns us for the determinist character of most of Foucaultian accounts, imbued with the tendency to overanalyze mechanisms of control at the expense of processes of protest, contention and resistance. However, generating valuable insights on the structuration of subjects and notwithstanding the fact that this poststructuralist body of literature is based on the very assumption of agency and the will to transcend the normalizing structures under scrutiny, these accounts have the tendency to overshadow the agency of ostracized groups, making them speechless (Spivak 1988).

The question of how power can be analyzed through its resistance, in our case the way the circulation of spectacular power – as the contradictory merging of repressive sovereign power and productive disciplinary power – is contested within a given police

order, remains largely unexplored within Foucaultian approaches (Death 2010, Lilja & Vinthagen 2014). As suggested by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000), it is in the eminent writings of Frantz Fanon that I will find the necessary ground to reassert the importance of agency within a poststructuralist frame of thought and propose the conceptualization of aesthetic agency. When hinting at a prognosis for his social diagnosis in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952:11) poetically reminds us that the disalienation and liberation of the colonized in its most materialistic meaning is “in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of the structure” as “society, unlike biochemical processes, cannot escape human influences. Man [sic] is what brings society into being”. In the closing chapter of the book, Fanon (1952:231-232) reasserts the agency of the (colonized) subject by suggesting that the humanity of the colonized is his or her own foundation through which he or she will initiate a cycle of liberation: “It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men [sic] will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.” In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he famously defined decolonization as a bottom-up historical process where two opposed forces meet, and that has the potential to change the order and whole social structure of a given society. Throughout this process prevailing subjectivities are fundamentally altered and a solid base for a new humanity is created. Or in Fanon’s (1961:36) own words: “[D]ecolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men [sic], and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men [sic].” It is thus only through the struggle for liberation that the colonized can overcome its inferiority complex and find a renewed humanity. Liberation and disalienation go hand in hand. In the light of our case study, the one word that caught the overall aim of revolt in Tunisia was dignity or ‘Karama’ in Arabic, referring to the will of the colonized to stand up and elevate him- or herself to the rank of human being (Ayari 2011). As stated by Foucault (2000:452), it is through revolution that “subjectivity [...] is brought into history, breathing life into it”. In this sense, revolt in Tunisia has “not only ‘unplugged’ subjectivity from sovereign apparatuses but opened the possibility for genuinely new subjectivity” (Abourahme & Jayyusi

2011:626). Or as understood by Rancière (1992), it is through the process of subjectivization, that political subjects confront the police order and bring proper politics into existence. However it may be conceptualized, there is a profound process of becoming taking place during revolutionary moments, a fundamental rearrangement of the contours of individual and collective subjectivities that has the potential to prescribe a new dignified body politic. As it will run throughout every of the five different chapters of this dissertation, the Tunisian case is the perfect case study to show how aesthetic agency was formed through the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power entrenched in the prevailing states aesthetics of a historically formed police order. The different revolutionary moments and movements under study will show under which conditions a prevailing post-colonial inferiority complex can possibly be surmounted through the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power.

Without framing revolt in Tunisia as “the first Situationist revolution in History” as proposed by Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (2011:*unpaginated*), this spectacular “reversal of established relationships” can be seen as a ‘détournement’, ‘diversion’ or ‘reappropriation’ in proper Situationist terms (Debord 1967). According to a collective text written by the Situationist movement (1959), the specific power of diversion or reappropriation stems from two of its constitutive movements. The first movement that constitutes the process of diversion is the loss of importance and original sense of the diverted elements. The second movement is the creation of “a new meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect” (Situationniste 1959:10). Through both movements, all the original elements must disappear or have to be reinvested. By reusing existing elements as material for new ensembles, the process of diversion not only negates the value of the previous organization of the elements it diverts, but at the same time expresses “the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level” (Situationniste 1959:11). However, as I will argue in chapter 2, the fundamental precondition for the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power is the violent disruption of specific historically formed spatial nodes that keep a police order in place and facilitate the proper circulation of spectacular power. The violence, by which that power is structured, is claimed and spontaneously redirected. As stated by Fanon (1961:40): “[T]he violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world [...] will be claimed and taken over by the native.” A revolting body politic that comes into



Figure 7. Police Station La Goulette, JR/Artocratie en Tunisie



Figure 8. Swimming Pool Trabelsi, The Bedouins



Figure 9. Ben Ali Luxury Resort Hamamet, Clotilde Gourlet AFP/Getty Images



Figure 10. JR/Artocratie en Tunisie

being by a spontaneous cathartic energy, amassed throughout decennia of severe oppression and violence, is moved by swarm intelligence. A collective body indeed moves like a swarm or in the words of Hardt and Negri (2005:91-92), like a “multitude of different creative agents [...] unknown, uncertain, unseen, and unexpected [...] without center that dictates order” resulting in “innumerable independent forces” that “strike from all directions at a particular point and then disappear back into the environment”. Aesthetic agency is hoarded through swarm intelligence.

As I mentioned before, spectacular power does not trickle down from the state to its subject through its essential representation in the form of a statue for instance. It also moves and circulates in a diffuse, multiple and heterogeneous manner in the intricate way state aesthetics is produced, reproduced, but also contested and thus diverted through swarm intelligence. For Foucault (1978:93), “power” is only “permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing” as “the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement”. In this light, Foucault (1978:93) emphasizes the omnipresence of power, as it is always produced in a diffuse way “from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another [...] not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. From a productive perspective, both domination and resistance are intertwined and create subjectivity and thus also potentially aesthetic agency. The revolution was then a momentary instant when the diffuse circulation of power concentrated in its official representation in public space and piled up to provoke its own total destruction. If the representation of power creates the illusion that power is permanent, homogeneous, fixed and self-reproducing, it is only in its singular, momentary and unique violent destruction then that power paradoxically comes together and unites, to represent or signify its radical rejection.

Subjectivities are spontaneously reimagined and reinvented during this movement of radical rejection. While revolting, the emerging aesthetic agency of the united body politic accumulates and culminates in the revolutionary diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power and by doing so, provokes an epistemological and political disruption on how being Tunisian is thought (Levine 2013). The questions who the united and demanding body politic is and what it meant to be proud again to be Tunisian are particularly difficult to answer as the revolutionary dynamics

are not led by highly politicized and organized groups or particular revolutionary parties (Chalcraft 2012, Zemni 2014, Salmon 2016). As I will further elaborate in the fifth and last chapter of this dissertation, new political subjectivities are formed through a struggle that colors outside the historically delineated lines of the nation. A lack of stable reference to designate the new emerging subjectivities however, upsets hegemonic discursive formations and is also epistemologically destabilizing (Levine 2013). De Smet (2016) rightly noticed that “there was no protagonist simply waiting behind the curtains of history only to make his scripted appearance at the scene of revolution”. The united body politic implies a revolutionary dynamic from the objective existence of a passive ‘population’ into the subjective self-consciousness of an active ‘people’ and thus entails a shift from a fundamental epistemological to an ontological question (De Smet 2016).

Different scholars engaged with the question of transforming subjectivity through the enunciation of ‘the people’, as the affirmative diversion or reappropriation of the central line of Tunisia’s national hymn ‘Humāt al-Himá’ – more precisely its last revolutionary verses quoting “the will of life” by the renown anticolonial poet Abu Al-Qasim Ash-Shabi – produced the viral slogan and main proclamation of the Tunisian and by extension Arab revolutions: “The people want!” (Challand 2011, Judy 2012, Colla 2012, Omri 2012, Gana 2013c, Bouzouita 2013, Alshaer 2014). As reminded by Gilbert Achcar (2013), the direct irruption and collective affirmation of a non-negotiable popular will, proved its effectiveness. During the struggle for a new constitution, this historical poetic phrase transformed into the bottom line of countless imaginable variants and served as a discursive vehicle to numerous, at times contradicting, political demands. In this dissertation however, I am not interested in the enunciation of peoplehood, but in the ways the revolting body politic united under the national banner and overcame its postcolonial inferiority complex, regaining their pride to be Tunisians through the successful diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power. I am thus particularly interested in the sensible way subjectivities were formed, through the way the authoritarian spectacle was reversed and turned against itself.

By the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power, the body politic was remaking itself, “shedding off years of conditioning and inertia to emerge as political subjects” (Abourahme & Jayyusi 2011:626). For decades, the Tunisian population was depicted, not only externally, but also by an internalized inferiority complex

as a passive and apolitical mass. They were generally portrayed and portrayed themselves as culturally distinct if not inferior, congenitally inapt to independence (Sahli 1965) and exceptionally nonsensitive to democracy and freedom (Bisharah 2012). Also in academia, in the domain of Middle Eastern Studies and beyond, Tunisians, like most Arab populations, were predominantly represented as passive objects of tradition, Islam and authoritarian rule (De Smet 2016). Always lagging behind the rest of the world, Muslims only understood the logic of force and would therefore be in an almost eternal need of authoritarian leadership. As I stated before, this contention was formulated as much from the outside, as from within, as over time it has, as stated by Abourahme & Jayyusi (2011:628), "seeped into an ossified shared subjective consciousness, as history relentlessly played itself out as an intractable sequence of setbacks, defeats, compromises".

The origin of what Fanon, following Aimé Césaire (1950), appropriately conceptualized as an inferiority complex, goes back to the era of French colonialism, which represented the body politic as uneducated, backward and thus incapable of liberation (De Smet 2016). To paraphrase Mohamed S. Sahli (1965), the principal convention in the curtain of ideological conventions that characterizes every colonial regime, is the postulate of the congenital inferiority of the colonized. The emergence of 'the people' and their aesthetic agency can thus be traced back to the struggle for national liberation. The struggle for liberation facilitated a process of subject formation, from the constitutive and inferiorized other inherent to their subjugation as colonial object, to the 'Tunisian people' as a liberated subject of its own history. In a context of presumed natural superiority of the 'Western race', indigenous populations in the eyes of the colonizer lacked intelligence and were considered as primitive, incompetent and even perverted (El Ghouli 2003). From an evolutionist perspective, the indigenous populations were dehumanized and seen as inferior beings. In short, "to be Tunisian, meant to be colonized" (Memmi 1965:viii). But if, as Fanon (1965:36) pointed out, "[d]ecolonization is the veritable creation of new men [sic]" and as stated by Beji (1982), Tunisians are no longer colonized, but at the same time not fully decolonized, what does it mean then to be Tunisian?

As explained in detail by Lisa Anderson (1986), succeeding processes of defensive modernization, Islamic reformism and colonization provoked the erosion of personal and family ties and particularistic loyalties in 19th century Tunisia.



Figure 11. Dégage, Amine Boussoffara



Figure 12. Tarz, Hela Ammar



Figure 13. Wall of Martyrs, Thala, L'Economiste Maghrebin

Processes of administrative territorialization divided tribes through newly defined districts. Kinship ties of tribes were replaced with wider and more flexible clientelist networks. Tribal solidarity became genuinely harmful to the wellbeing of these collectivities within the rural population. Changing labor structure through intensified patronage provoked the decline of familial solidarity of village tribal and community associations in favor of patron-client ties. Colonial state formation pushed the population further into a destitute and dependent subject position. It further fragmented collective subjectivities ingrained in the tribal affiliation structure, engendering modern individualized subject formations. The institution of legal administration, together with the replacement of collective economies by private commercial markets, accelerated the weakening of tribal solidarities. Local collectivities, once subjected to equal and common kinship ties, were made subject to the needs that accompanied state formation and the development of a modern capitalist economy. As kinship obligations were replaced by relationalities based on differential access to state services (like tax exemptions, access to land, schooling, etc.), the social structures inside these local communities gradually differentiated. The elite, city dwellers and well-connected individuals profited through clientelist ties from the centralized colonial regime, mostly located in the Sahil region. Lisa Anderson (1986) further argues that as the French occupation further impoverished the majority of the population through selective wealth redistribution, disenchantment in the French protectorate widened. Local revolutions – that already started during the initial process of defensive modernization and Islamic reformism – spread under French occupation to the center and deep south of the Regency. Protest also rose against racial discrimination of educated Tunisians in liberal professions and government services. Resistance was violently oppressed and ideologically dismissed by the French, portraying the insurgents as irrational Arab, Bedouin, religious fanatics and reactionary obscurantists in short as “le péril indigène” (Anderson 1986, Ben Hamida 2003, El Ghoul 2003).

As subjectivity is always constituted in conflict with the other, colonialism can be considered as the “systematic negation of the other” or as the denial of “all attributes of humanity” to the other (Fanon 1961:250). The fundamental problem is that this ontological denial is being interiorized by the colonized. The inferiority complex of the colonized is not something that predates colonization as contended by Octave Mannoni (1950) in his *Psychology of Colonization*. As convincingly argued by Fanon, the inferiority

complex is formed through the internalization of precisely this historical and political process of domination. The inferiority complex is the outcome of a double process. First it is deeply embedded in the economic and social relations of violent domination and exploitation instilled by colonial power. Second, it is the direct consequence of the subjective internalization of the presupposed superiority of the colonizer by the colonized, trapped in a zone of non-being through a collective process of fierce alienation. Through the process of what Maldonado Torres (2007:247) calls "damnation", the colonized is subjectified through a continuous questioning, a permanent doubt, suspicion and inferiorization that denies the colonized its humanity, thus instilling a structural lack of being and a certain dispensability or disposability in the ontological constitution of the colonized. In the words of Albert Memmi (1965:87-88): "Constantly confronted with this image of himself, set forth and imposed on all institutions and in every human contact, how could the colonized help reacting to this portrait? It cannot leave him indifferent and remain a veneer, which, like an insult, blows with the wind. He ends up recognizing it as one would a detested nickname, which has become a familiar description [...]. [W]illfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up being accepted and lived to a certain extent by the colonized. It thus acquires a certain amount of reality and contributes to the true portrait of the colonized."

Needless to say that during the struggle for national liberation, the colonial statues – whether representing Jules Ferry, Cardinal Lavigerie, Paul Cambon or Philippe Thomas – were all destroyed almost in the same vein in which the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime was annihilated during the latest revolution. For Fanon (1961:94) "violence is a cleansing force" that has the potential to "free the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect". As contended by Bird-Pollan (2012) and in analogy with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic central in Fanonian thought, agency is not a given but something that is achieved through struggle, against the very deprivation of any agency by colonial power. The unavoidable violence exerted to divert spectacular power is then constitutive of the process of subject formation. Confronted with what Mbembe (2013:188) considered the "sculptural extension of racial terror", to free him- or herself from his or her inferiority complex, the colonized has the option to direct its inherent violence towards the representation

or personalization of the power that engenders his or her inferiority complex in the first place or towards him- or herself.

In chapter 4, I will go deeper into what Abourahme & Jayyusi (2011:627) properly describe as “the readiness to sacrifice, to consciously [...] put one’s body and life on the line” as a consequence of a “body and self pushed by degradation to the very brink of total abjection”. For Foucault, the will to revolt is situated in the impulsive moment “in which a human being ‘really’ prefers the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey” (2000:449). As I will describe more in-depth in chapter 4, self-sacrifice can be the condition for a collective subjectivity to emerge, for a space of appearance to come into being that invites life outside established and legitimate political structures, the bare life of the dispossessed saturated in power relations, to appear. In the light of the fire of revolt that spread over Tunisia, the lives of the damned that occupy the proper place of non-being and permanently struggle against an omnipresent death (Fanon 1959, 1961), the life of those that have no part in the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004), can be grasped through the mythologized and sometimes romanticized masculine figure of the ‘Bouazizi’, but also that of the ‘Jihadi’ and the ‘Harraga’. The figure of the ‘Bouazizi’ refers to the suffocating forlorn person, hemmed in in his precarious livelihood, who, marked by the disdain, scorn and disregard he has experienced, keeps the honor to himself and decides to burn himself as an ultimate and spectacular act of revolt. The character of the ‘Jihadi’ lives under the same social conditions but by contrast feels obliged to burn the other to achieve his utopian political goals. The ‘Jihadi’ refers to the depoliticized Islamist activist that travels to the Middle East to blindly fight a bloody war that is not his or that is exported to Tunisia to commit unreasonable deadly attacks. In between the figure of the ‘Bouazizi’ and that of the ‘Jihadi’ lies the figure of the ‘Harraga’. The ‘Harraga’ is not an immigrant. He is the one who burns his identity papers, the sea and contingent borders, and risks his precarious life crossing the sea to Lampedusa to claim an inalienable right to international mobility. The desperate act of burning the self, the other or the contingent frontiers of the world system can be understood in this light as a form of diversion or reappropriation of biopower or as a canalization of necropower as I will show in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, but also as a way to emasculate sovereign power through the radical assumption of bare life (Edkins & Pin-Fat 2005) and to surmount a deeply engrained inferiority complex. What is of interest in this dissertation is thus the violence by

which the inferiority complex was surmounted through the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power circulating through the images and monuments that constitute prevailing state aesthetics. The following chapters will deepen the various ways in which this diversion or reappropriation relates to what I have called the contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia. By untying the intricate entanglement of processes of the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics, the redistribution of the partition of the sensible in the post-colonial revolutionary context of Tunisia will be laid bare. The diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power will in other words be scrutinized as a process of what Kompridis (2014:18) aptly conceptualized as “reflective re-disclosure”, i.e. as the task to redisclose “conditions of intelligibility and possibility, creating alternative possibilities for thought and action” and demand “a transformation of perception and the conditions of perception, a transformation of sensibility as well as of rationality”. The process of the reappropriation of sovereign and disciplinary power engrained in the state aesthetics of the Ben Ali regime might have opened “a void of possibility in the partition of the sensible wherein new political subjects emerge” (McKee 2016:22). While “the sublime spectacle of pure popular power sweeping away tyranny” (Abourahme & Jayyusi 2011:626) was only ephemeral and produced only momentary rupture, it nevertheless contributed to the appearance of “new modes of intelligibility, new modes of creativity, and new modes of collaborative revolutionism” (Gana 2013b:16). As stated by Ebrahim Moosa (2011:172), “if the outcome of the [...] revolutions is unclear, then there is one certainty: the people have changed the order of the sensible”. In this dissertation, I want to contest this asserted certainty and reformulate it into a question: Did the revolting body politic really change the order of the sensible during the moments and movements of revolt in Tunisia?

3 REVOLT IN TUNISIA

Questioning the entanglement of both processes of the aestheticization and politicization within the police order of an all-encompassing aesthetic realm, is not a hermetically closed theoretical endeavor. Starting from a precise case study, the latest sequences of revolt in Tunisia, I will inquire how, through the circulation of spectacular power, a certain division of the sensible can be structured and how the diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power can at the same time contest that very same police order. Before delineating my case in time and space, it might be helpful to give a clarification of the concept of revolution. For that I will refer to Furio Jesi's (2014) fundamental phenomenological distinction between a revolt and a revolution, looking in particular at their respective different experiences of time. This distinction between revolution and revolt will not only install conceptual clarity in the terms used to designate the societal transformations Tunisia is undergoing, but will also be helpful to sharpen the underlying research question that will consider the aesthetics of the revolutionary dynamics under scrutiny.

According to Jesi (2014:46), a revolt can best be comprehended as a sudden insurrectional and explosive movement. A revolution on the other hand is "a strategic complex of insurrectional movements, coordinated and oriented over the mid- to long term towards ultimate objectives". A revolution can thus be apprehended as a well-considered constellation of different revolts that unravels towards a long-term or long-distance horizon. A revolt "suspends historical time", whereas a revolution is "wholly and deliberately immersed in historical time". A revolt therefore "suddenly institutes a time in which everything that is done has a value in itself, independently of its consequences and of its relations with the transitory or perennial complex that constitutes history". According to Cavaletti (2014), the distinction between revolt and revolution is consistent with Jesi's distinction between idea and ideology. In the same way as ideology can be contrasted with "the immediate epiphany of the idea" and thus be understood as the "ossification" of an idea "in the ideological canon", revolution can be contrasted with the instantaneous emergence of a revolt and thus grasped as a form of essentialization of that

revolt in history (Cavaletti 2014:10). Hence, whereas the idea or the concept of revolt refers to “novelty” and “the time of subversion”, ideology or the concept of revolution refers to the “time of memory”. Narratives of major ruptures tend to paralyze the moving images that constitute a revolution and to petrify the volatile terms, interpretations and imaginaries of revolutionary movements. In the words of Raunig (2007:27): “[T]he irresistible processual meaning of the term revolution is lost in the fixation of the image of the major rupture.” The interpretations of the course of different revolts or revolutionary flows that are grouped and post-factum considered a successful revolution, thus tend to fix the ideas, myths and symbols that made up this revolt in the first place into a static and well-delineated, fossilized part of history.

Having clarified our use of the concept of revolution, the topicality of the case study central in this research now forces us to question the physical and temporal distance needed to theorize and analyze revolts or revolutions and their aesthetics (Gerring 2004). In other words, how can one conduct a research when the effects and outcomes of the examined political situation are so current and therefore uncertain and volatile? Different geographical and temporal imaginaries and registers shape our understanding. The choice to locate an event in one specific imaginary or register over the other has important consequences, as it can have a profound impact on which practices, actors, events, and power relations are or are not taken into account. Choosing for revolt in Tunisia as a case study to understand the way aesthetics can be politicized and politics aestheticized in the police order of a postcolonial authoritarian regime, implies making explicit the unit under analysis as a spatially confined phenomenon, stretching over a delimited period of time in history. In what follows, I will first draw the geographical contours and then the time horizon of the ongoing movements of revolt in Tunisia.

3/1 **REVOLTING SPACES AND GEOGRAPHIES**

Revolt in Tunisia has mostly been interpreted as a caesura in national and regional histories, and much less as one situated on a global scale, let alone in continental dynamics. While considering the theoretical implications of studying our subject from a regional, continental or global perspective, I will position my case study primarily within the specific history of

nation-building, examining the revolution as a singular, discrete and separate case, contained within the geographical boundaries of the Tunisian nation-state.

The movements of revolt in Tunisia and their reverberations in the Middle East and North Africa, made the classic issue in Middle East scholarship re-emerge of whether these revolts mark the final end or a return of 'Arab politics' (Phillips 2012, 2014). The series of revolutions facilitated the legitimacy of a regional reading of ongoing revolutionary dynamics, as it showed the resilience of a certain Arab public sphere. The contagious character of the sequences of revolt in Tunisia illustrated the initial relevance to re-use the lens of 'Arab politics' to understand ongoing societal dynamics. Notwithstanding the definitive failure of Nasserist, unitary, pan-Arab nationalism and the confinement of the borders of the nation-state, Arabism remained a central component of the nationalist discourse of the postcolonial regime in Tunisia (Ayari 2010). Whether describing the ongoing political dynamics in Tunisia as part of a larger 'Arab Spring', 'Arab Awakening' or 'Arab Revolution', the nearly hegemonic reference in the field of regional studies to a presupposed 'Arabness' proper to these dynamics reiterates an implicit cohesive Arab consciousness, highlighting a renewed sort of supranational Arab nationalism from below. Yet, attempts to study revolt in Tunisia as part of larger 'Arab Revolutions' can be interpreted as the re-emergence of a form of reduction or mythification, Abdel-Malek (1963) and later Said (1978) coined 'Orientalism', reorientalizing Middle Eastern Studies (Burris 2011, El Mahdi 2011, Aouragh 2012, Scheid 2012, Borg 2016, Ventura 2017, Malak & Salem 2015). These common generalizations lump together millions of different people living in more than a dozen different countries, where non-Arab minority groups also live and are politically active, resulting in the impossibility to simply discuss Arab societies (Said 1975). Nevertheless, too often these societies are framed in a liberal civilizing discourse underlying presupposed essential temporal differences between 'the Arab world' and 'the West' (Borg 2016). The 'Arab world' is a constructed category that can cast a shadow on the heterogeneity of the region (Moore & Hamdar 2015). Although sharing a common aim of dignity, the different movements that are absorbed under these endlessly repeated common denominators, are constituted by a variety of particular demographic realities, different causes and strategies of protest, divergent economic and social demands, but also distinct historical circumstances and peculiar authoritarian

regimes (Anderson 2011). Moreover, different streams of Islamism seem to fill the role previously played by pan-Arab politics in challenging the regime, causing postrevolutionary regimes to emphasize Islamism over Arabism (Phillips 2014). Furthermore, the sequence of revolt in Tunisia in themselves challenged Tunisia's homogenous Arabness and postcolonial narrative of a unified nation, through a certain politicization of issues pertaining to diversity and more specifically to ethnic, racial and religious differences (Pouessel 2016). It made visible again and reinforced a certain historical adherence to, but also an already existing politicization of, Amazigh belonging, reclaiming autochthony and indigeneity (Torres de Janon 2014, Maddy-Weitzman 2012, 2015). The movements of revolt in Tunisia also opened up a certain political space for racialized minorities and their struggle against racism (Pouessel 2012, Abedlhamid 2012). Both struggles mainly found expression in an artistic imagination that kept the discussion on the Black and Amazigh inheritance of Tunisia alive through music, street art, cinema and theater (Pouessel 2012, Becker 2016). Finally, as I will directly point out below, research emphasizing the Arabness of the revolutions tends to cut off global and continental connections from their analysis.

African readings of revolt in Tunisia have been largely overseen, in the same way as Africa in its whole has been ignored in the context of the ongoing wave of global protest. While the world was being occupied by the multitude, people rose up in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Western Sahara and Zimbabwe. Blinded by prejudices about African politics, the sequences of revolt in Tunisia was framed as part of an Arab Spring or of a worldwide protest movement, severing it from its very geographical location. Whether calling it an "African Revolution" (Branch & Mampilly 2015), "African awakening" (Ekine & Manji 2012) or an "Afro-Arab Spring" (Villa-Vicencio, Doxtader & Moosa 2015), reframing revolt in Tunisia from a continental perspective pushes research to first look into Africa's own history of revolution before looking outwards to the rest of the world. It makes clear that revolt in Tunisia also builds on a legacy of African protest and more specifically on the history of anticolonial struggle (Branch & Mampilly 2015). The movements and moments of revolt in Tunisia and their continental reverberations reactivated the hope of an "African renaissance" that had not been heard since the successful struggle against Apartheid in South Africa (Villa-Vicencio, Doxtader & Moosa 2015).

Seen from an African perspective, the revolt in Tunisia takes up a historical lineage of nonviolent protest again and by doing so imbues itself with the moral power it implies, pioneering a different imagination that facilitates new politics of inclusion beyond nativist and modernist divisions (Mamdani 2011). The political project of Pan-Africanism was of importance for Tunisia during the struggle for decolonization and in its direct aftermath, but once the independent state implemented its own power relations, the fundamental questions that constituted it were left behind (Thlili 2012). The sequences of revolt in Tunisia put the struggle for “a second independence” against neocolonial and neoliberal postcolonial states back on the continental agenda. Thus it helped to dissolve the imaginary border between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (Zezeza 2012) but also to re-inscribe past imperial relations under new neoliberal guises (Grovogui 2011).

‘The Protester’ was chosen as person of the year by *Time Magazine*. 2011 was indeed a year of great significance as noted by the *Declaration* of Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri (2012). In the light of what is seen as a global wave of dissent against a global economic and financial crisis, a lineage of revolt is drawn that started in Tunisia, but soon extended to neighboring countries in the Middle East, Europe and the United States to converge into a worldwide movement. From the Arab revolutions, over the Indignados to the Occupy movement, what academics were witnessing would have been a sedentarization of the alter globalization movements that started in the nineties but was hindered by the global ‘war on terror’. As protest seemed to be “kicking off everywhere”, some argued for reading the ongoing protests intertextually as a global revolt against neoliberalism (Mason 2012, 2013, Lunghi & Wheeler 2012), going in pair with the development of the multitude as a global actor of dissent (Hatem 2012) and experimenting with horizontal nonrepresentational constituent practices (Lorey 2011, 2013). What scholars were observing would have been a global popular revolt against a general regression that facilitated globalized liberal capitalism (Badiou 2012). Some even thought the revolts were inspired by the methods of nonviolent action as elaborated by the renowned popular politicologist Gene Sharp. Others more analytically proposed to seize the momentum of global struggle to reconsider and contextualize the nature of local political rule as situated in a larger extra-regional context so it can be related to different global trends and we can refocus our attention on the politics of three decades of neoliberalism (Bogaert 2013), countering the

widespread idea of an “Arab exceptionalism” (Brownlee & Ghiabi 2016). An opposite reading is proposed by Chantal Mouffe (2013) and Sami Zemni (2017), who both problematize the homogenization of these very heterogeneous movements and thus refute the assertions made by Hardt and Negri (2012) that revolt in Tunisia can be understood in a global genealogy of revolt. The reasons and the political aims that brought people to the streets were very different in the authoritarian context of Tunisia than in liberal democratic societies in Europe and the United States. Revolt in Tunisia is a product of specific circumstances with its own historical context and its own particularities. Interpreting revolt in Tunisia from a global perspective can facilitate eurocentric insights that reduce struggle to a struggle for Western-style democracy (see for instance Lorey 2011, 2013) reinforcing the re-emergence of and a renewed attention to processes of democratization (Stepan & Linz 2013; Cilento 2014). While agreeing with the concerns formulated by Koen Bogaert (2013), following Immanuel Wallerstein, that in times of accelerated globalization a prevailing “methodological nationalism” in political science should be problematized and although nation-states can no longer be studied as self-contained entities without taking into consideration their convolutedness with processes of global capitalism, I will focus on the Tunisian case for contingent but obvious reasons that I will deepen out in my methodological part.

Answering exotic expectations, the etic misnomer of ‘Jasmine Revolution’ rapidly went viral in France and the rest of the world to designate what was happening in Tunisia, even in the highest spheres of academia (see for instance Bayat 2011). Inside Tunisia however, nobody accepted the label, some even contested it, as it refers to the term Zine El Abidine Ben Ali gave his medical coup in 1987. Moreover, the connotation of the orientalist label glosses over the roughness and bloodiness of the revolution (Omri 2012). As Habib Ayeub (2011) argues, the sequences of revolt in Tunisia can better be understood as the revolution of the South against the North, of the margins against the center, of the Alfa grass against the Jasmine. As a consequence of colonial exploitation and unbalanced postcolonial development policies, there are roughly speaking two Tunisia's. The first Tunisia is the one of power, money, comfort and so-called development. Geographically situated in the coastal touristic areas, Tunis capital and the Sahel (Nabeul, Sousse and Monastir), it is the part of Tunisia with the highest concentration of infrastructure and consequently with positive economic and social indicators.

The second Tunisia is the damned one, the zone of non-being, geographically located in the south, the center and the west of the country. This part of Tunisia has a mainly extractive economy. Resources are transferred to the other part of Tunisia without a fair compensation, which results in negative economic and social indicators and the total economic dependence of the south on the north, even though resources are mainly located in the south (for instance water, agricultural land, oases, ores, gas and oil). Knowing that Jasmine is mainly grown in the former part of Tunisia, Ayeb (2011) prefers to call the revolution the "Alfa Grass revolution". Ayari & Geisser (2011) propose the designation "Nouzouh Revolution", diverting the negative connotation that sticks to the people living in rural areas, as opposed to the urban elite, the "Beldis". Nabihah Gasmi and Sadri Khiari also reject the flower that only grows in the affluent suburbs of Tunis, proposing instead "the Revolution of the prickly pear", which is the only flower 'authorized' to grow in these arid regions. These critical brandings of the revolution did not go viral, but fit the social and economic realities on the ground. The only concept that catches the overall mission of the revolution is dignity or, as I have already pointed out, the will of the colonized to stand up and assert his or her humanity (Ayari 2011). In any case, I will avoid the use of any metaphor and consequently speak about the Tunisian Revolt or Revolution.

3/2 REVOLTING TIMES AND HISTORIES

Unlike revolts, revolutions require patience. As pointed out by Stalpaert (2002), historical change does not happen smoothly overnight, but is the laborious externalization of enduring processes of resistance that have been lingering in the margins of society. Different sensible formations pile up over time, as elements of previous formations always survive or are reactivated in newly manifested structures. Different histories thus always coexist and simultaneously relate to each other and by doing so emerge in the present. In this sense, all histories are histories of the present. Building on the work of Deleuze and Foucault, Stalpaert (2002) counters the hegemonic one-dimensional image of history as a mathematical continuous, sequential evolution or linear teleological development, neatly separated in different periods or epochs by clear-cut fracture lines, with the archeological image of a multiplicity of historical formations or sedimentary

strata piling up, forming a discontinuum or a thousand unfolding and overlapping plateaus. Different elements emerging at a certain point in history cannot be grasped as facts or as representations of a particular but contingent periodization, but rather as multiple, incomplete but always malleable nodes that unearth dynamic and sensible formations. As Gerald Raunig (2007) reminds us, the different elements of this Deleuzian formation cannot be reduced to different clearly distinguished or juxtaposed and often hierarchically positioned points on a linear timeline or temporal sequence that could be staged against each other, but rather form a constantly moving constellation where the limits of before and after, beginning and end lose their significance. Such a dynamic constellation does not move from an origin through a sudden break to another end but discontinuously “moves across and through [...] a rampant and lasting middle, where things pick up speed” (2007:30). Revolutionary flows do not depart from one discrete point to set off to another point, from the here and now of colonialism to the hereafter of independence, to paraphrase Raunig. The underlying view on history, involves “a history of currents and bridges, outside the realm of flat notions of linear progress” (2007:19).

At first sight, this bright elucidation of historical change through the archeological image of a thousand ever unfolding and overlapping plateaus seems to match the image of the palimpsest central in the thinking of de Certeau (1988) and elaborated in the third chapter of this dissertation. In a palimpsest, difference does not take the form of a juxtaposition but of imbricated strata where all epochs survive and pile up, in the same place, intact but mutually interacting. Beneath the supposedly flat surface of the present, opaque and stubborn places remain present. Or in the words of de Certeau (1988: 201): “[t]he revolutions of history [...] lie in layers within it, and remain there, hidden in customs, rites and spatial practices. The legible discourses that formerly articulated them have disappeared, or left only fragments in language. This place, on its surface, seems to be a collage. In reality, in its depth it is ubiquitous. A piling of heterogeneous places. Each one, like a deteriorating page in a book, refers to a different mode of territorial unity, of socioeconomic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism. The whole made up of pieces that are not contemporary and still linked to totalities that have fallen into ruins, is managed by subtle and compensatory equilibria that silently guarantee complementarities.”

Whether time and historical change is grasped through the dynamic image of a thousand unfolding and overlapping plateaus or through the more static image of the palimpsest, for obvious pragmatic and analytical reasons, I am compelled to suggest a beginning and an end to the subject under scrutiny and thus to implement what Raunig (2007:20) calls a form of "operative periodization". I will divide the revolution in different phases, not to engage with existing ideologies that believe in a neatly planned sequence of different necessary stages to successfully complete any future revolution, but as a way to inductively make sense of revolting movements or revolutionary flows as they passed by during my research. Three different scholarly temporalities or temporal registers seem to be reiterated at the epistemological core of every political analysis: a short-, middle- and long-term temporality (Schwedler 2016). Holding on to the complex structure of time and history, I will nevertheless adopt a middle-range temporal register in the analysis central in the five following chapters of this dissertation and thus grasp the lifecycle of the revolution. My arguments will be disclosed following a timeline that reiterates in a cyclical manner and thus replays the scenography of the revolution, taking the shape of a spiral through the different chapters of this doctoral thesis. Every chapter will answer various scholarly preoccupations by analysing the lifecycle of the revolution around a specific theoretical dimension, be it the premonitory agency, the embodiment or visualization of dissent during the revolution, its politics of time or spatial aspect and placeness. By limiting analysis of revolutions to the middle term however, the societal dynamics under scrutiny are too often disconnected from the social and historical root causes that ultimately produced them and tend to de-contextualize and deny the histories of resistance that precede every revolution (Mabrouk 2011, Antoun 2012). Therefore, as I repeatedly spell out the lifecycle of the revolution over the different chapters, I will take into account long-term political processes of historical change to enhance a further understanding of the lifecycles central in our analysis.

The revolting flows did not start with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. As I will show in the first chapter of this dissertation, in hindsight, a run-up period can be discerned, building up aesthetic agency from the 2000s on, which can be termed the premonitory phase of the revolution. Moreover, the revolution did not stop after Ben Ali was ousted on January 14, 2011, nor did the postrevolutionary phase start after his ousting. To make sense of the lifecycle of revolt in Tunisia,

a distinction is made – following Hannah Arendt’s analysis of revolutions (1990 [1963] in Zemni 2015, 2016) – between a liberation and a constitutive phase. The overthrow of the government can be interpreted as a first phase of liberation. After this first step a new political order had to be created. This second phase can then be labeled as the constitutive phase of the revolution. Since the ousting of the president and the fall of the government, the new singular and coherent collective revolutionary body indeed de-fragmented as quickly as it was formed. The people, unified until then, woke up in a conflict-ridden society (Zemni 2013a). The homogeneous image of the nation fractured (Saidi 2014) as old differences of class and ideology flared up again (Gana 2013b) and generational, regional and religious divisions erupted (Marzouki 2011). A multiplication of political sensibilities formed an atomized political landscape characterized by the re-emergence of historically formed rifts and divisions, fractures and tensions (Dakhliya 2012). The constitutive phase discloses the struggle of all the fragmented, pluralistic and conflicting forces that made up the unified people in the phase of liberation, during which the hegemonic narrative and normative self-image of the homogeneous postcolonial nation, sustained by decades of authoritarian rule, is being addressed again. It is in this phase that society is being reinvented and its imaginary reinstated (Zemni 2013a). During the constitutive phase the re-emerging discourses of national unity and state prestige engrained in the historical reformist idea of Tunisianness were being contested (Mullin 2016). With the re-emerging postcolonial nationalist myth, together with external geopolitical pressure – in particular the successful counterrevolution in Egypt – a compromise was found and facilitated by civil society between the secular modernist and moderate Islamist force in the first but fragile democratic constitution of the Arab world. Officially the revolution ended and the postrevolutionary phase started with the promulgation of the new constitution. However, as I will show, three separate fatal jihadi attacks in a row challenged this newly formed democratic platform.

As mentioned above, the lifecycle of the revolution takes center stage in my fieldwork and analysis, but at the same time I make sense of this lifecycle through a long-term perspective, seeing the revolution in continuity with nearly two centuries of changing power relations in the light of defensive modernization and Islamic reformism, subsequent colonization, and postcolonial authoritarian rule (Amin 2015, Chalcraft 2016). The abiding

history of social and political dissent before the independence in Tunisia is often ignored. Research adopting a long-term political perspective, too often begins its analysis with the official independence of 1956, overseeing the quintessential role of struggle and revolt in the historical process of nation-state formation. History is key to understand the contemporary political situation in Tunisia (Ben Romdhane 2011). Moreover, the revolution has produced the most profound changes since the struggle for national liberation. It can be read as a continuation of a long history of revolt rather than as a total rupture (Hanafi 2012). For Paulo Freire (1970:101), history can be understood as “as a constant process of transformation within which epochal units materialize. These epochal units are not closed periods of time, static compartments within which people are confined. Were this the case, a fundamental condition of history – its continuity – would disappear. On the contrary, epochal units interrelate in the dynamics of historical continuity”. When looking at revolution from a dynamic rather than a static point of view, there is “no absolute before or after, with the taking of power as the dividing line”, rather “the taking of power constitutes only a decisive moment of the continuing revolutionary process” (1970:136-137). Integrating a dynamic historical perspective that acknowledges the material genealogies and the sensible aesthetic formations that facilitated the revolution will do justice to the complexity of the subject matter (Matar 2012).

The delimitation of history into distinct periods projects specific defining hierarchal characteristics onto the fixed defined periods (Corpis, Kinkela & Sahin 2018). Depending on which geographical perspective one adopts, different readings of the long-term historical processes that can enhance an understanding of the lifecycle of the revolution pop up. From a global perspective, more specifically a global perspective structured by the teleology of transitology literature, the sequences of revolt in Tunisia would have provoked a fourth wave democratization, finally including Middle Eastern and North African states in the global tide for democracy (Stepan & Linz 2013, Howard & Hussain 2014, Cilento 2014, Abushouk 2016). Tunisia was finally catching up with the world and more specifically with countries in Southern Europe, Latin America, some parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa that had already made their first steps towards parliamentary democracy between 1974 and 1990, and thus constituted what Huntington (1991) famously coined “the third wave of democratization”. From a regional angle, revolt in Tunisia was more likely to have provoked a second “Arab awakening” (Dawisha

2013, Muasher 2014, Amin 2015). Referring back to the book *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (1938) by the Lebanese-Egyptian author and diplomat George Antonius, the causes of the revolution are traced back to the first awakening or renaissance, also known as the 'Nahda' that began in the 19th century. It reacted to the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire with defensive modernization and Islamic reformism, but only crystalized into the pan-Arab ideology over the struggle for national liberation in the 20th century. Finally, through a continental lens, revolt in Tunisia is understood as the harbinger of a third wave of dissent, following two major waves of struggle in Africa (Branch & Mampilly 2015), engulfing Tunisia with the hope of a "second independence" (Zezeza 2012). The first wave occurred in the late colonial period and culminated in the end of colonial rule, but facilitated the desolation of postcolonial authoritarianism. The second wave, which emerged in the late 1980's and 1990's, marked the end of single-party and military states and the implementation of multiparty systems of government and introduced new policies of neoliberalization. Thus, my analysis will focus solely on revolt in Tunisia from a middle-range temporal register. Without falling in the trap of methodological nationalism however, it will connect the case study under inquiry with a more historical global scale, informed by a long-term perspective taking into account the history of nation-state formation, starting from various forms of dissent against processes of defensive modernization, over subsequent colonization, and postcolonial authoritarian rule. I will do so from an aesthetic angle, by looking at relevant artistic productions beyond any clearly formatted disciplinary confinement.

3/3 RELATING TO SENSE EXPERIENCE

Revolutionary flows most often coincide with outbursts of artistic energy from bottom-up. As van Nieuwkerk, Levine & Stroke (2016) remind us, these outbursts reflect the power released when authoritarian regimes abruptly collapse. Poetry, music, visual arts, dance and performance all become necessary media for transmitting political directives, agitating people, and facilitating the unity paramount to divert the spectacular power circulating in state aesthetics and the violence this entails. Most academic knowledge production in political science however tends to overlook the close connection between art and politics. Abundant studies emphasize formal politics, high-level

diplomacy, elections, political parties, formal associations, classic civil society and NGOs, neglecting less formal political strategies, forms, relationalities and damned political subjectivities, thus reflecting an apparent indifference to different modes of resistance, such as those engaging with artistic practices (Salih & Richter-Devroe 2014). The recent series of revolts however, have stimulated scholarship on the intersection of art and politics, not in the least concerning our case study, Tunisia. Many observers have assigned new public roles to artistic productions during and in the aftermath of the mass mobilizations, covering just one out of the many sense experiences that form a given police order. As I will demonstrate, most theoretical contributions engaging with questions related to the intersection of art, revolt and revolution in Tunisia tend to ground their analysis on one specific artistic discipline – from poetry, graffiti and music over theater or cinema to contemporary art or cartoons – restricting their study to one out of the many ways the sensible is shared and distributed and could be redistributed in times of revolt. A minority of scholars go beyond this disciplinary categorization to give more analytical depth to fundamental political questions, related for example to public space, both in the sense of collective space and in the literal spatial sense, but also to particular positionalities or target groups that are marked by gender, racial and generational differences, and eventually to more divisive political questions, such as the relation between the artistic sphere and the emerging opposition between secularism and Islamism. Finally, different studies were conducted at the crossroads of art and politics from a comparative viewpoint, by zooming out from the Tunisian case, taking on a larger global or regional perspective. This study covers the diversity of sense experiences that constitute the extraordinary movements of revolutionary flows. I will focus my attention on the (in)visible dimensions of aesthetics, by lending my eye to what and who is (made) visible, who or what is (made) invisible and to how revolt can be lived phenomenologically and embodied throughout a revolutionary flow that thoroughly questions the division of space and time in the authoritarian postcolonial context of Tunisia.

A growing body of academic work studies the poetics of revolt in Tunisia in and of itself (Judy 2012) or as a linguistic struggle between different languages (Khalil 2012) with particular grammars (Guessoumi 2012) and vocabularies (Chaouachi-Marzouki 2012, Guellouz 2015, Baraket & Belhassine 2016). As stated before, one poem in particular got ample attention. The affirmative diversion

or reappropriation of the central line of Tunisia's national hymn 'Humāt al-Himá', more precisely its last revolutionary verses quoting "the will of life" by the renowned anticolonial poet Abu Al-Qasim Ash-Shabi, produced the viral slogan and main proclamation of the revolution, not only in Tunisia, but in the Arab world at large (Challand 2011, Judy 2012, Colla 2012, Omri 2012, El Bousty 2013, Gana 2013c, Bouzouita 2013, Alshaer 2014). Whether shouted, chanted or written on banners or walls in public space, different slogans were analyzed as bottom-up linguistic practices from a sociolinguistic perspective, not only capturing their poetry but also shedding light on the political demands (Al-Abed Al-Haq & Hussein 2012, Jerad 2013, Shiri 2015). Further research was conducted to know how the revolution impacted the literary production and the Tunisian novel (Sakr 2013, Gana 2013b, Fitouri 2015), with little attention to postcolonial carceral literature (Ghachem 2017). Finally, original perspectives were added to this stream of analysis by Palma (2014), who looked into the new phenomenon of street poetry, and by Hamdy & Rice (2016), who shed light on the history of oral poetry as a collective breath of life from below with subversive power and revolutionary potential, used by the downtrodden to resist not only colonial and postcolonial authoritarian regimes, but also the ongoing consumerist onslaught on traditional lifestyles.

New observations convincingly clarified how street art and graffiti became efficient means of political dissent (Korody 2011). Further research was done on the use, translation and significance of transnational iconic symbols of resistance (Quezada-Grant 2013). Georgeon (2012) succeeded in capturing a glimpse of the street art collectives that formed in the heat of the revolutionary moment. Others analyzed the later proliferation of street art as a – to a certain extent – unmediated sphere of free expression that attempts to break the hegemonic position of the regime and reclaim public space, but also as a contested public space in itself between opposing groups (Palma 2014, Miladi 2015, Grira 2015). Lucia Lacquaniti (2015) made a remarkable and cogent analysis of the political tensions at stake from the 2011 revolt until the 2014 elections by doing a discourse analysis of what was written and drawn on the walls of the capital. Other research focused on the preservation, protection and dissemination of the revolutionary graffiti through various copyright regimes (Rizk 2015).

The movements of revolt in Tunisia were also decoded as a musical composition. Different scholars showed how hip-hop and rap

in particular worked as vehicles of popular discontent, keeping alive a certain critical repository. Golpushnezhad & Barone (2016) looked into the impact of the revolution on the political economy of the rap scene and the way it only slightly reshaped the disciplinary interplay between the rap scene and the political field. Barone (2017) further researched the emergence of rap as a societal commentary, reimagining social structures and representing damned (neighbor)hoods and their youth in a dignified way. Gana (2013a) too analyzes the role rap music played in the revolution. He furthermore historicizes Tunisian rap music and integrates it as an integral part of the cultures of resistance to colonialism, neocolonialism and late capitalism (Gana 2012), while on the other hand Hisham Aidi (2011) warns for hip-hop diplomacy by foreign states such as the USA, underlining its soft power. Others look into hip-hop as an underground subculture of resistance that, through rap music, not only collectively reasserts a lost dignity but also engages in ongoing political debates between secularism and Islamism (Ovshieva 2013, Halila 2015). Comparing rap music with the more folk-oriented mizwid, Nouri Gana (2013c) further unraveled the genealogy of musical dissidence in postcolonial Tunisia. Salzbrunn et al. (2015) analyzed the representations of Harraga in both rap and mizwid, to reveal not only a certain migratory imagination but also an important subversive potentiality.

Mannone (2012) opened up the debate beyond the well-researched hip-hop and rap scene, by shedding light on the transformations of cultural, symbolic and material capital within the sphere of music, activism and journalism. Bouzouita (2013) analyzed the dissident power embedded in the inner political practices of underground music before the geopolitical earthquake of the revolution. Organized in a new public cyberspace, this anthropological study shows how underground music prefigured the revolution. Laine, Suurpaa and Ltifi (2017) further analyzed how young musicians, through their everyday practice, engage in respectful resistance and by doing so escape state-dominated formal politics. Levine (2012, 2014, 2015) further contends that the free and decommodified production, virtual circulation and dissemination of music that took center stage during the revolution and the DIY culture it promoted in the physical world, has brought back the critical aura of music. Finally, Barone (2016) offers a unique insight in Tunisia's fragile metal scene, taking into account the material constraints and the troubled context of hostilities in which metal heads operate.

The revolution cannot be deciphered only as a poem or as a musical composition, it could as much be experienced as a theater or at least as a performance. Attempts were made to understand the revolution in itself and at large as an unfolding performance of domination and resistance (Kraidy 2012, Zahrouni 2013a, Tripp 2013a, Levine & Reynolds 2016, Kraidy 2016). Interesting research emerged, questioning whether theater can be seized to document the revolutionary dynamics (Jay 2012) or to make sense of the ongoing historical changes (Habbassi & Astor 2012). When analyzing the revolution through its theater productions, the work of the New Tunisian Theater and more precisely the work of Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaibi is given considerable academic attention, to show how, in hindsight, a certain premonition anticipated the revolution (Ruocco 2013, Amine 2013, Zahrouni 2013a) or how the structures of censorship of the Ben Ali regime transformed with the emergence of Islamist politics after Ben Ali's ousting (Carlson 2015, Carlson 2016, Zahrouni 2013b). The renewal of a regime of censorship with the arrival of Islamist ideologies at large got scholarly attention (Hemke 2015). The necessity was also articulated to analyze critical theater practices in continuity with its genealogy as an opposition movement to colonial power, but also to postcolonial authoritarianism (Gana 2013b, Mrabet 2014). Only sparse attention was given to the role of dance in the revolution (Noeth 2012, Saidi 2013).

The profusion of images, video productions and the use of audiovisual digital technologies during the revolution sparked the interest of scholars to redefine their use not only for mobilization purposes (Riboni 2015a) but also to reappropriate the possibility of an autonomous representation (Riboni 2016) and overcome the invisibility of damned subjectivities (Riboni 2015b). Scant attention was given to the role of photography (Amami 2011). Other research shows how through documentary and fiction, Tunisian cinema seized the momentum to illustrate the revolution and helped to construct a documented memory of this historical shift, but at the same time also created new stereotypes related to the sudden re-emergence of the people defining a certain national identity (Rouxel 2017). Reconstructing genealogies of resistance in postindependence cinema show how different films form a continuum of cinematographic dissidence and formulate a critique that is key to understand the cumulative power that actuated the revolution (Gana 2013c, Lang 2014). The revolution opened up a space to rethink how the political climate before the revolution often demanded allegorical approaches to the political

(Gana 2013c, Lang 2014, Mannone 2015). It also incited filmmakers to return to past episodes of political violence and document memories of torture, repression, and destruction during the post-colonial rule of Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Pierre-Bouthier 2017) or to shed light on the premonitory, prospective and utopic character of underground cinematic productions (Barlet 2012).

Compared to its exponential booming on the ground, subversive political cartoons and caricatures during the revolution got only little academic attention (Fakhfah & Tlili 2013, Langone 2014, Labidi 2015, Nasri 2017). Political understanding of the revolution was elaborated through an account on the sphere of contemporary art. Whether it is to question the possibility of a movement towards a contemporary postcolonial aesthetic (Shilton 2013) or to reclaim the universal humanist, ahistorical and acultural character of the discussed artworks (Hamdi 2011), these accounts often fail to say anything meaningful about the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia. Confined within the white cube of contemporary art galleries disciplined by international art markets, the proposed analyses are cut-off from the political dynamics that traverses the discussed artworks. At the same time however, a growing body of academic work tries to make sense of the way revolutionary dynamics provoked a turn towards more participatory work in public space (Bruckbauer & Triki 2016), how it added to an important social dimension (Boissier 2017) a form of reterritorialization of art practices, i.e. a local anchoring and engagement (Trasforini 2013), and how, by relating to the liberated public sphere, it regained a productive and powerful political dimension (Triki 2011, 2013). Research also questioned the dissonances between the production, curation, reception and consumption of artistic productions of the revolution and the sometimes contradictory tensions between local art practices and the global, capitalizing, trendsetting galleries and biennials (Demerdash 2012). The revolution also reopened the debate about the need for a national museum for modern and contemporary art that can bring together, valorize and protect artistic heritage (Messaoudi 2016).

While most contributions are centered on one specific artistic discipline, others go beyond this disciplinary classification to tackle more fundamental political questions. A first question that comes out of this transdisciplinary body of research relates to the role of art in public space or in the public sphere in general, as part of a re-emerging civil society, shedding light on art practices such as graffiti, music, installations, happenings and

performances in previously confiscated public spaces (Triki 2013) and how these forms facilitate new affective and political relationalities (Salih & Richter-Devroe 2014). This academic perspective not only takes stock of these rather recent phenomena, but also shows how art can reveal key political tensions by the reappropriation of public space, thereby changing the overall urban identity of different cities (Machghoul 2013, Msolli 2014) and generating debates between competing visions, dividing the public sphere into different counter publics (Demerdash 2012, Palma 2014, Tripp 2016). Further inquiry shows how artistic practice in itself formed a new critical public sphere that succeeded in developing a counterpower that resists hegemonic stereotypical discourse about and representations of the revolution (Parvan 2014). Other research was conducted through the angle of artistic activism or 'artivism' and youth subculture, looking into ways art alters urban and digital public spheres and challenges prevailing societal and political conditions (Korpe 2013). Another stream of research questioned how this new artistic public sphere can nourish or contribute to the common good, and thus to the structuring of an autonomous common ground or a renewed civil society, independently from the state, the market and religion (Downey 2014). Scholarly attention was also paid to the historical role the national trade union organization played in structuring the formation of a national culture and how a renewed attention to alternative and engaged art challenged the emergence of new political subjectivities (Omri 2016).

Within this burgeoning field of study that hints at the importance of interdisciplinarity in the arts to pose fundamental political research questions, attention is also given to particular positionalities or target groups. Whether it is in contemporary art (Hadria 2013), cinema (Rouxel 2016), cartooning (Labidi 2015, Nasri 2017) or beyond disciplinary categorization (Labidi 2014, Rabadi 2014, Ben Youssef 2016), the role of women artists in the revolution is given ample consideration. Next to scholarly attention to a gendered perspective on the aesthetics of revolt, the generational gap is also taken into account. The youth, indeed largely excluded from the official participatory channels of parliamentary democracy, found in art a new venue for political participation (Ben Smail 2013), demanding structural changes and by doing so reinforced their subversive voice and challenged the postcolonial national consensus (Saidani 2015, 2017). A focus is also given to the depiction of Europe in Tunisian cultural productions related to undocumented migration, looking into the

different artistic strategies for expressing the agency of the Harraga (Souiah, Salzbrunn & Mastrangelo 2018). Next to that, research spotted how the visibility of already politicized claims of racialized minorities such as Amazigh (Becker 2016) or Blacks (Abdelhamid 2012, Poussel 2016) were enhanced by a growing artistic production since the revolution.

However predominantly performed by the political elite in the mainstream media, the strident opposition between Islamists and secularists not only seeped into the artistic sphere (Levine 2015) but also into the academic contributions engaging in the interplay between arts and the revolution. In this binary, for the bulk of scientific account on revolt in Tunisia, artists would a priori be engaged on the side of civil and secular opposition, not only resisting Islamist's uncreative narrow-mindedness, but also a renewed religious censorship (Pouessel 2013, Saidani 2015). In this interpretation, the revolution would be an outcome of the progressive and modernist values the artistic sphere fought for since the independence, finding a way in between global free-market capitalism and religious fundamentalism (Lang 2014). The reformist voice of artists would in other words be trapped between controlling government authorities and conservative and extremists religious movements (Schwartz, Kaye & Martini 2013). Art is thus pushed forward as a keystone for a smooth transition to democracy against the reappropriation of public space by Islamist activists (Ben Cheikh 2013, Moustier & Soldo 2014). Others see the artistic sphere in itself being divided in two diametrically opposed camps, reducing Islamist engagements to an external global reverberation, if not an imported superficial ideology (Halila 2015). Timo Kaabi Linke (2014) reached the nadir by analyzing the connections between, and thus subtly comparing how artists deal with, on the one hand the re-emerging Islamist subjectivities and on the other the proliferation of litter and rubbish in the streets since the revolution. Of course not all authors reproduced the political binary from a modernist secular perspective, some scholars succeeded in analyzing the cultural and artistic sphere escaping the double bind between either religious tradition or secular modernity (Ovshieva 2013, Levine 2015, Rice & Hamdy 2016).

Finally, different accounts were made on the crossroad between art and politics by zooming out to a global or regional scale. When looking at our subject from a global perspective, scholarly attention is given to the arts and aesthetics of what is dubbed

the worldwide Occupy movement, with reference to the politics of revolt in Tunisia but without taking into account its inherent aesthetics or artistic aspects (Mitchell 2012, Mitchell, Harcourt & Taussig 2013, Thompson 2015, Shukaitis 2015, McKee 2016). An exception can be found in the edited volume of Pnina Werbner et al. (2014) that gives ample attention to the aesthetics of the Tunisian case. When enlarging our scope to the broader region of the Arab and larger Muslim world after 2011, the proliferation of themed issues by international academic journals venturing into questions related to the arts of the revolution are witness to a burgeoning field of inquiry.³ While already present before (see for instance Zuhur 1998, Armbrust 2000), the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing global 'war on terror' have increased academic interest in the arts and cultures of what is commonly referred to as the Middle East and North Africa (Dakhli 2006, Sabry 2009, Van Nieuwkerk 2011, Sabry 2012a). A new but rather unstable field of inquiry is emerging that engages with the arts, culture and politics of the region, forming a growing body of scholarship that is, however, not yet epistemologically conscious of itself (Sabry 2009, 2012a). The analysis of cultural phenomena in the Arab world has not yet resulted in a generally accepted academic field of study or discipline (Valassopoulos 2013). Various attempts were made to structure this prosperous field by falling back on the settled discipline of cultural studies, approaching it from a geographical, cultural and religious perspective. Cultural studies is then mapped and delineated as an emerging field of inquiry within the area under scrutiny, i.e. the Middle East and North Africa (El Hamamsy & Soliman 2013, Laachir & Talajooy 2013), having a common determined Islamic background (Van Nieuwkerk 2011, Van Nieuwkerk, Levine & Stroke 2016) or an intermutual Arab culture (Sabry 2012a, Valassopoulos 2012, 2013). Whether writing about 'Popular culture in the Middle East and North Africa', 'Popular Culture and Islam' or 'Arab Cultural Studies', the notion of popular culture seems to be key to understand and analyze the ongoing revolutions and the processes of societal transformation they entail. However, as noticed by Salih & Richter-Devroe (2014), a lack of in-depth engagement with the relation between culture and politics is noticeable in this newly emerging body of cultural studies, which is strongly shaped by Marxist political economy or nation-state-centered approaches. How insightful and inspiring these pathways to the study the intertwinement of arts and politics in the region might be, they cannot but consider cultural politics as a mere opposite or at best an outgrowth of the economic and the political. Following

3. The Middle East Report was the first journal to edit a special issue on 'The Art and Culture of the Arab Revolts' (2012). The international journal of literature and culture *Boundary 2* compiled a dossier on 'The Tunisian Revolution of Dignity' (2012). *The Review of Middle East Studies* made space for a special section on the 'Cultural Production in the Arab Spring' (2013). *Theatre Research International* also came up with special issue on 'Theatre and the Arab Spring: The Arab Studies Journal' (2014) published a special issue on the 'Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond: The Politics of Art, Aesthetics, and Affect: The journal of Middle East - Topics & Arguments' published a themed issue on 'Iconography' (2017) and another one on 'Culture' (2017). *The Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* issued a themed edition on 'Creative Dissent: Visual Arts of the Arab World Uprisings' (2018). *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* came up with an issue on 'Culture and Politics of Transformation in the Arab World' (2018).

again Salih & Richter-Devroe (2014), the cultural can indeed not be understood as the mere byproduct of the political or economical. On the contrary, the cultural, the political and the economical have to be seen as mutually constituting each other. Moreover, a strong investment with the quotidian or everyday practices and expression in cultural studies (Valassopoulos 2013) makes 'Cultural Studies' ill-equipped to understand the profound changes that are brought about by the revolutions under scrutiny. As stated by Dina Matar (2013:2), "transformative events, such as the ongoing Arab revolutions, demand transformative intellectual responses, brave new ways of thinking and interrogation, creativity and creation". Finally, as I argued earlier, it might be productive to pursue the proposition to radically leave the notion of culture behind altogether (Abu-Lughod 1996) and follow the aesthetic turn in political science. While there is clearly a growing body of academic literature on revolt in Tunisia that deals with artistic practices, significantly broadening the scope of research about our case study, the analysis of how art and politics fundamentally entangle in times of revolt is rather restricted, as the aesthetic category and the rich theoretical discussion it underpins is rarely, if ever, mobilized.

Following the proposition to leave the flawed concept of culture behind will allow me to venture contrapuntally into the – for this context rather new and unexplored but fruitful and productive – framework of aesthetic theory to make sense of the phenomena of revolt and revolution. For this I will thus refrain from limiting my research a priori to one artistic discipline or to prioritize one out of the many possible sense experiences. On the contrary, I will analyze my subject beyond disciplinary categorizations, from an interdisciplinary perspective, by focusing on the way the sensible is distributed and how this distribution is fundamentally imbricated with the political and thus can possibly be redistributed. I will nevertheless focus my analysis less on the distribution of the sayable or hearable, and thus discursive aspects, than on the (in)visible and the corporeal dimensions of sense experience. While the media I will ground my analysis in are quite eclectic (especially in chapter 1), using paintings, novels, site-specific performances, happenings and installations as well as photographs, films, documentaries, cartoons or hip-hop songs, I will be more involved in what could be seen in the visual quality of the sensible than in what could be said and thus in the discursive in the revolutionary flow that constitutes the Tunisian Revolution (among others, but mostly in chapter 5).

To paraphrase Rancière (2004: 12), I will have more attention for phenomena that question the ability to see than for those that revolve around the talent to speak. Focusing on the visible and corporeal or embodied aspect of sense experience (particularly in chapter 4), I will also fundamentally question the related delimitation and shared distribution of the possibilities of time (mainly in chapter 3) and the properties of spaces (primarily in chapter 2). This dissertation thus studies the revolutionary flows through the various existing sense experiences. It will focus its scholarly attention on the (in)visible dimensions of aesthetics, by looking into what interventions and processes and which subjectivities are (made) visible and which subjectivities or what interventions and processes are (made) invisible. It will also venture into the question how revolt can be understood phenomenologically as a lived and embodied experience, and into the conditions of possibility through which these revolts have the power to possibly alter the shared distribution of space and time in the authoritarian and postcolonial context of Tunisia.

4. REVOLTING SENSES

Inspired by and hoping to add a new brick to an emergent but still unstable field of inquiry that is not yet epistemologically conscious of itself and following the aesthetic turn in political science, this study ventures into an analysis of the contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia. Curiously, none of the accounts that make up this nascent body of scholarship systematically engage with the way state aesthetics can be historically structured or politics are aestheticized, let alone with how these aesthetics were received, interpreted and diverted over time or how aesthetics can be politicized in an authoritarian context. To look into the artistic sphere of a society experiencing deep transformations, I followed, as I will show in the method section below, an engaged and even passionate interpretative and hermeneutic approach. Lead by my field notes, but moving back and forth between my findings on the ground and more theoretical insights, I slowly formed a rather eclectic framework through what Sigrid Vertommen (2017:25), building on the work

of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, calls “theoretical diffraction”. The idea of diffraction refers to a way of “reading and writing ideas, texts and insights intra-actively through one another”. When confronted with presumably incompatible or contradictory ontological, epistemological or methodological aspects of different bodies of literature, like aesthetic theory and postcolonial critique, rather than dismissing one school of thought over the other, I make use of the productive tension between these different analytical perspectives.

More than the notion of culture, the primary concept of aesthetics, and thus the assorted ways the sensible is shared and distributed but also possibly redistributed, allows us to grasp the mutual entanglement between states’ aesthetics and aesthetic agency and thus also to grapple with the various original ways these aesthetics were contested and diverted during the recent revolutionary flows. Aesthetics is seized as a historically formed contrapuntal ensemble, i.e. an all-encompassing realm that is made of different intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories traversed not only by an imperial or colonial but also by post- or neocolonial divide. A Foucaultian reading of state aesthetics is complemented with a Fanonian account on the aesthetic agency of revolt. By doing so, this dissertation ventures into the potential ways revolt can provoke changes in prevailing subjectivities, perhaps overcoming a deeply entrenched inferiority complex.

This study on the contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt thus examines transversally, i.e. beyond the prevailing but often cautious and reductive artistic divisions and disciplines, the subversive aesthetic agency formed by artists, activists and citizens to contest state aesthetics by diverting the symbolic power circulating in the postcolonial authoritarian police order that holds together the Tunisian society. The police order of the young modern nation-state, determining the distribution of the roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, is structured through the spectacular division of space and time, the disciplining of bodies and the reproduction of visual representations of a certain historical subjectivity. It defines a delimitation of what can be seen, said and done but also what can or cannot appear to our sense experiences, what can or cannot be embodied and experienced and what is or is not generally shown and visible and thus can or cannot be visualized in a certain time and space. During the time of revolt, the symbolic power of this

disciplinary complex was diverted by the revolting body politic through the reappropriation of the same power entrenched in the postcolonial fragmentation of space and time, the regulation of bodies and hegemonic national representations. The violence by which a prevailing inferiority complex was enforced over time, was surmounted through the reappropriation of spectacular power circulating in prevailing state aesthetics and facilitated a process of becoming or a fundamental rearrangement of the contours of prevailing subjectivities, prescribing a dignified body politic and liberated police order.

The revolting senses in this movement of diversion or reappropriation were also inspiring for artists in different fields who, if not playing a vital role in this ongoing process, certainly politicized their practice to engage in different revolutionary efforts and societal debates. Since the idea of the Tunisian Revolution found a broad acceptance however, different studies approached the role of artists mainly as an analytical window to enhance a more nuanced understanding of the changes society is going through, reducing artists to mere political symbols, overlooking the core of their aesthetic practice (Ben Smail 2015). This dissertation is not concerned with the role artists played in different pulses of revolt, nor with the ways artists position themselves vis-à-vis public debates on the codified and mythologized Tunisian Revolution or the way artists themselves were positioned by participants and audiences in those revolutionary debates (Gana 2013b). It is not the aim of this research to look into the function or role artists play in a revolutionary context, nor to answer the lingering question who played the card of revolutionary repentance, surfed the wave of the revolution, turned their coat, managed to whitewash their relation with the authoritarian state through the revolution or who is the real, authentic subversive artist. This research is only interested in the aesthetic practices and what these practices reveal about the contrapuntal aesthetic of the revolution, regardless of the position of the artists in society before or after the departure of Ben Ali. It will moreover only engage with aesthetic practices that Rachida Triki (2013: *unpaginated*) calls “new real-life fictions”, i.e. practices “that not only accompany the event but participate in its appropriation”. Different practices were inspired by the aesthetics of revolt and echoed some of its symbolic and mythologized elements, but did not truly take part in the ongoing aesthetic movement itself, nourishing the repertoire of an enduring liberation movement. I will therefore merely focus on what Lisa Wedeen (1999:89) calls aesthetic practices that inherently

relate to “the dynamic interplay between the regime's exercise of power and people's experiences of and reactions to it” and therefore constitute “the site of politics”. These aesthetic practices that navigate the poriferous borders between art and activism are not only often the target of repressive state measures as they unfold in the ambiguous zone in between aesthetic and revolt, they are also often disregarded and excluded from historiography and the art world, but also from the archives of political history and art theory, by structural conservatisms, the reductive nature of hegemonic canons and an art world constrained by still too often demarcated art fields or disciplines (Raunig 2007).

The aesthetic agency to resist state aesthetics or the way politics was aestheticized will be approached strategically to – paraphrasing Lila Abu-Lughod (1990:42) – “tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them” and to trace “the complex workings of [...] power” and to analyze “how power relations are historically transformed”. By looking at revolt through its contrapuntal aesthetics, I want to gain insight in how the body politic related to the way the Ben Ali Regime dominated space and time, how it controlled the bodies and subjectivities, how this symbolic power dispositif was historically structured and power redeploys through the destruction, diversion or reappropriation of this symbolic dispositif. Finally, by analyzing the processes of revolt through their contrapuntal aesthetics, I hope to uncover avenues that – following Abelkabar Khatibi – go beyond the persistent divide in society as well as in academia between Islamism and modernism in the history of the Tunisian nation-state, and evolve another thinking, a thinking of difference.

During the first upsurge of revolt it was clear for most observers that the concentration of power produced by the state aesthetics of the Ben Ali regime to fashion regime-obedient subjects, likewise made it the primary site for political resistance. Domination not only produced an apparent consent, but also the seeds of dissent and rebellion (Ayari, Geisser & Krefa 2011). By analyzing the way the unique power constellation entangled in the Ben Ali Regime was contested, diverted and subverted, I will thus gather insights in how different modes of power, in casu sovereign, disciplinary and bio power, are articulated, in the way they are mutually imbricated in a given police order and thus in how the circulation of power structures a shared division of the sensible. By analyzing the processes by which aesthetics was politicized, I will give further insight into the way the Ben Ali regime

aestheticized its politics. By disarticulating the mutual entanglement and interconnection between both dynamics, I will lay bare the contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia. Finally, I will ask if and how the different sudden, insurrectional and explosive flows, epiphanies and revolts that shortly suspended historical time but now constitute the strategic complex of Tunisian Revolution, succeeded in redistributing the shared distribution of the sensible proper to an authoritarian regime. I will look into the dynamic processes through which the shared interpretation of what appeared to sense experience during these different moments of revolt ossified or crystallized into myths and symbols inscribed into the collective memory or the far-off horizon of history of revolt in Tunisia.

5 A METHOD

My interest in 'revolting senses' originated in April 2011, when artists from the Tunisian diaspora and their friends in Brussels knocked at the door of Pianofabriek, the culture and art center I was working for as a programmer at the time. They enthusiastically proposed to organize an event that would celebrate the departure of Ben Ali. Looking online for interesting artworks that came out of the revolutionary flows to enrich the event, my view on Tunisia changed fundamentally. The event *Tunisie, la Revolution et Après* finally took place June 4, 2011. Engulfed by the power of the different (artistic) interventions and the fervor of the audience, I revived the revolutionary moment a second time in a more profound, sensible and personal way. During the public debate, the speech of one of the invited artists caught my attention. Selim Tlili demanded to acknowledge the existence of colors other than purple and to recognize numbers other than seven, referring to the omnipresent state aesthetics of the contested regime. Mesmerized by the aesthetics of the revolutionary flows and intrigued by Tlili's poetic – but for me then still mysterious – sloganeering remark, I immediately booked a ticket and visited the country for the first time by myself without any family obligation. Ever since, I researched the complex interplay between state aesthetics and the ambivalent way it was being produced, reproduced and contested during the different revolutionary flows that constitute the Tunisian Revolution.

During my fieldwork however, I was surprised by the strength by which and the depth through which certain images and representations about 'Arabs', 'Muslims' and 'Islam' in general were interiorized by some of my local interlocutors. At first, during the liberation phase of the revolution, I was mesmerized by the organic artistic dynamics in public space and convinced of the critical agency of the revolting body politic and its artistic sphere in particular. The deeper I dug and the closer I permeated into my field through different interviews and online and offline observations, the more these expectations of critical agency had to be readjusted. It all became clear and explicit during the constitutional phase of the revolution, when an emerging and a growing Islamist constituency with an important fringe of activism violently and physically targeted artists. I was surprised to hear how Islamophobic discourses – the kind of discourses only the most extreme of the far- or alt-right dared to enunciate here in Europe – legitimized certain artistic practices. This surprise hinted at a certain inferiority complex, or at least at a real confusion between religious and more political aspects of prevailing societal problems and the rejection of the Islamic identity as part of a shared identity between artists in a Muslim-majority country. Following Willis (1980: 78), I deployed this feeling of being surprised to elaborate some of the research questions that guide my contentions in this dissertation.

5 / 1 ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD

My participatory observation already began before the official start of my dissertation, with the event '*Tunisie, la Revolution et Après*' at the Pianofabriek in Brussels. It brought together the work of artists from various disciplines, such as – among others – singer-songwriter Ghalia Benali or Jawhar Basti, theater maker Chokri Ben Chikha, the eminent dance duo Hedi & Ali Thabet, musician and composer Sofyann Ben Youssef and graphic designer and artist Selim Tlili. It also featured work from the newborn visual arts collective Le Collectif Dégage and the theater collective Les Dégagistes. Prof. Dr. Sami Zemni and activist Selma Benkhelifa also created a reflective space. Following the epiphanies that had overwhelmed me during the preparation and unfolding of this event, I set foot in Tunis for the first time in many years. In the summer of 2011, I visited the different sites that appealed to my imagination. The country felt like walking into a rosy dawn after a long and turbulent night. Particularly

the intangible and volatile aspect of the revolt struck me. I was compelled to look for traces of the revolt and testimonies in the midst of the by then partly cleaned-up vestiges the movements of revolt had left behind. Back home, I structured the collected data, wrote down my main findings and some preliminary thoughts on the aesthetics of revolt in an article that was published in the popular journal *Rekto:Verso* on the occasion of the first anniversary of the departure of Ben Ali (Ben Yakoub 2012).

As I started my research on a voluntary basis at Ghent University in September 2012, the different ongoing movements of revolt strongly informed my practice as a programmer at Pianofabriek. For the first edition of the Aflam Film festival on January 14, 2012, which lasted five days, I programmed different films that focused on the role young artists play in the enduring revolts, such as the documentary *Revolution under 5* by Rhida Tlili, visualizing the philosophy behind the aesthetic practice of the street art collective Ahl El Kahf. In March 2013, I co-organized the multidisciplinary art festival Sounds of (R)evolutions, zooming in on the arts of the Arab revolutions, such as the documentary *We are here* by Abdallah Yahya. I also invited the renowned curator and art critic Rachida Triki to discuss the role of art in the context of revolt in Tunisia. FOMU, the museum of photography in Antwerp, invited me to contribute to their biannual thematic magazine *Extra* in the frame of *Power! Photos! Freedom!*, an exposition about the power of photography in the ongoing revolutionary dynamics in the Arab world. In my contribution entitled *Khobz ou mè, Ben Ali là!*, I analyzed the transformation the presidential portrait underwent during the different upsurges of revolt (Ben Yakoub 2013). While writing the commissioned article, I collected hundreds of pictures from the internet depicting the use of the portrait by the ruling party and another hundred showing how this portrait was diverted and destroyed by the revolted body politic. The spacing, positioning and slow montage of these two types of photos circulating on the internet resulted in the video loop *Guillotine Imaginaire*, a video of 16'8" that focuses on the alteration of the portrait of the contested head of state during the decisive moment of revolt. Slowly zooming in on the transition between the authoritarian and revolutionary mise en scenes allowed me to better comprehend how primary aesthetics can be distributed but also redistributed through spontaneous actions of diversion or reappropriation and particular aesthetic practices. Creating this montage was also essential for the elaboration of some of the insights pertaining the liberation of urban space



TUNESIË, De revolutie en erna

A REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE THROUGH PICTURES, FILM, MUSIC, THEATRE, DANCE & DEBATE

FEATURING: **GHALIA BENALI, CELINE RALLET, MATHURIN BOLZE, HEDI THABET & LA COMPAGNIE LES MAINS LES PIEDS ET LA TÊTE AUSSI, DIDIER POITEAUX, LOTFI THABET, CHOKRI BEN CHIKA, LISBETH BENOUT, MATHIEU KOUZ DUPONT, ALI THABET, AMEL BOUZID, SAMI ZEMNI, SELMA BENKHELIFA, HOUSSAM DUEDERNI, AHMED ZORGUI, FADILA MAGHREBI, JAWHAR BASTI, SOUAKI, AMEN GHARBI, SOFYANN BEN YOUSSEF, LE COLLECTIF DEGAGE & LES DEGAGISTES...**

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Figure 14. Tunisie, la revolution et après, Pianofabriek

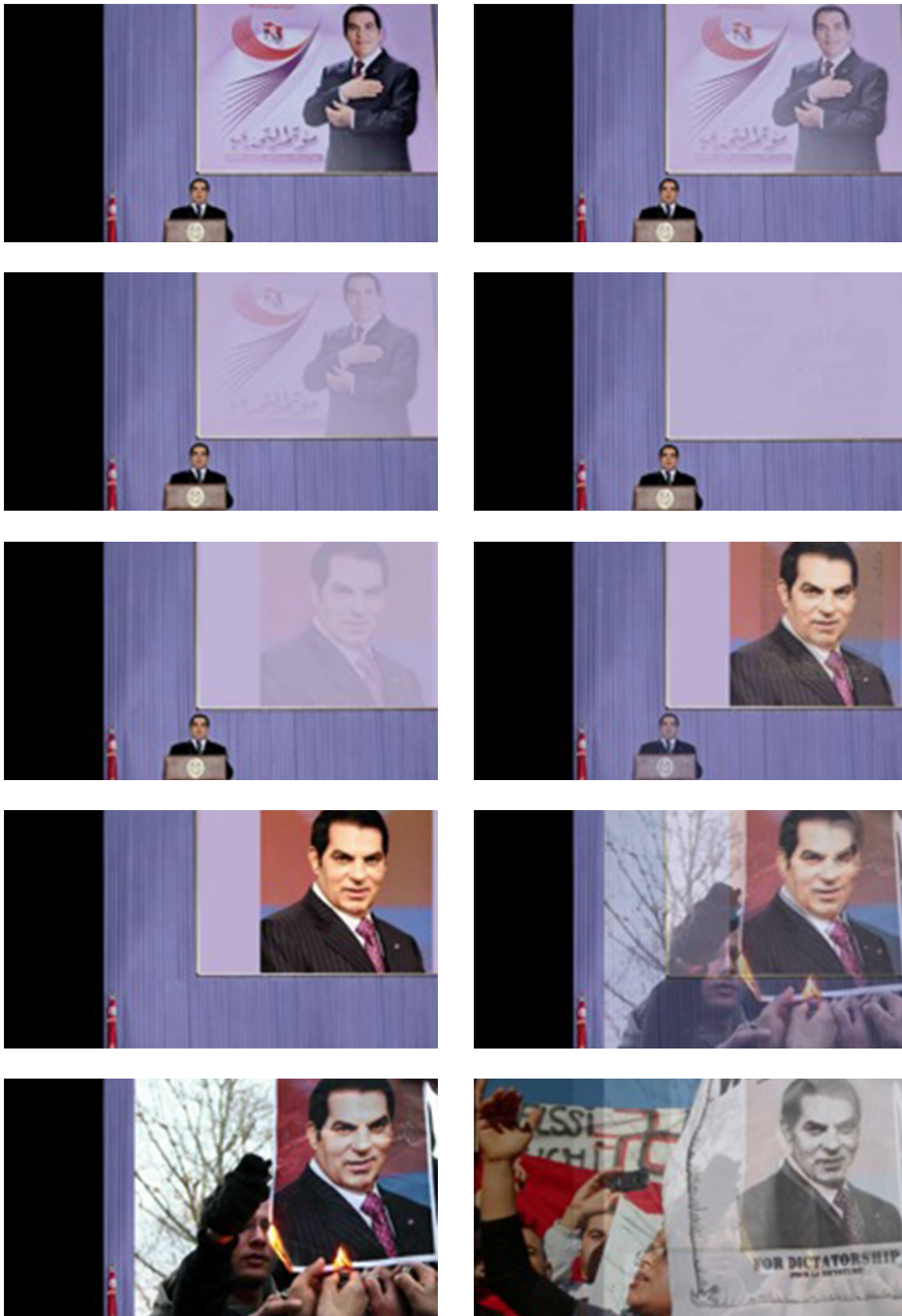


Figure 15. Videostills Guillotine Imaginair

as will be developed in the second chapter of this study. The video was shown during *Power! Photos! Freedom!* in June 2012 in Antwerp, but also during *Le Printemps de la Medina* in March 2013 in the Club Taher Hadded in the medina of Tunis and at the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel in Luxemburg in March 2014.

In November 2014, I had the privilege to engage in an intensive participatory observation during an artistic training organized by the Fai-Ar, the European Center for Artistic Training in Public Space and L'Art Rue Association, initiator of the Dream City Biennial of Contemporary Art. The research-oriented but practice-based training was planned in the local context of Tunis' medina on the theme of 'Conflicts and Resistance: The Artist Citizen & the Tunisian Public Space'. Artists studied public space in its relation to pictures and images, materiality, voice and sound, writing and staging, the body and movement. I had the honor to assist choreographer Soufiane Oussi who facilitated the artistic process of students engaging with the body and movement in public space. I gradually developed insights through my lived, embodied and shared experience with artists absorbed in three performances initiated during the artistic training. Thanks to an intensive and thoroughly embodied participatory observation, I gained practice-based insights into the concept of a space of appearance that I developed in an additional article for the theater journal *Documenta* (Ben Yakoub 2015). This turned out to be helpful for underpinning my arguments in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

Starting as a scientific coordinator at the University of Ghent and leaving my position in the artistic field in Brussels in November 2015, did not mean the end of my participation in the artistic sphere, on the contrary. I was asked, together with Sami Zemni, to provide food for thought for the theater piece *Join the Revolution by Action Zoo Humain* in May 2015. I gave a closed visual presentation, offering a chronology of the most important aesthetic moments of revolt but also gave feedback during different preliminary showings to help develop the work in progress. I also advised the artistic program of the Moussem City #Tunis festival, after which I wrote a critical article in *Arab Stages Journal* together with writer and activist Fida Hammami (Ben Yakoub & Hammami 2016). Finally, I was asked by Flanders Arts Institute to facilitate a part of their reflection program on the internationalization of art practices in Flanders towards the Middle East and North Africa, for which I gave a

keynote lecture that was later published (Ben Yakoub 2018). I also organized different reflective moments on the challenges of internationalization with input from among other scholars Adnen Jdey, Mariem Guellouz and Kmar Bendana as well as artists and curators Sana Tamzini and Moez Mrabet in the framework of the Dream City festival in October 2017 in Tunis. This last phase of field research brought the two worlds and professional spaces I daily inhabit together. My role as a critic in the Flemish art field and my role as a researcher in the Tunisian context fused in an intense week of lively discussion and condensed debates that in the end – at least for a brief moment – nullified any theoretical, methodological or even ontological contradiction between these two positions. I hope I succeeded in holding on to this moment of clarity throughout the elaboration of the main theses of this dissertation. Finally, in June 2018, I was invited to present the preliminary findings of my dissertation in a talk with curator Yasmina Reggad entitled ‘Revolting Senses’ during the opening of one of the pavilions during the fifth edition of Jaou Tunis, an annual festival of contemporary art organized by the Kamel Lazaar foundation. I also participated in a round-table on the *‘Decolonization of the Body’* together with Seloua Luste Boulbina, Bernadette Dufrêne and Héra Yousfi in the French Institute of Tunisia during the first edition of Carthage Dance, a contemporary dance festival, organized by the ministry of culture.

Although sometimes thematically distant to the core of my subject, these different moments of intense participation – engaging with the world, curating programs and advising or participating in existing ones, giving artistic and dramaturgical feedback or participating in talks and round-tables of different state-sponsored or private international festivals – helped me to stay close to my field, to keep my database of ongoing aesthetic events up to date and to familiarize myself with different key interlocutors, but also to position myself academically in the face of existing institutional and political tensions, thinking through compelling problems and questions related to the artistic field in Tunisia. Confronted with the impossibility of merely describing the reality I tried to understand, I slowly became part of the body politic. By merely being present and relating to my interlocutors and later by publishing some preliminary findings in different popular and academic journals, but also by speaking during different public events, I slowly transformed into one of the innumerable creative agents that constituted the vibrant collective revolting body and

by doing so influenced in one or the other subtle way certain of its unpredictable and almost infinite microgestures and movements, at least on an intersubjective and discursive level. However minimal the impact on the ground may have been, this partial transformation of my positionality towards the world I was studying and engaging in, raises at least some ethical concerns on the hardly measurable influence of my research on the political reality, in other words on the performativity of my research, but also and consequently on the multiple relations I built up with my interlocutors who are more often than not bound to live there and nowhere else. This stands in sharp contrast to my relative mobility and the possibility and privilege I have to freely move back and forth, online and offline, between real - and cyberspace, over the two continents crossing the Mediterranean hither and thither over and again.

5 / 2 TACKING TO SPEAK NEARBY

Given the dynamic and ongoing character of my research subject, the first aim of this study was to inductively build up a grounded theory while navigating the unruly waves of revolt (Glaser & Strauss 1967). I use the metaphor of navigation to stress "the motion within the motion" of doing fieldwork as pointed out by Henrik Vigh (2009:420). The concept of social navigation is useful to emphasize the dynamic dimension of fieldwork, certainly in times of revolt, as it stresses the processual character of fieldwork as a movement in a setting that is in itself "wavering and unsettled". While doing fieldwork in times of revolt, I indeed felt like moving between different agents and various structures that were in themselves also in constant movement. These changing relations between agency and structure in their turn engaged and moved me as an observer as I navigated along the way. It stresses my dynamic and interactive relation to changing aesthetic structures and the subjects moving and transforming within these shifting aesthetic structures.

Starting from what I initially thought of as an inductive qualitative approach, my research began with an online collection of qualitative data concerning the aesthetic aspect of key movements and moments of revolt. In a second step, the online exploration was verified and deepened during offline field trips in Tunisia on the one hand and through open, in-depth expert interviews on the other. Going back and forth from my empiric field,

I noticed however how easily the distinction between an inductive and a deductive approach can be blurred, as both logical dynamics tend to overlap in practice since they always happen more or less at the same time. This insight complicates the whole idea of grounded theory. The interpretative hermeneutical sailing metaphor of tacking as conceptualized by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) clarifies the difficulty of making a clear-cut distinction between an inductive and a deductive approach. Tacking is a common sailing maneuver and refers to the way sailors have to manipulate the bow of their vessel into the headwind on the capricious water of the sea, allowing it to navigate in the desired direction. While through tacking fieldwork is still leading the theory, knowledge is always produced through a constant back and forth movement between the whole and the parts, between theoretical concepts and observed details, between theory and the empiricism it requires, between the detailed observation and the gathering of data in the field site and its more abstract interpretations. At times, this improvisational effort of moving back and forth between theory and the empirical, while navigating the field, does not enable a linear accumulation of growing insights, but rather a circular and grounded spiral process of understanding and deepening knowledge construction. Out of this cyclical and vibrant process, thus tacking between the more theoretical whole and the detailed parts of my empirics, maneuvering or navigating the capricious and sometimes unruly waves of my field site, the five main indicative concepts of my analysis came to the surface: premonition, space, time, body and image. Each one of the concepts relates to a specific domain of everyday life and revolt that is structured by state aesthetics, and thus also by aesthetic agency. Informed by a transdisciplinary framework combining theoretical and methodological insights from art and political theory – more specifically from aesthetic philosophy and theories committed to various postcolonial critiques – the five different chapters of this dissertation will thus revolve around and deepen the five main concepts in the light of the mutually intertwined processes of domination and resistance and the way these intermeshed entanglements perhaps unfold in moments of revolt to question the shared distribution of the sensible in a given police order.

Living a unique moment in the history of Tunisia, I immersed myself in the field by collecting as much data as possible, mostly online in Belgium and offline in Tunisia. Apprehensive of the possibility that the data I was looking for would not be

4. There are too many photo exhibitions and publications to share here, but I would at least mention the three most important publications that visualize the first moment of liberation, i.e. *Dégage. La Révolution Tunisienne*. *Livre-Témoignages* published by Alif Editions or *Volonté/Revolution* Tunisienne 2011 published by Pixels Trade and *Dégage/Une Révolution* published by Phébus Editions.

5. The most important films, documentaries and web series that dealt directly with questions related to art, aesthetics and the specific moments of revolt in Tunisia are amongst others, *Tunis Mix* by Jeremix & Zea, *Hors-Champs du Banc Public* by Gaïa Vianello, *Murs Georgeon*, *Le Muet* by Dounia Georjeon, *Wall Asks: Okay?* by Ahmed Hermassi, *Revolution Sous 5* by Rida Tili, *Les Gens de la Vachère* by Marc Monaco et Sarah Fauré, *Zweyla... Mais On Rêve* by Chahine Berriche and Fatma Laazibi, *Ceci Est Mon Corps* by Maxime Avon, *Artistries en Tunisie* by Serge Moati, *Immersion en Tunisie* by Mohamed Kaci, *Tunisie l'Ere d'une Révolution Culturelle* by

archived and would quickly dissolve into thin air, escaping collective memory and history, I developed an almost compulsive behavior. I collected every picture that visualized in one way or another the revolutionary upsurges and kept track of different photo exhibitions that engaged with moments of revolt.⁴ I downloaded all the videos I could find that came out of the various moments of revolt, scanned almost every possible film festival to see the newest fictions and documentaries and ended up collecting all the film classics of the New Tunisian Cinema.⁵ I collected the songs and music that engaged with the spirit of the revolt, searched for the different styles and historical streams and went to different energizing concerts. I also tried to keep track of every curated contemporary art show that emerged out of the revolution and ended up reconstructing the history of modern art.⁶ I paid particular attention to the data that could inform my reflections on the way state aesthetics was historically structured and contested during the ongoing revolts. Whether only inspired by the aesthetics of revolt or truly taking part in the ongoing movements themselves, I collected all the data surrounding these emerging aesthetic practices that appealed to my imagination. The collected material was a testimony to the agency central in the diversion or reappropriation of the authoritarian state aesthetics. Unable to cover the variety of sense experiences that structured the aesthetics of the revolutionary surges under study and grappling with the theoretical frames through which I would make sense of the collected information, I gradually selected the data that related in one way or the other to the (in)visible, lived and embodied dimensions of aesthetics and to the properties of space and the possibilities of time in and through which these dimensions of aesthetics were manifesting themselves.

Starting from an online research exploring the Tunisian blogosphere, social media, video-sharing websites and online news platforms, a database of pictures, videos and texts related to the aesthetics of the different revolutionary flows was created. Employing cyberspace as a space of research, I was soon confronted with the impossibility of unplugging from my field site even when I was seated far away at my desk in Brussels. Doing this sort of internet research certainly presents new challenges, for example in terms of dealing with the various ways I could move in cyberspace as a researcher and how these movements determine possible interactions with the field I was engaging in. As Dhiraj Murthy (2008) reminds us, the internet should never be apprehended as a neutral observation space. The social media

handled to collect possible data always remains a dynamic and interactive fieldwork setting. Social networking platforms were useful for collecting data and thus for the initial mapping of a delineated field, but it is crucial not to forget that while I was connecting with activists and artists online I related with possible interlocutors I could observe online, before meeting and questioning them offline. The other way around, I also slowly became visible and thus observable in the field I was studying and I had to be aware about the various possible ways certain posts or likes could influence the image of my positionality.

In a second phase, a network of directly concerned and expert interlocutors (artists, bloggers and academics) was interviewed to refine my findings. This allowed me to gain information to improve, deepen and broaden my online exploration. Most of the 84 interviewed interlocutors were artists (50%), an important part was composed of researchers (14%), cultural workers (10%) different curators (6%) and active members of civil society (7%). I also interviewed different activists, journalists, entrepreneurs, artisans and judges. I mostly stayed in Grand Tunis to meet with my interlocutors, but also traveled over the country, from Kelibia, over Nabeul, Hergla, Monastir, Ksar Hella, Mahdia, Mahres, to Gabes and Djerba to visit different cultural sites, museums, galleries, artistic events and festivals. Within Grand Tunis I had the feeling I traversed the whole society and its different class layers. I satisfied my hunger, from the most popular eatery in Bab Souika to a five-star restaurant on the beach of a wealthy resort next to the house of a private art collector. I slept under the stars on the rooftop of a squat during the tour of a young art collective, but also in a five-star hotel that hosted an international conference where I was invited to give a presentation. I have travelled from the most popular bus or cramped collective taxi to the private driver of one of the wealthiest curators of the country. Not having lived or experienced time during the authoritarian rule of the Ben Ali regime, I literally immersed myself in the national archives of Tunisia in Tunis to understand what it means to live under an authoritarian regime that was slowly being contested since the 2000s. I repeated both online and offline phases in a cyclical manner in the summer of 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017.

Strolling around in Grand Tunis, conducting these interviews and immersing myself in the national archives, gave me a feeling of what Denzin (1989:83-84) in *Interpretive Interactionism* calls a sense of “verisimilitude”, referring to “truthlike statements

Valérie Loewensberg, Artistes et intolérances Maghreb Orient Express, Les Couleurs de la Constitution by Stella Boni et Elena Parravicini, 7 Vies by Amine Boufaïed & Lilia Blaise, La Maison Mauve by Selim Gribaâ and Bourguiba de Retour by Hishem Ben Ammar.

6. *Breath of Freedom/Tunisia*, a virtual exhibition curated by Mohamed Ben Solmane in 2011; *Dégagements ... La Tunisie un An Après* curated by Michket Krifa held at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 2012; *Printemps des Arts Fair Tunis* curated by Meriem Bouderbala in El Abdellhya and Assaada Palace in La Marsa and Museum of Sidi Bou Said in 2012; *Rozige Zukunft* at the Ifa Galerie in Berlin curated by Christine Bruckbauer and Patricia K. Triki in 2012; *The Dream City Biennale* in the medina of Tunis, *L'Artiste Face aux Libérés* curated by Selma and Sofiane Ouisi in 2012; *Chkonn Ahna* at the National Museum of Carthage curated by Timo Kaabi Linke and Khadijah Hamdi; *Politiques 1&2* curated by an autonomous collective of Tunisian artists gathered under the name *Politiques*

in respectively 2012 and 2013 in the National Centre for Living Arts in Tunis and in the Centre National d'Art Vivant de Tunis and at the Talmart Galerie in Paris, *De Colline en Colline. Three Hills* curated by Faten Roussi in Sidi Bou Saïd, Takrouma and Chénini in 2013, *Tunisia: Turbulences. Contem porary Artists From Tunisia* curated by Leïla Souïssi in 2014 at the Carlo Blotzi Museum in Rome, *The Whole World is a Mosque* curated by Lina Lazaar in 2015 in the frame of Jaou Tunisi, *Traces, Fragments d'une Tunisie Contemporaine* curated by Sana Tamzani in 2015 at the MuCEM in Marseille and in 2016 in the French Institute

that produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described". In one of my latest trips to Tunis in the summer of 2017, while interviewing Moez M'rabet, then director of the international cultural center in Hammamet, I had the peculiar feeling of talking about an event as if I had lived and experienced it, while in reality I had only been busy reading newspapers and journal articles, watching documentaries and news videos capturing that event. We were talking about the premonitory strength of the theater play *Yahia Yaish* by Faidel Jaibi in which Moez M'rabet plays an important role. I recalled the day of the première in the Municipal Theater in Tunis and how confusing it must have been when the sounds of the police containing the revolt outside merged with the soundscape of the play and how the teargas managed to find a way inside, emphasizing how both the theater of revolt and the scripted theater in the black box merged in that unique moment. When conducting the interview, I was remembering that very moment when reality seemed to have overhauled theater during the turbulent period of Kasbah II, as if I myself had been present there, in the tribune, watching the piece interfering with the riots on the avenue. During this interview the experiences that I had reconstructed through my fieldwork came to life. I vividly remember how I had the feeling I was exchanging with the lived experiences of my interlocutor, whereas in reality I had only engaged in a thick description of these experiences, forming a sense of "verisimilitude" to the interpretation of the field I was studying.

The blurring of the border between online and offline research, but also between lived experiences and experiences based on a sense of verisimilitude, obliged me to take an analytical distance, to clear out, constantly order and reorder my data. This continuous process of ordering and reordering enabled me to make a clear distinction between the data I found online, and the data I found offline, the data I could rely on based on my own lived experience and the data for which I had to rely on the different stories and testimonies I collected from various interlocutors on the ground. The data found online was always verified comparing different media outlets and their sources. To filter rumors from relative facts I later reassessed my findings in my offline research. Although I collected original and at times poignant and engaging testimonies, I consciously choose not to cite from my interviews, as I choose to prioritize my own interpretation of the ongoing movements of revolts. Every interlocutor was approached in a relational and intersubjective way as an expert of his or her own

lived experience and as a subjective storyteller answering the question of an 'outside' academic, not as a simple data provider, let alone as a carrier of truth about the transformations society was going through. I had to pose and counterpose the different narratives I encountered on the field site, to distill the final data I could fully rely on to make my own interpretations and to answer my research questions, based on my own sensible experience and my own embodied immersion in the field.

Like pointed out before, eventhough poststructuralist thought is based on the very assumption of agency and the will to go beyond the normalizing structures it studies, these accounts have the tendency to eclipse the agency of subaltern groups, making them speechless (Spivak 1988), or to speak for these groups, or as stated by Ben Chikha and Arnaut (2013) to "insinuate oneself into the other's voice" (2013:661) all the while prudently concealing their "ventriloquist set-up" (2013:678). While acknowledging that the knowledge produced throughout this dissertation would simply not have been produced without the numerous encounters and interviews with the diverse group of interlocutors I encountered during my research, I do not claim "to give voice to" them, as if they could not speak for themselves. On the contrary, I propose to refrain from re-using their words to justify my interpretation of the extraordinary moment of revolt, all the while carefully listening to what my interlocutors had to say. During such unexpected moments of revolt, positions and interpretations are volatile, dynamic, making quoting a very unstable and at time an ethically questionable endeavor. Leaving behind the mere thought of a ventriloquist set-up, I wish to engage in what Trinh T. Minh-Ha (in Chen 1992) first coined in her film 'Reaseemblage' as "speaking nearby".⁷ Minh-Ha contrasts the indirect attitude and worldly positioning of "speaking nearby" with that of "speaking about". The formation of such an attitude, starts with the conviction that knowledge production entails a continuous movement from the inside out and the outside in. It further necessitates the believe that a structure can be understood from within one self, that it is possible "to know the world inwardly, so that the deeper we go into ourselves, the wider we go into society" (1992:82). Speaking nearby is "a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place", it is "a speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it." (1992: 87). In the writing of this dissertation, I speak as close as possible

7. With infinite gratitude to Hari Prasad A. Sacré for having introduced me to the work of Trinh T. Minh-Ha and showing me what it could mean to embody the attitude of "speaking nearby".

to artists and activists, I met or interviewed during my field-work. Moreover, I elaborate an understanding of revolting senses to make visible what is most often overseen or made invisible, speaking nearby those who have no part in the distribution of the sensible in a given police order. By relating to aesthetic practices that made tangible the bodily contours of the will to life during moments of revolt, I came to speak nearby the damned whose life – as we will see further below - is a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death.

5 / 3 **PASSIONATELY RECLAIMING OBJECTIVITY**

“Who do you love the most? Your mother or your father?” This was the question posed to me, after I was not able to properly answer the Arabic questions of the border police when I first arrived in Tunis in the summer of 2011. It was the first time I passed the border alone, without my parents. My father always discouraged me to travel to Tunisia by myself during authoritarian times, as he was genuinely afraid I would be obliged to pass my military service. Navigating an authoritarian regime is indeed always challenging, not necessarily for its repressive aspect, but even more so for its arbitrariness and uncertainty (Glasius et al. 2018). The arbitrary, uncertain and at times instrumental way the duty of military service was imposed on the youth, facilitated the interiorization of a form of fear and a depoliticization that hindered me to visit my father’s motherland by myself, until the first upsurge of revolt, the ousting of the authoritarian president and the subsequent collapse of the wall of fear. The question I faced when first arriving at the border control beggared belief, as it clearly insinuated that I loved my mother more than my father, as I did not understand the question posed to me in Arabic. I was welcomed, but as an outsider. The question therefore strongly resonates until now as it points to my distant, yet very personal relation to the country I choose to research. The categorical interpellation by the border police compelled me to choose sides between two apparent contradictory or at least conflicting poles. I nevertheless refused to answer and up until today I still refuse to answer similar binary questions pushing me into one of two presupposed contradictory poles of a societal or political tension. I also vividly remember, in a later phase of my research, being endorsed as “a real Tunisian” by a colleague after having given a presentation at an international conference

in Boston, or even as being welcomed as part of “the family” after giving a talk at the French Institute in Tunis. Whereas I immediately felt a certain proudness after being recognized and even endorsed as a real insider to my field of research, this endorsement made me think through what that presupposed thing is that an insider is supposed to be an insider of. What does it mean to be considered “a real Tunisian” while doing research on the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia? Amusingly, questions related to my position of insider/outsider were the only questions consequently posed to me throughout the time of my research. Both seemingly contradictory interpellations, one pushing me as an outsider, the other endorsing me as an insider, were not unfamiliar to me or unique to my situation, on the contrary. Both feelings are reminiscent of the condition already aptly described by W. E. B. DuBois (1903:2) as a “double consciousness”, i.e. “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. A consciousness that feels like an ever present “two-ness” that constantly strives to merge into oneself, without losing either part. Embodying two poles of historical formations that are fundamental in structuring political oppositions in time of conflict, broadly speaking ‘the Orient’ and the ‘Occident’, I am continuously looking for and drawn to a “relational, polyphonic, and contrapuntal – rather than merely binary and oppositional – understanding” (Lionnet 2011:388). The drive of this ever present “two-ness” that persistently merges into oneself and compels us to a contrapuntal thinking, relates to what Nedjma Hadj (2017) calls the continuous commitment to “stitching worlds together, almost putting sutures into gaping wounds, with memories of a recent and violent past undigested by either side”.

While at first I felt inclined to find a sound balance on an imagined cord between an etic and emic, an outsider and insider perspective (Headland, Pike & Harris 1990), I soon became aware that the insider’s presupposed advantages were not always the outsider’s disadvantages, or vice versa. Moreover, I could consider myself an ‘insider’ in relation to a multiplicity of characteristics and an ‘outsider’ to a multiplicity of certain other qualities while engaging in my field. I was raised in Belgium by a Belgian mother from an industrialized farming family and a Tunisian father from an industrialized fisher’s family, who reclaimed his right to mobility, crossed the sea and moved to Belgium not so long after his country had liberated itself from the French colonial empire. Not knowing if it would be permanent or intermittent, my father

finally lived in both spaces simultaneously, incessantly moving between the two poles, becoming a “nomad with different local histories [...] generated in the places once exterior to [the world system] and now becoming a conflicting part of it” (Mignolo 2000:72). Having the privilege of visiting my father’s family gave me a relational perspective to not only Tunisian society in general, but also to my research subject in particular. Observing, experiencing and questioning the social and political differences between the lower middle-class part of my family living in the North (Soliman) and the lower class part living in the South (Djerba), I was told important inside stories and interpretations about the political situation, but also for instance about the voluntary servitude central in the functioning of state aesthetics in daily life. I vividly remember in this light how my uncle, who was freed from prison during the revolution, immediately took me to the central café in Soliman in the summer of 2011 to tell me all the details about how he, a director of a shoe company, was imprisoned during the Ben Ali regime. Officially accused for corruption, but factually for refusing to financially cooperate with the regime, he explained me how the suspicions and accusations of corruption started after a police officer entered his office and noticed there was no portrait of the head of state hanging on the wall. Of course, not properly speaking the local language generated an important gap and distance towards my interlocutors in particular but also to my case study and field of research in general. While most of my respondents spoke French and the different media outlets and social media channels through which I made sense of the ongoing movements used the French language, my knowledge of the local idiom formed a non-negligible obstacle between me and the world I was studying and engaging in. As reminded by one of my interlocutors, the knowledge I built during this research is therefore necessarily partial, as I could not look into the literature, theater and poetry of revolt, three of the main aesthetic forms flourishing since the start of the revolts. By now however, it is clear that it was the very language barrier that compelled me to precisely delineate my subject and thus to look specifically into the aesthetic, (in)visible and more embodied dynamics of revolt. Finally, when looked at my research process in hindsight, it also gradually became clear that my position to certain aspects changed over time, becoming more intimately linked, building up friendships next to deepening family ties, but at the same time taking more distance as an academic observer. My understanding is colored by the continuous interaction of a convoluted set of changing interpellations.

In other words, my position as an insider or outsider is dynamic, and thus determined by where “[I] stand in relation to ‘the other’ at a certain time and in a certain space” (Merriam et.al 2001:411). Earlier methodological debates concerning the insider/outsider status assumed its mutual exclusivity. The researcher had to make explicit his/her inside or outside to be able to study reality objectively. While the question of insider/outsider status is being rearticulated in terms of power and thus of one’s positionality vis-à-vis race, class and gender, today it is more generally accepted that the boundary between both is complex, slippery and ambiguous and that both positions are susceptible to what can be considered a constant process of negotiation (Merriam et al. 2001).

The multiple subjectivities I try to explicit here tend to go against the grain of the assumption made by Frantz Fanon (1951:175) when stating that “scientific objectivity was barred to [him], for the alienated, the neurotic, was [his] brother, [his] sister, [his] father”. While at first sight I am certainly sympathetic to his clear and outspoken position, it presupposes a problematic notion of what scientific objectivity might be. In his phenomenological and psychoanalytical study of colonial alienation, Fanon questions what real scientific objectivity is when what is being studied are human beings, the relations between these beings and the meaning-making process these relations entail. The enunciated impossibility to fuse his objective and subjective practices as a writer and social psychoanalyst stems from his apparent adherence to a very narrow notion of objectivity central in a positivist understanding of social science. Fanon overlooks the insight that knowledge is always situated knowledge (Harding 1986, Haraway 1988). As stated by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007:25), doing research is always an interpretative process of understanding rather than “an exercise in recording an objectively observable reality”. The positivist ideal of objectifying can never be reached, as understanding always happens from a certain point of view. Even more so, the locatedness of researchers, in casu their particular vantage point and socio-historical location, can be understood as the very condition for the possibility of knowledge production. Research always involves a particular and situated viewpoint. Objectivity is thus not a question of proximity or distance, or of having an insider or outsider perspective. Bringing back the question of scientific objectivity to the visual senses, Haraway (1988:581) emphasizes the embodied nature of all vision against what she calls the “conquering gaze from nowhere... that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies” and points to the

question of what actually structures “the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation”. In this light Haraway (1988:582) considers the infinite vision behind scientific objectivity a disembodied “illusion”, even “a god trick” and on the contrary thus insists metaphorically “on the particularity and embodiment of all vision [...] to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and power of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates”. Surely this poignant assessment is also valid for other sense experiences, but accentuating the vision is striking both from a feminist and postcolonial critique. Objectivity is a theoretical, epistemological presupposition, hence the necessity to reconceptualize it as a theoretical stance as strong objectivity (Harding 1986), feminist objectivity (Haraway 1988) or – why not – postcolonial objectivity. As stated by Edward Said (1993:65), there is no “Archimedean point beyond the question from which to answer it; there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships [...] no one has the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting the world free from the encumbering interests and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves”. I do not have the privilege of being a sovereign detached observer and therefore do not make sense of my research subject outside the power relations that act upon myself and through which I am interpellated daily, nor outside the subject I scrutinize and the world I am essentially comprised in. I make sense of my subject as a participant of that actual world, not as a detached outside observer, and thus I continuously push myself out of the insider and outsider binary, into a reflexive research mode.

If there is no outside to my subject under study and all knowledge is situated knowledge, then where do I write or speak from? It is worthy to explicit the position from where I speak or what Stuart Hall (1990:222) calls my “position of enunciation”, as every analysis is written in a certain context, from a particular place and time and a specific history. As made clear from the onset of this dissertation, I am writing from a postcolonial diasporic position, thus located in what I, following Bhabha (1994) and Fanon (1961), came to designate as a critical third space constituted by a complex interaction between different historically situated presences and their representations. This third space is not a delineated space of pure difference, but is a hybrid space constituted through the dynamic interplay of what Hall (1990:227) coined the “doubleness” of similarity and difference. Difference endures in and alongside continuity. Sameness and difference are

not mutually exclusive and can thus live alongside each other. The boundaries of difference are dynamic and are continuously repositioned in relation to infinite discrete loci of reference and interpellations. At the same time, still following Hall, there is no preexisting positionality that transcends the very concrete conditions of place and time, on the contrary every positionality is always itself subject to the incessant and hard dynamics of geography and history. In the light of the French colonization of Tunisia, the movement during the 1960s of immigrants driven towards Europe by the will to improve their economic conditions, has formed a diaspora of displacement of which I am a descendant (Elmoudden 2013). I was ushered as a constitutive other in an environment – of which I slowly became aware – that was very hostile towards the very possibility of an African presence, but also in a secularizing post-Christian space deeply hostile to an Islamic or racialized Arab presence within its border,, I could not but actively and willingly attain this postcolonial third space, where boundaries of belonging and otherness are incessantly contested. I slowly reiterated this continuous contestation into a postcolonial critique (Rutazibwa & Shilliam 2018).

Stuart Hall warns engaged researchers, who too often feel part of one shared true collective self, for reflecting an imagined history and culture they would essentially have in common with all others, thus sharing the same positionality. Referring to these “passionate researchers”, Frantz Fanon too (1961:210) warns us for research that too often is “directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others”. Hall (1990) nevertheless underlines the importance of passionate research, as long as these processes of imaginative rediscovery of hidden histories are not seen as passive archeological endeavors of merely unveiling or rediscovering, but as productive processes that constantly recount and reiterate theses distorted, disfigured and even destroyed histories. Despite the real pitfall of essentialization, these “acts of imaginary reunification” (224) are crucial to give coherence to the dispersal and fragmentation so central in diasporic experiences. In this light it is something completely different to consciously position oneself in a postcolonial diasporic space in the Belgian context and then to engage in a passionate research from that same position in Tunisia. Presenting some preliminary findings of my research for a Tunisian audience, I was indeed quickly

confronted with the exceptional space from where I analyzed the aesthetics of revolt through a lens I had formed not only during my fieldwork in Tunisia, but also during my long-term engagement in the arts sector in Belgium. An in-depth engagement with a critical postcolonial lens to make sense of the dynamics of revolt in Tunisia is apparently a rare thing to do, at least in the French- and English-speaking part of Tunisian academia (exceptions of course can be found, for instance in the work of, among others, Hela Yousfi, Sami Zemni, Sadri Khiari or Corinna Mullin). Having the privilege to move in and out of my field site and case study, not only gave the necessary space to scrutinize certain political and aesthetic dynamics central in this site but also provided a better understanding of how these dynamics are conceived from its constitutive outside, from a eurocentric perspective. In short, I passionately engaged in an act of imaginary reunification from this third critical diasporic space, facilitating a double critique, necessary to grapple with and disentangle the intricate political and at times conflicting constellations.

Reminding us of the critical work of Talal Asad (1975) and the ontological difference he pointed at, inherent to the way anthropology and knowledge production in general were historically structured through the colonial encounter, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) emphasizes the lived dilemmas of passionate researchers, unsettling prevailing assumptions around the fundamental distinction and hierarchical boundary between self and other. As “the ‘other’ that the researcher is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self”, passionate researchers inhabiting a diasporic condition are confronted with the impossibility “to comfortably assume the self of anthropology” (1990:53). Taking into account the divisive historical power relations of domination, the constructed self-other distinction central in anthropology and the nature of the relation of the researcher to its subject matter is fundamentally different for researchers inhabiting a diasporic condition as – in their process of self-construction – they – in contrast to other researchers with a more standard or default positionality – “discover the self by becoming conscious of oppression from the other” (1990:52). It is in this light thus indispensable to challenge the borderline of what is and what no longer regarded as anthropology (Minh-Ha 1992). Building on the concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ as elaborated by bell hooks, Grada Kilomba (2008) explains the need and the drive of passionate researchers to write as a political act of becoming, a transition and transformation from objecthood to subjecthood.

Whereas objects are merely defined, constructed and enunciated in relation to subjects, subjects define their own reality, construct their own identities and utter their proper history. Taking into account the history of colonization, writing or speaking up for a person who is objectified or othered in a given situation is not only a political act of becoming but also a personal process of decolonization. This transformative process of subject formation was not easy and at times an arduous and painful process of overcoming my own deeply entrenched inferiority complex, without descending into a politicized category of difference, but by relentlessly bending projected inferiority into mere difference and humbleness. Ceaselessly reiterating a double critique, I slowly moved and I am still moving from the constitutive and inferiorized other inherent to my subjugation as a postcolonial object, to an academic liberated self, that is subject of its own history. While writing this dissertation I am, in the well-considered words of Kilomba (2008:12), no longer “the ‘Other’, but myself, not the object but the subject, [...] the describer of my own history, and not the described” and I thus “become the absolute opposition of what the colonial project has predetermined”. As described by Abdelkader Zghal and Hacemi Karoui (1976), through the process of decolonization, research in social sciences in Tunisia was also characterized by a transition from the state of object (for foreign and colonial research) to the state of subject (posing autonomous research questions). The historical emergence of social and political sciences was intimately linked to the industrialization of Europe, while the colonial expansion facilitated the growth of ethnographic, ethnologic and anthropological science. Colonized societies were merely objects of European research, research that did not lead to a better understanding of the colonized society but that was rather conducted to facilitate European expansion and reduce the indigenous resistance to this expansion. In the Tunisian case, decolonization facilitated more pragmatic autonomous research on practical problems related to the dynamic aspects of development, planification and modernization, rather than critical research on processes related to culture, let alone aesthetics. Coming closer to be the subject of my own history while writing this dissertation, I hope to place myself in a broader and collective epistemological liberating dynamic pertaining to the Global South in general and Tunisia in particular.

8. In November 2016, I was part of the panel 'Tunisia Five Years After: The Forgotten Structures of Revolutionary Practices?' at the MESA 2016 conference in Boston (United States), where I presented a draft entitled 'Sensitizing the Next Battle – An Overlooked Prehistory of the Tunisian Revolution'. The discussion this panel provoked was essential to restructure my dissertation into the first chapter of my dissertation. The chapter will be published as a co-authored article with Sami Zammi as part of a special issue for the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* entitled 'Creative Dissent: Culture and Politics of Transformation in the Arab World', co-edited by Eid Mohamed, Waleed F. Mahdi, and Hamid Dabashi.

5/4 STRUCTURE

Before briefly introducing the five different chapters, I want to emphasize that this dissertation is not a classic monograph, but a thesis by publication. The five chapters thus coincide with five different publications, four papers in four different peer-reviewed academic journals and one book chapter in a peer-reviewed edited volume. The five different chapters were initially written separately. The first drafts of these writings were presented in different workshops and international conferences to be afterwards completed as four different academic papers and a book chapter. In a last step these papers were joined together to constitute the various chapters of this doctoral thesis. Each chapter could thus stand alone and forms in itself a concise and coherent whole, with its own literature review, conceptual developments, analyses, and discussion. At the same time, this dissertation is thematically and structurally linked through a comprehensive, overarching, in-depth theoretical and methodological introduction and ditto conclusion. The different chapters are thus indebted to the critical feedback I received in the discussions following my presentations and throughout several engaging peer-review processes. The five chapters thus all deal in their own particular way with one specific aspect of the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia and the way state aesthetics was contested through the accumulation of aesthetic agency. At the same time, they will all inform the main questions posed in the introduction and answered in the conclusion of this dissertation, revolving around the possible redistribution of a shared division of the sensible in times of revolt.

When analyzing revolt in Tunisia through its contrapuntal aesthetics, the premonitory and subversive agency of the aesthetic practices in the decade preceding the liberation phase becomes intelligible. In the first chapter of this dissertation,⁸ I will therefore focus on the reconstruction of an often overseen local and rather short historical build-up of aesthetic contention that directly preceded the intense moments and movements of revolt in 2010, and ask the question if this sequence might have prefigured the revolt that eventually ousted the authoritarian head of state. With the benefits of hindsight, I will clarify how not only the tech-savvy, hip-hopping, alternative youth dared to take a direct stance against the Ben Ali regime and disrupted the prevailing police order a decennium before the general outbreak of revolt. Also more conventional artists linked to the rather traditional art streams like the New Tunisian Cinema or the New

Theater of Tunis, and even the blossoming contemporary art scene flirted with premonitory practices, sometimes subtly sometimes ostensibly, subverting the imagery of sovereign power, politicizing prevailing aesthetics and thus slowly accumulating aesthetic agency. This seditious premonitory subversion grew into a generalized practice as it emerged in full daylight during the first phase of liberation, being an important mediator of the fundamental changes the body politic was lifting itself through.

Once the body politic converged and formed an apparent homogeneous but unabiding whole, it was difficult to overlook the spatial dynamics of the moving swarm, pushing the damned – or those without part in the distribution of the sensible – back in the center of public attention. When zooming in on the properties of space within the shared distributing of the sensible, it becomes clear how the upsurge of revolt that ousted the head of state spontaneously turned prevailing state aesthetics inside out, at least for a moment. In the second chapter of this dissertation,⁹ I will venture into the contestation of the urban materialization of state aesthetics and thus into the processes through which aesthetic agency was temporarily accumulated through the diversion or reappropriation of urban space. The mesmerizing occupation and diversion or reappropriation of symbolic places, such as the Kasbah Square or Bourguiba Avenue, produced a momentous heuristic enclave of another order, projecting images of a renewed inclusive body politic and police order. Delving into the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt however, I will show how often overseen violent processes of disruption and destruction repeatedly preceded these enthralling processes of diversion or reappropriation and occupation. Police stations, the presidential personality cult and the private estate of contested regime members will be discerned as spatial nodes of prevailing state aesthetics that keep the compartmentalization and fragmentation of urban space in place. Moreover, by including the often-omitted occupation of mosques and subsequent pockets of revolt contesting the ongoing constitutional political dynamics, I will show why the revolutionary process failed in the production of that liberated and dignifying space projected during its initial liberation phase.

During the first liberating outpouring of revolt, the agitated swarm did not totally destroy the monumental landscape that constituted prevailing state aesthetics. Guided by the provocative *Anti-Clock Project* by visual artist Nidhal Chamekh, in the third chapter of this thesis ¹⁰ I will show why the strongest element of

9. I had the honor to present the findings of this chapter in the prestigious French seminar series 'Un Paradigme Tunisien? Histoire et Sciences Sociales en Révolution' at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (November 2017), where I received precious critical feedback. I am also grateful to the researchers connected to the Al Jisr Workshop of the Harvard University in Tunis, where I was invited to present my research in July 2018. Thanks to these two critical cycles of feedback I was invited to submit a full paper to the journal *City – Analysis Of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, where it is now in review.

10. I participated at the conference 'Heritage in Transition: Scenes of Urban Innovation' organized by the International Association for the Study of the Culture of Cities in July 2016 in Syros in Greece, where I presented a draft of chapter 3. On account of the constructive comments I received during the conference I was able to translate the paper into an article published in the *Middle Eastern Journal for Culture and Communication*.

entitled 'The Last Monument Standing - The Politics of Time in the Tunisian Revolution'. It will appear in 2018 in a special issue on 'Creative Dissent: Visual Arts of the Arab World Uprisings'.

11. For the fourth chapter, I am indebted to the critics I received during the conference 'Bodies and Artistic Practices' at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts of Tunis and to the participants of the Euro-Méditerranéenne Workshop 'Conflits et Résistances: l'Artiste Citoyen et l'Espace Public Tunisien' in the L'Art Rue Association at Dar Bach Hamba in Tunis (April 2014). It was later published in the edited volume *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance Dance: Im/mobility and Politics*, edited by Gržinić, M. & Stojnić, A (Penguin Macmillan, 2018).

the state aesthetics of the Ben Ali regime survived the destructive wave of revolt, pointing to a structural lack in the accumulated aesthetic agency. Unearthing the possibilities of time in the shared distribution of the sensible, I will venture in the question why the central Clock Tower is still standing in the capital today and why it will probably still stand there tomorrow. In this chapter, I will thus render intelligible the palimpsestic character of prevalent state aesthetics and make visible its imbricated strata that reveal hegemonic modernist assumptions and politics of time. The monumental translation of the new era promoted by the contested authoritarian regime paradoxically froze the idea that change would facilitate general progress, innovation, modernization and development. I will argue however that the Clock Tower and the civilizational project it materializes, initiated by colonial occupation and upheld by the consecutive post-colonial regimes, is not necessarily warranting a better future, but restrains political sensibilities to the present time, dismissing various historical pasts and withholding differential futures.

The authoritarian regime in Tunisia can be defined as an intensive biopolitical regime where disciplinary techniques of surveillance and governmentality are entangled with sovereign logics of exceptionality and decisionism.. Within a biopolitical imperative, the body must constantly be managed, governed and controlled; it is therefore at the same time the strongest vehicle of revolt. Focusing on the embodiment of revolt, the possibilities of embodiment and lived experiences, in the fourth chapter of this dissertation ¹¹ self-sacrifice will be apprehended as a potent symbol of disruption of the expected bodily cooperation within a well seated biopolitical regime that allowed for the appearance of the body politic in all its complexity and diversity, including the life of the most damned, of those that have no part in the distribution of the sensible. Considering death as agency, the gesture of self-sacrifice will be apprehended not only as a performance, but also as a condition for the coming into being of what I will conceptualize as a 'necropolitical' space of appearance. Not only the bodies in the street but also additional embodied artistic performances managed to produce extra-discursive or even non-discursive effects outside the biopolitical logic of everyday life, which allowed to further engage in fundamental ethical question essential for the future constitution of a new dignified body politic and liberated police order.

The upsurges of revolt not only liberated the country of its tenacious authoritarian head of state, it also impacted – in a profound way – the imagination of prevailing political subjectivities. After Ben Ali fled the country, unsettled postcolonial tensions over the delineation of these changing subjectivities reemerged, coloring outside the lines of the nation. In the fifth chapter of this dissertation,¹² I will dive into the faculty of sight and look for the structures that delimit what can appear to our senses, what is shown and who is visible, what is not shown or who is made invisible in a given police order and how this shared distribution can be altered when a given body politic decides to revolt. I will analyze contentious processes of becoming, through a visual analysis of the entangled dynamics of imagination and reimagination that the national flag underwent during the subsequent pockets of revolt, starting from the liberation phase in December 2010, through the constitutional phase and the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, until the inauguration of the National Flag Square in March 2017. The proposed visual analysis in chapter five will not only paradoxically be witness to the very limitation of the power of images to engender dignified relationalities within a given nation, but also to the slow closure of the revolutionary space and the gradual blockage of revolutionary processes of subject formation. This blockage will seem to be productive for the precarious restoration of national unity and state prestige necessary for the completion of the new constitution, but less so for the demands for liberation, social justice and dignity so central during the different moments of revolt.

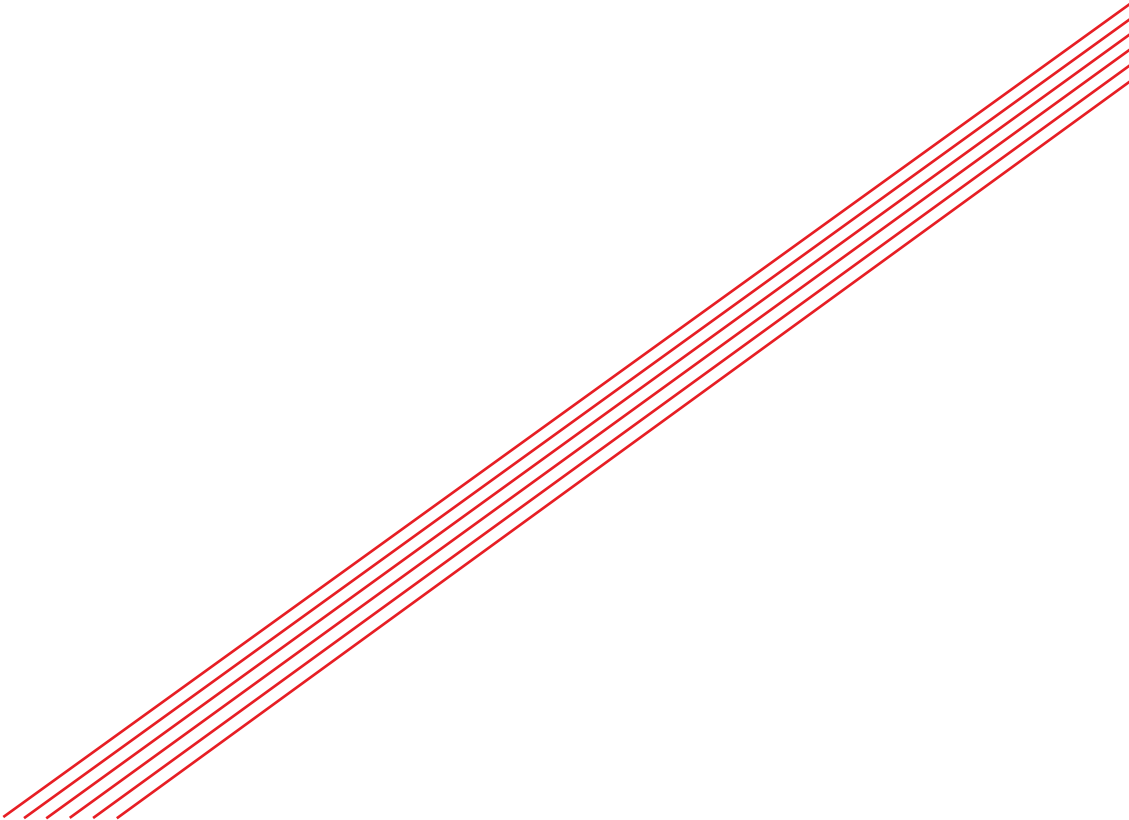
12. The fifth chapter of this dissertation is indebted to the critical responses I received during the international conference 'Art, Literature and Democracy' in February 2016, organized by Research Unit Theoretical and Practical Poetics of the Higher Institute of Human Sciences of the University of Tunis El Manar. It was later published in a special issue of *Middle East - Topics and Arguments* on 'Iconography', in an article entitled 'Coloring Outside the Lines of the Nation: An Iconological Analysis of the Tunisian Revolution'.

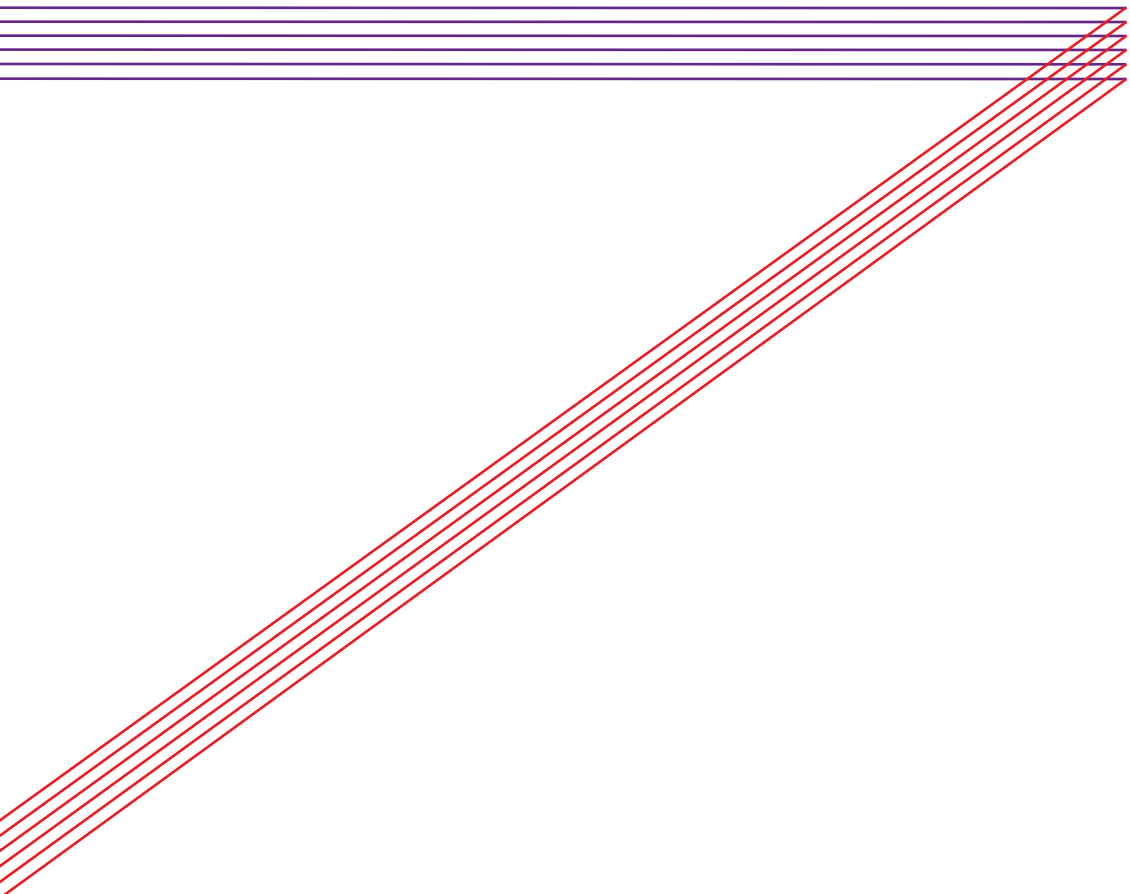
Chapter 1



SENSING THE NEXT BATTLE

An overshadowed prehistory
of creative dissent in Tunisia





/ Presented at the annual conference of the Middle East Study Association in 2016 in Boston, United States.

/ To be published as a co-authored article with Sami Zemni as part of a special issue for the 'International Journal of Cultural Studies' entitled 'Creative Dissent: Culture and Politics of Transformation in the Arab World' co-edited by Eid Mohamed, Waleed F. Mahdi, and Hamid Dabashi.

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SENSING THE NEXT BATTLE

*Jetez les prisons en prison
La parole sera délivrée
S'élèvera alors le chant des réchappés
Un déluge est à venir.
Et la parole est captive*

'Open the doors' by Basset Ben Hassen ¹³

Even though the signs of a coming political crisis were abundant, few, if any, were able to predict the sudden outbreak of a revolution. Basset Ben Hassen's poem, published about 7 months before Mohammed Bouazizi's ordeal, reflects a premonitory sensibility, a feeling of that change about to come that was not captured by political and social scientists. To most observers, the revolution came as a surprise. While the purpose of social sciences is not to 'predict' such events, Tunisia was mainly perceived as a strong and resilient authoritarian order (Zemni 2016: 133). Even if in hindsight some scholars can recall a prevailing premonition of inevitable change, no one could know when major change would happen, nor could they foresee what would trigger such a profound political movement. Revolutions, however, do not 'suddenly' appear but always start from an enduring "molecular accumulation of movements and collective action" that point to a specific prehistory (De Smet 2016: 180). While scholars have tried to specify the role of formal political parties, civil society institutions or informal mobilizations and social movements, few have taken into account the different forms of contestation that, since the 2000's, gradually undermined – through (artistic) subversion – the symbolic power of the Tunisian regime engrained in its personality cult.

Forms of dissent in the more informal and artistic spheres and among the more damned parts of society were often overlooked as political and social scientists were mainly focusing their attention on the repression of organized oppositional forces in the formal sphere of politics. (Khiari and Hibou 2011) Blinded by the presupposed resilience of the authoritarian state and the ensuing

13. Translated from Arabic by
Hager Bouden (in: Ben Slama
2011).

premise that the regime controlled every inch of society, the ripening of alternative political spaces and informal and extra-institutional activities that dared to face the increasing political repression, were easily overlooked (Chomiak 2011). These blind spots have their origin not only in the lack of scholarly attention for the role of imagination in politics to transcend the study of institutional routines (Mamdani 2011) but also in the efficiency of different interconnected mythologies that were keeping up an exceptional image of Tunisia (Cavatorta & Haugbolle 2012). The symbolic and non-discursive dimension of authoritarian power and the extreme personalization of power, often times approaching the grotesque, were central elements in the construction of what Hibou (2006) then aptly calls a 'Tunisian fiction'.

Together with its symbolic mediation in the form of a spectacular personality cult, the Tunisian fiction not only obfuscated a reality of growing economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation of traditional morals and religious references. It also overshadowed existing dynamics of resistance. The ambiguity of the state's symbolic representations paradoxically not only allowed the circumvention of state censorship, but also facilitated creative dissent. In the decade preceding the revolution, the personality cult and its spectacle were subverted in numerous sensible ways not only making visible the growing discrepancy between the Tunisian fiction and the reality of state oppression, but also prefiguring the iconoclastic liberation phase of the revolution. Engaging analytically with the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime, will allow us to see the contentious ways in which the cult was diverted, and people got ready to attack, as the symbols of social order became symbols of revolt and liberation (Fanon 1961). The revolution could indeed be read as a "campaign to dismantle Ben Ali's cult of personality" by the "destruction of displays of political power", that as "rudimentary acts of collective defiance" were a precursor for the demand for the autocrat's departure (Chomiak 2013).

This contribution offers an account of how citizens, activists and/or artists expressed creative dissent and mobilized for political change through the subversion of symbolic power engrained in the personality cult and its spectacle. In doing so, this contribution wants to shed light on the relations between different forms of creative production and changing social and political dynamics. This fiction was mediated through the image of the personality cult, but, conversely, it could also be demystified

by the diversion or reappropriation of the images that made up its personality cult. A close analysis imposes itself, on how the increasingly ubiquitous and powerful personality cult, also invited transgression (Wedeen 1999). Focusing on the prospective rather than the retrospective agency of activists and artists in the large decennium before the episode on the barricades (Sakr 2013), the proposed reconstruction of the prehistory of political dissent, does not aim to label the revolutionary process as 'an ex-post inevitability' (Zemni 2015). While the restitution of a certain predictability by a retrospective teleology is, to a certain point, inevitable (Dakhliya 2011), the genealogy below aims at moving our gaze to the crucial role the ambiguity of symbolic power played and still plays today in the constitution of a post-revolutionary dignified body politic. By revisiting the optimistic energy of creative dissent, this reconstruction also hopes to counter the growing disillusion when analyzing the current outcomes of the revolution.

1/ AMBIGUOUS SYMBOLS OF POWER

The revolution did not come from nowhere (Khiari & Hibou 2011). Creative dissent not only reflects social change but has also the potential to foreshadow deep political shifts and help to bring them about (van Nieuwkerk, LeVine & Stokes 2016). The seeds of the revolution can be found in various art forms before 2010, expressing the bleak reality behind the regime's façade (El Hamamsy & Soliman, 2013). Frantz Fanon (1961) already claimed that an attentive reader can sense and even see the next battle, manifested in exceptional forms of expression and themes enacted through cultural and artistic interventions freshly imbued with mobilizing power. As stated by James C. Scott (1990:212) behind every revolutionary movement lays, "a long prehistory, one comprising songs, popular poetry, jokes, street wisdom [and] political satire". Each subversive intervention creates a new layer of popular memory, nourishing the repertoire of an ongoing liberation movement.

Different academic accounts witnessed an emerging flow of discontent since the end of the nineties. Most scholarly attention was given to the various ways poetry (Omri 2012, Rice & Hamdy 2016) literature (Sakr 2013) humor (Geisser 2001, Meddeb 2013) theater (Ruocco 2013, Amin 2013, Zahrouni 2013a 2013b) cinema (Barlet 2012, Gana 2013c, Lang 2014, Mannone 2015) and music



Figure 16. Place du 7 Novembre, Mohamed Rais

(Bouzouita 2013, Gana 2012, 2013a, 2013b) anticipated the revolution in their own right. However, none of these accounts systematically scrutinizes transversally, beyond the prevailing disciplines, the subversive power of creative dissent. Academic readings of revolt in Tunisia engaging consistently with power structures engrained in the symbolic sphere of the regime, are rare; let alone accounts that settle into the question how people subverted what Lisa Wedeen (1999:145) coins "the symbolic disciplinary power" subsumed in the personality cult.

When research does consider the theatricality of power and the fiction it performs as a disciplinary device and a mode of governance (Hibou 2006), it is often caught in a deterministic relation between the symbols it analyses and the production of legitimacy, charisma or hegemony, neglecting the problem of reception (Wedeen 1999). To fully consider disciplinary symbolic power, namely a subsystem of coercive power that recognizes that power is generated through its representation and that symbols can function as disciplinary devices that enforce compliance, we have to consider its ambiguity in the sphere of both domination and resistance. Domination not only produces the apparent consent of the people, but also plants the seeds of rebellion (Ayari, Geisser & Krefa 2011). As stated by Frantz Fanon (1961:53) "The symbols of social order [...] are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message "Don't dare to budge"; rather, they cry out "Get ready to attack". The spatial concentration of power produced by the Ben Ali regime around a cult of personality to fashion regime-obedient citizens, likewise, made it the primary site for political dissent (Chomiak 2011, 2013, Tripp 2013b). The personality cult and its spectacle enforced the image of an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient president. Power is, however, never absolute nor indivisible, let alone unconditioned, but always mediated by an entangled network of intermediaries, encompassing nearly the whole of society (Hibou 2006). Guy Debord (1967 [2000]:4) already pointed to the 'spectacle', as not merely a collection of images but as "a social relation between people that is mediated by images". An essential feature of this all-encompassing relational entanglement, is a general atmosphere of ambivalence or ambiguity (Wedeen 1999, Hibou 2006). Symbolic domination is thus not a unidirectional, but a multiple and diffuse process. The state exercises its power inside society, through relational processes of subjugation, that allow power to be exercised (Hibou 2006). At the same time there is space within this entanglement, for what Nouri Gana (2013c:198)

calls “constructive ambiguity”, i.e. the possibility to indirectly raise questions about the regime’s policies, without mentioning its moral values and by doing so ignite controversy and debate. Symbolic power can be received and reproduced, but also questioned and even turned against itself. Taking into account the ambiguity of symbolic power, allows to see the in-between space where, “political vitality resides and where critique and oppositional consciousness thrive” (Wedeen 1999:89).

Central in the ambiguity of symbolic power is the contrast between the intended regime representations and the ways in which such representations are received, negotiated, and reinterpreted (Wedeen 1999). Since the 2000’s, attentive observers noticed the first signs of what Kilani (2000) formulated as a “divorce between the official discourse and daily reality”. The accumulation of diversion or reappropriations of the Tunisian fiction formed a ‘hidden transcript’ i.e. a growing unofficial structure of feeling, with its own dialect, humor, and poetry, opposing the prevailing “public transcript” of the apparent official structures and their mediations (Scott 1990). The importance of analyzing this broadening gap between hidden and public transcripts cannot be overstated, as in hindsight it can be considered not only a critical indication for where and how opposition takes place, but also one of the main drives actuating the revolution (Joffé 2011).

Aziz Amami (in: Meddeb 2013:31) already suggested how deconstructing the symbols of oppression, and ridiculing the cult of personality, was an efficient way to counter state censorship and “break down the wall of appearances”. In what follows we will closely analyze the reception of the personality cult in the decade before the outbreak of the revolution. As political research in general and materialist analysis specifically, altogether fail to acknowledge the role symbolic power plays in daily life, there is a general lack of clear-cut concepts and suitable methodologies to analyze precisely the role of symbols in producing political power. We will focus on specific modes of counter conduct and in itself ambivalent forms of dissent, already present in the years leading up to the revolution. More specifically, we will carefully scrutinize different ways the three central elements of the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime were diverted, as these sensible practices were largely ignored due to their silenced and occulted location outside the official and formal political sphere.



Figures 17, 18, 19, 20 Sept foi c'est fini, Hicham Driss

2 / NOVEMBERIST DISPOSITIF

From its onset in November 7, 1987, the regime presented its new president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, as “The Craftsman of Change”, symbolically distancing the new ruler from his charismatic predecessor, erasing all citations and public references to the legacy of the first leader of the liberated nation, Habib Bourguiba. Starting from the newly constituted “November 7, National Pact”, over the erasure of Bourguiba’s portrait from public space and national currency, to the unbolting of monumental equestrian sculptures, the regime engaged in a process of “debourguibisation” (Saidi 2007). Whereas Bourguiba’s historic legitimacy and charismatic leadership created a symbiotic relationship between himself, the state and the people (Lacouture, 1970), Ben Ali’s acute lack of charisma and political eloquence, inspired the imagination of the regime. The image of Ben Ali was initially build around 2 formally elaborated original elements: the date of the constitutional coup “November 7” and the traditional Tyrian purple color. Eventually, with increasing confidence in the resilient structure of his leadership, a classic presidential portrait was added to the repertoire.

Through the naming and branding of state services and public properties, the presidential imagery was officially disseminated in different ways to permeate the whole of society. The strength of this coordinated and well-rehearsed Novemberist dispositif – referring to the various institutional, physical, administrative mechanisms and the knowledge structures which maintain the exercise of power – was its capacity to reproduce itself. The symbolic imagery reproduced itself in a complex interaction between power and the people, between the hegemony of symbolic power and its interiorized elements; whether through fear, calculation or opportunism. Its main ingredients, the reference to November 7, the color purple and the image of the president itself – were not only produced by the state’s institutions but also, whether through gentle pressure or not, by private companies, businesses and shop owners, wanting to pledge their allegiance to the president by hanging Ben Ali’s portrait, the bigger, the better, in their businesses. Not showcasing Ben Ali’s portrait became suspicious and could entail the start of severe bureaucratic, financial and juridical troubles even violent incarceration.¹⁴ References to November 7 and the color purple were also excessively used in the marketing campaigns of private companies in recognition of the people close to the

president's inner circle who had helped them in providing services and opportunities for their businesses (obtaining a professional license, access to a bank loan, obtaining access to land and/or properties,...). Employees donned purple ties in the hope of promotion while guests of honor to meetings organized by Ben Ali's party regularly wore purple scarves, if not purple suits, skirts or caftans to mark their allegiance. During 'elections' public buildings and infrastructures (railings, bridges and even whole houses) were repainted in purple. Artists regularly reproduced this symbolic power by creating artistic works using the known ingredients. Purple paintings with seven doves, or mosaic portraits of the president were awarded official prices while the purchase commission of the Ministry of Culture, massively bought artworks without ever publicly exposing them, except in the private palace of the president in Sidi Dhrif.^{15 16} In summary, reproducing the political imaginary became a symbol of affiliation and loyalty, gently imposed by the ruling party and reproduced in different layers of society. This 'spontaneous' reproduction became gradually more intense during Ben Ali's twenty-two years in power.

15. Interview with artist Mouna
Jmal.

16. Interview with artist Nadia
Jelassi.

Even if the three central elements of symbolic power of the Ben Ali regime are interwoven and connected, we will, in what follows, analyze separately the reference to the day of Ben Ali's accession to power (November 7, 1987), his favorite color purple as well as his portrait and show how these elements were gradually being questioned, contested and subverted by a growing number of artists that ultimately led to the 'tearing up' of the constructed image of the 'Tunisian miracle' during the revolutionary events of late December 2010, early 2011.

3/ NOVEMBERIST DIVERSION OR REAPPROPRIATIONS

In 2007, when Tunisia celebrated the twenty years of Ben Ali's rule, scholars expecting a year of pompous splendor and wildly enthusiastic festivities, were disappointed by the mere repetition of the annual commemorative routine (Geisser & Gobe 2008). The political context surrounding the festivities, such as a rising jihadist threat and an increased visibility of state corruption, asked for sobriety in extravagance. The magic of the first November 7 rituals, gave way to a flat and formal *mise-en-scène* and a meticulously staged state performance.

This disappointment missed, however, the growing dynamics of dissent against the ritualized celebrations and the subversions of 'commemorative routines'.

For the regime's 20th anniversary, digital activist Sami Ben Gharbia subverted the founding document of the Novemberist regime, the November 7 declaration of 1987. In the alternative declaration 'November 7 as we experienced it' Ben Gharbia (2007) tackled several taboos, inspired by the way the people really experienced the 'Tunisian Miracle', criticizing state corruption, the failure of the juridical system and police oppression. On the same day, the first edition of the Dream City art biennale was launched without official authorization. Instead of joining the celebrations of the 'Era of Change', artists reclaimed public space and occupied the old Medina of the capital with different sensible interventions, installations and performances in what was intended as an 'artistic coup'. On social media, Hamadi Kaloutcha created the popular platform 'Against the ridicule number seven cult', to document all the references to November 7 in public space and unveil its ridicule. As nearly 3500 members and activists gathered virtually to engage in political discussions mocking the regime, the online platform was quickly shut down by the state. Whereas for the 20th anniversary the ruling party still bothered to mobilize 'the masses' by chartering coaches, the next year the television coverage of the presidential speech revealed how it misled its audience. A very small audience was framed in vain as a fully packed 'November 7 Stadium'. In contrast, two days later the same stadium was filled to the nock for the final game of the national soccer championship (Chomiak 2013). During derbies between the two major teams of Tunis, the Club Africain and l'Espérance de Tunis, the crowds always fill the space, sometimes singing songs subtly defying state authority (Beau & Tuquoi 2011). The hooligans of the different teams are generally not fighting against each other, but engage in collective fights against the police state (Hussey 2014).

The Novemberist subversion gained momentum in the late 2000s but was nothing new. In 1997, an anonymous pamphlet entitled 'The Seven Families who plunder Tunisia' was already distributed, convincingly showing how wealth was concentrated in the hands of seven families surrounding the president (Beau & Graciet 2009). Referring to 'The Seven Families' gradually became a generalized way to voice dissent against state corruption (Kilani 2000). Neither did the strategy of numerical diversion

or reappropriation stop after the 20th celebration. On November 7, 2009 blogger and cartoonist _Z_ published a cartoon mocking the bizarre purple sectarian dynamics, depicting different affiliated figures venerating a wooden totem with atop the face of Ben Ali with a 7 sculpted on his head (_Z_ 2009 a). For the following celebration in 2010 he explicitly addressed what he calls the endless November 7 Carousel, tackling the never-ending "Change" advanced by a regime that is paradoxically not changing since 23 years, "stuck in a time warp by a metaphysical accident" (_Z_ 2010 a). When the Windows 7 operating system became available in the Tunisian market, people joked that even Microsoft was aligning with the regime. Not only multinationals were 'suspects', locals also had to be careful when branding their products. A butcher who named his shop the Butchery of November 7, unintentionally created national commotion. The insulting connotation of the well-intended tribute, was so much debated that the butcher could not but rename his shop (Auffray 2011). This popular story inspired Nadia Kabi-Linke in 2010 for her installation 'Butcher Bliss' that was exhibited in 'The future of a promise' during the Venice biennale. By exposing porcelain imprint of animal stomachs, Kabi Linke refers to the bodily repulsion many already felt towards the regime, and which came to the surface as some had the 'guts' to speak truth to power.

The clock tower on the main November 7 square in the capital, the quintessential Novemberist symbol of the regime, was evidently not spared. In a context when the Ministry of Culture officially subsidized only seven cinematographic productions per year (Marouf 2013) the film 'Cinecitta 7' by Ibrahim Letaïef came as a critique of the regime's official imagery and how this imagery is closely linked to the distribution of means, advantages and benefits. Disguised as a comedy, the movie sharply points at generalized state corruption, mocked up by a closely monitored and controlled representation of Tunisian society. In tribute to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (Coslett 2009), 'Cinecitta' deliberately choose to cut off-frame the phallus of the regime, showing only a kissing couple in its base fountain. To push through its political engagement, the film officially came out in exactly seven different cinemas over the country in 2009 (Dami, 2009). The Clock tower is also a central component of the novel 'Al-Gorilla' by Kamel al-Riahi, that anticipated quite directly the coming revolution (Sakr 2013). From the first page, al-Gorilla climbs up the symbolic tower on the November 7 square to announce the coming intifada. Through the oneiric storyline

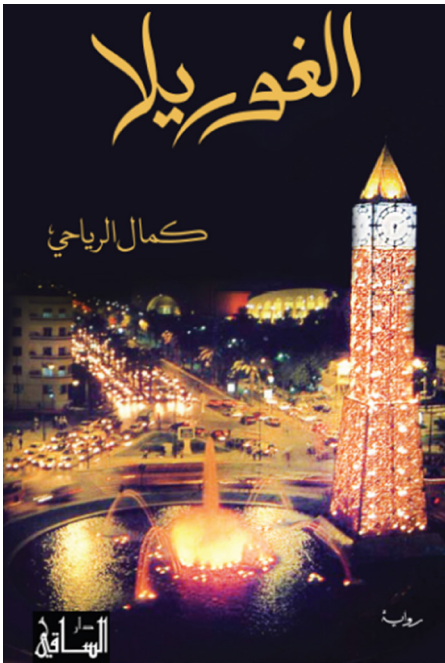


Figure 21. Al-Gorilla, Kamel al-Riahi



Figure 22. Cinecitta 7, Ibrahim Letaief

revolving around the Gorilla hanging from the symbolic monument, the novel addresses societal problems such as marginalization, political repression and torture of opposition members by an ingenious totalitarian surveillance system (Sakr 2013).

For the last celebration of the anniversary of 'Change', the Byrsa movement led by Slim Ben Hassen tried to convince the youth to boycott the festivities. Under the slogan, "On November 7, 2010, we will not celebrate the past. We will celebrate the future", the movement organized a counter-event in Paris to celebrate the activist youth and debate of the 'The Tunisian question', in the hope the festivities in Tunis would be deserted and November 7 altered in a day of political, social and cultural dissent. The coup fatale was given by the young rapper 'El General' who on November 7, 2010 uploaded 'Rais le Bled', a song directly addressing the president to critically denounce the state of affairs and calling for justice, social equality and freedom of speech. Despite regime attempts to get the song offline, it quickly spread through new media all over the country, and, thanks to Al Jazeera far beyond.

4 / PURPLITIS

*"Il se murmure, dans certains bars et à partir
d'une certaine heure,
qu'il y aurait d'autres couleurs que le mauve.
Des dictionnaires non autorisés,
vendus sous le manteaux,
prétendent que le pluriel de couleur existe"*

The above citation is an excerpt of 'The mystery of colors', the first episode of the online graphic novel 'The Amazing Bendirman' introducing the mysterious purple figure (Kilani 2009). Bendirman is a superhero living in a country where the existence of other colors than purple is the biggest taboo. BendirLand, a monochromatic land where people sing 'Life in purple', is the only country in the world with a 'Ministry of Re-coloring'. The main mission of Bendirman is to find out the existence of other colors than purple. Bendirman was the figure behind which the popular protest singer-songwriter Bayram Kilani was voicing his criticism. His name, obviously modeled on Super- and other Batmans, refers to the traditional 'bendir' or hand drum. Tunisians use the term tbandir or drumming to refer to singing the praises of the powers that be (Omri 2012, Meddeb 2013).

17. Interview with artist Aicha
Fillali.

18. Interview with artist
Mohamed Ben Slama.

Bendirman is as such a sarcastic critique to all those who did not defend other colors than the one in power and reproduced the symbolic power of the regime behind a semblance of goodwill and engagement.

In 'Tunisia Friend. 300 days of sun, 1400km of beaches and 3000 years of history' visual artist Aicha Filali tackled the official tourist imagery of the Ben Ali regime. Her touristic installation was exhibited at the Ammar Farhat gallery in June 2008 and consisted of twenty randomly aligned suitcases, accompanied with a travel directory subtly subverting the official touristic marketing discourse. Every suitcase is carefully covered with a different collage, integrating photographs of everyday scenes, but always slightly referring to the touristic imagery. The brochure accompanying the installation, clarifies Fillali's intentions. When read in between the lines, the brochure clearly addresses different pressing issues such as the unstoppable wave of deadly migration to Lampedusa and the double standards in international mobility or the instrumentalization of the feminist cause by a patriarchal authoritarian system, the restriction of freedom of speech and control through state propaganda or even the prevailing economic malaise, the overall growing inequality and the increasing state corruption and nepotism. When opened, the suitcases, lined with a purple fabric, seem to be empty. For Fillali, the message is clear. Behind the touristic façade, lies emptiness, as the regime hollowed out everyday life, through enduring and thorough state control. For those adhering to the purple affiliation, there is no option left than to pack their bags and leave the country.¹⁷ In Mohamed Ben Slama's series of paintings 'Trait-Portrait' exhibited at the Kanvas Art Gallery in the spring of 2007 purple is also a recurring theme. In one of the untitled paintings Leila Trabelsi is depicted surrounded by seven purple angels eating her hairdo, standing behind her husband who sits on a chair with a head skull on his shoulders. On another painting, two purple angels are flying away with the kings head, between God and a Joker who states it is time to leave.¹⁸

Purple is also a recurrent style-element in the cartoons of _Z_. In the heydays of the Ben Ali presidency, which he post-factum baptized 'The Purple Years' (_Z_ 2011), the anonymous pen behind the DEBATunisie blog extensively reclaimed the color purple to symbolize regime adherence in his drawings. It is in this light no surprise that _Z_ is the author of the first 'Purplespeak

(Mauvlangue) dictionary' entitled 'La3rouss! 2010', published online by the editions of eternal joy to "promote purple literature and culture in Tunisia and beyond" and is commonly referred to as "the first Tunisian collaborative participatory dictionary" and "a true patriotic project" (_Z_ 2010b). From 'Ammar' to 'Zaba', the newly issued 'La3rouss' systematizes Purplespeak – a clear reference to newspeak, the ambiguous fictional language used chiefly in Oceania, the totalitarian state in George Orwell's dystopian novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" – to keep up general fluency in the vocabulary of regime-adherence. The dictionary teaches us the meaning of the word 'Tassfi9', namely: "A pavlovian reflex affecting people with purplitis, manifested by a sudden erection at the slightest perception of purple followed by frantic applause." It clearly consists of "scientific definitions based on etymologic research", as Purplespeak is a language "skillfully developed by leading purplelogues" of "the Purple Academy". The Academy regularly organizes conferences, that can be attended in their main building, situated on the November 7 Avenue in the capital. When taking a closer look at the academic institution, it ends up to be nothing more than a clothes store where only one type of purple suite, 'the suite of Change', is sold.

19. Interview with activist Ali Bonasselmi.

The reproduction of the presidential color always gained momentum as a decorative element in the run-up to presidential elections. People were relieved, as a popular saying goes, that the water coming out of the tap was not purple yet.¹⁹ Illustrative in this light is a cartoon series of _Z_ depicting Tibetan monks, aliens caught on picture by NASA, the national union of the blind people (nearly falling into the abyss while demonstrating), but also the prisoners of Redeyef or the immigrants who were sent back from Lampedusa, even president Obama or the resurrected dead of the Djellaz cemetery, all dressed in purple in support of the re-election of Ben Ali in 2009 (_Z_ 2009b). The following legislature, the daily journal Echourouq published a call signed by sixty-five public personalities (doctors, lawyers, cultural figures, etc.) to urge President Ben Ali to stand for re-election for the 6th time in 2014. The collective Nawaat (2010) relayed the information, naming and shaming the signatories of the call in purple and bold. Inspired by an advertisement image of an Italian clothing brand, the website set the counter attack by spreading an image of Adolf Hitler in pink uniform with the sign of a loving heart instead of a swastika on his forearm, backed with the warning 'In 2014. Tunisia will be covered in purple'.

BENDIRMAN



Figure 23. Bendirman, Bayram Kilani

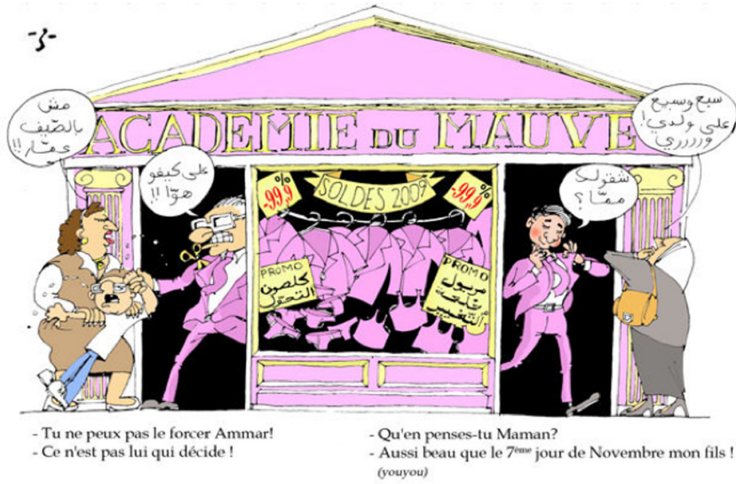


Figure 24. Academie du Mauve, _Z_



Figure 25. Elf Leila wa Leila, Tarik Mekki

5/ BEN ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES

During authoritarian times, certain policies could carefully be criticized, but never the responsible behind these policies (Hawkins 2011). Directly attacking the one who personalizes the whole system, was the most challenging strategy to subvert symbolic power. People therefore sought refuge in subverting the image(s) of figures close to the president. The First Lady was the undisputed star of popular humor (Geisser 2001) but harking back to the imagery of the first president of independent Tunisia was also a powerful way to voice dissent.

In the official imagery, the First Lady was supposed to embody the continuation of Bourguiba's progressive policies towards women. This feminist image was contested, as Leila Trabelsi seemed haunted by her former profession as a hairdresser, Tunisians jokingly referring to her career as one "from hair dryer to power" (Du séchoire au Pouvoir). "The Regent of Carthage" as a book title of Beau & Graciet (2009) reminds us, was a regular object of mockery. The most sensible popular critique can be found in the 2008 web series *Elf Leila wa Leila* (Thousand and One Nights) by Tarik Mekki. The title was in itself was already a blow to the regime, as the name 'Leila' was barred from public broadcasting by the censors of the Ministry of Culture (Beau & Tuquoi 2011). Even the use of a 'trabelsi glass', a traditional tea glass, was not allowed (Mannone 2015). The message of *Elf Leila w Leila* was clear. The president would not have been aware of the state of corruption surrounding his presidential palace, as he was totally bewitched by his nefarious wife (Kraidy 2016). This sexist critique of power was common ground (Allal 2012). The spell allowed her and her family full play on the Tunisian market, resulting in huge amounts of profit. The sobriquet *Leila-djin* circulated thus not only in reference to the jeans she was proudly wearing to assume here role as feminist First Lady, but also to refer to her presupposed magical powers. The popular sexist prejudices also ultimately exonerates, or at least puts the responsibility of Ben Ali in perspective. The bad reputation of Leila as a derivative and outlet for popular discontent contributed paradoxically to the legitimating of the regime (Khiari 2004). Mocking Leila Ben Ali could nevertheless be understood as a strategic deviation, a way to attack the supposedly untouchable president.



Figure 26. La Rue, Faten Gaddes

The body politic related indirectly to the presidential imagery, not only through the image of his wife, but also through the reproduction of the icon of his self-proclaimed spiritual father, Habib Bourguiba (Ben M'Barek 2003). Evoking an ounce of the legacy of Bourguiba during "The Era of Change" was outlawed and nearly considered a form of treason. Both Bourguiba's word and image, the two foundations of his charisma, were banned (Kerrou 2016). This prohibition was peculiarly hard, as Bourguiba was doubly admired by the people (Lacouture, 1970). He was not only the face of a historical liberation movement, but also that of a sensitive, disarming, familiar father figure. As the 'pater familias', he instituted a direct and familiar bond, making elections almost redundant (Khiari & Lamloum 1998). From the moment Ben Ali took power, the seldom times Bourguiba was officially mentioned, he was instrumentalized to legitimize Ben Ali as "his son". This debourguibisation policy is driven by the will to symbolically kill "The Father of the Nation" (Saidi 2008). April 2000 can in this light be pointed as a turning point in the contemporary history of Tunisia (Khiari 2003). Not the death of the "Supreme Combatant" in itself, but the problematic way the regime dealt with his public funerals caused a general feeling of humiliation that de-legitimized the regime in place (Chouikha & Gobe 2015). During the funeral, the national "Tunis 7" TV station broadcasted a documentary about the life of sea snakes. The strong presence of police forces and the tightly orchestrated minimal ceremony prevented genuine collective moaning. The body of the former president was carried by a plane branded with the purple November 7 logo. As stated by Kilani (2000), the physical death of Bourguiba, resulted in the political death of Ben Ali. Thousands of students dared to defy the ban on demonstrations, took the streets and chanted 'By our soul and our blood, Bourguiba, we will avenge you' (Geisser 2000).

Different artists engaged with the image of the 'Father of the Nation' during the Ben Ali regime, defying the debourguibisation policy. The photograph of the de-located statue of Bourguiba in La Goulette, central in Faten Gaddès's series "La Rue" exposed at the Ammar Farhat art gallery in 2009, not only shows the regime's wish to eradicate the historical event of national return in 1955 that the statue represents (Triki 2012), it also sensibly illustrates the ongoing process of irreverent demarcation.²⁰ The image of a bronze Bourguiba sitting on the back of his horse, apparently standing on the dilapidated and nearly collapsing construction site in La Goulette instead of the marble pedestal,



Figure 27. Bassem Jelali

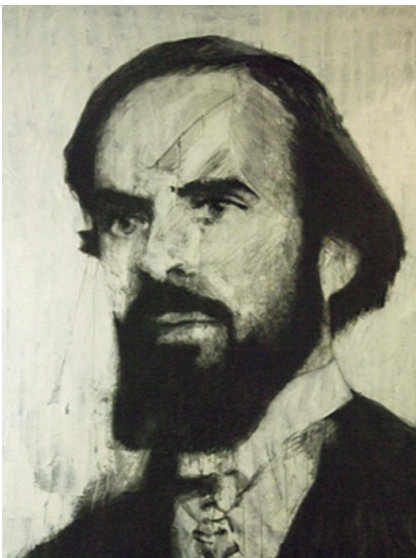


Figure 28. Mehdi Bouanani



Figure 29. Wassim Ghoslani

21. Interview with artist Wassim Ghoslani.

22. Interview with artist Selim Tlili.

23. Interview with activist Fide Hamami.

is also testimony to the expropriation of some long-time residents of what was once known as Tunisia's Little Sicily for the benefit of lucrative real estate projects closely connected to the regime. The graffiti stencil of Wassim Ghoslani (2002), the Warholian screenprints of Bassem Jelali, the speed-painting of Selim Tlili (2010) or the painting of Mehdi Bouanani (2010) all show the dissidence engrained in the reproduction of Bourguiba's portrait during the "Era of change".^{21 22} Mehdi Bouanani painted different portraits of Bourguiba together with the portraits of other world leaders, such as the overthrown Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. When he was invited to exhibit in a Tunisian art gallery in 2010, he was refused entry by the customs and his exhibition was canceled.

The biggest taboo was to mention the name of the one who personalizes the regime as a whole, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali himself. However, in the years leading up to the revolution, different terms of endearment came to the surface. After a fourth presidential term was secured through the performance of a constitutional referendum in 2002, the appropriate nickname 'Ben à Vie' was introduced (Ben Brik 2003). Ben Ali never finished high school, but nevertheless succeeded in becoming General Director of National Security during Bourguiba, hence the surname 'Le général bac moins trois' (Beau & Tuquoi 2011). Ben Ali Baba (and his forty thieves) was another running moniker, referring to the renowned orientalist tale of Arabian Nights (Sadiki 2010). The most popular sobriquet was the acronym Z.A.B.A. often used by dissidents, such as blogger Zouheil Yahyaoui, who used it consequently on his 'TUNeZINE site' and alluding to the commonly used epithet "Zebbi!", Arabic slang for 'Dick!' (Meddeb 2013).

Tunisians were not only creative in finding terms of endearment for the president, but also in diverting the meaning of his ubiquitous portrait. Especially body language opened a space for whispered mockery by a growing part of society. As Ben Ali was usually depicted with one hand on his chest pocket, the inescapable image that was supposed to instill trust came to be a signifier of widespread bribery. Another reading, warned the people they better obey if they did not want to end in his pocket. A different portrait depicting the president with folded hands to symbolize honesty and solidarity was also read as a warning not to be crushed between presidential hands.²³ The slogans accompanying the portrait were also commonly diverted. "Ma3an Ma3a Ben Ali" (Everyone together with Ben Ali), the slogan of

the latest electoral campaign was diverted to “Mahma Ben Ali”, i.e. “Ben Ali, whatever it takes”. As soon as the intelligence service picked up the subversion the propaganda machine changed the slogan to the less ambiguous “Kulu Ma3a Ben Ali”, everyone with Ben Ali. ²⁴ The slogan “Ben Ali ila al-abad” (Ben Ali forever), was the baseline of what a group of young men in Gafsa baptized as their daily meeting spot the “Bar of subversion” (Allal 2012:835). They ironically used the English translation “Forever Ben Ali” and nicknamed their own gang Jama‘at Forever BA (The Forever Ben Ali Band).

24. Interview with designer
Hamadi Bousselmi.

Coercive networks of censorship prevented public subversion of the presidential portrait. However, Sami Ben Gharbia (2009) had the courage to post a daring picture on the Nawaat website depicting the face of Ben Ali mounted on the brawny torso of a body builder to illustrate the power needed to achieve a monster score like 89% during the elections. The same year visual artist Samir M'kadmi installed a multi-screen video installation entitled ‘Liberating the Multi-Voiced Bodies’ in the frame of a street-level window in Oslo, confronting passers-by with the graphic erasure of Ben Ali’s face. Starting from the slow but premonitory process of defacement, the work quite directly questioned the tenacity of the Tunisian regime and the steadfastness of the image of its authoritarian ruler. Finally, the theater performance *Yahia Yaïch* (Amnesia) by Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi that premiered in the center of Tunis April, 2 2010 is generally considered a visionary performance (Ruocco, 2013; Amin, 2013; Zahrouni, 2013). The powerful performance revolves around the almost suicidal way the head of state, named “Yahia Yaïch”, deals with his abrupt resignation. Notwithstanding it enacted more a top-down coup rather than a bottom up revolt, the performance anticipated a fundamental power shift through a meaningful subversion of the character of the powerful leading figure.

6/ THE NEXT BATTLE?

When analyzing revolt in Tunisia through the reconstruction of the ambiguous and relational dynamics of symbolic disciplinary power and beyond the prevailing regime and state focus in most academic literature, the subversive, prospective and premonitory agency of the informal cultural and artistic spheres becomes discernable. Certainly since April 2000, after the physical death of Bourguiba and the ensuing ‘political death of

Ben Ali', the regime started losing its legitimacy, the revolution became increasingly sensible through the molecular accumulation of creative dissent, that turned against itself the power subsumed in the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime. As the cult and its spectacle symbolically mediated the exceptional façade the 'Tunisian fiction' made up by an entangled web of mythologies, the inflation of these creative diversions or reappropriations rendered visible the contrast between the intended regime representations and the ways in which these representations were received, interpreted and reinterpreted. It enforced an irreversible separation between the official discourse and daily reality and by doing so broadened the gap between hidden and public transcript that in hindsight exactly indicated where and how resistance to the regime was taking place. Not only tech-savvy youth dared to take a subtle stance against the regime and its ambiguous symbolic power relations, some of the last productions of the New Tunisian Cinema and the New Theater of Tunis and the Contemporary Art field were to a certain extent premonitory of the Tunisian Revolution.

By reconstructing the prehistory of creative dissent, we did not aim to reframe the revolutionary process as an unavoidable historical event, but hope to point to the constructive role the ambiguity of symbolic disciplinary power plays in processes of resistance in authoritarian contexts. The retrospective genealogy of creative dissent made intelligible how the symbolic disciplinary power was subverted by the diversion or reappropriation of the three central elements of Ben Ali's personality cult in numerous sensible ways. The use of the Phoenician Purple or the reference to November 7 was no longer only a formal way to show adherence and allegiance to the regime, it was also extensively used by novelists, singers, filmmakers, theater directors, cartoonists and contemporary artists to signify critical dissent. Less widespread was the diversion or reappropriation of the eventually confident classic presidential portrait. As naming the one who personalizes the whole political system was often too challenging, indirect strategies to subvert symbolic power were found by relating to the First Lady and by harking back to the imagery of the first president of independent Tunisia. However, closed structures of censorship prevented the visual subversion of the presidential portrait, some eventually dared to divert the very face of the authoritarian regime whether online or on stage of the municipal theater.

This seditious premonitory subversion grew into a generalized practice as it emerged in full daylight during the first liberation phase of the revolution as an important mediator of the fundamental changes the country was lifting itself through. The molecular accumulation of these subversive interventions during the 2000's, was only fully completed, when the personality cult together with the 'Tunisian Miracle' it represented, was torn apart. The previously obfuscated reality of economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation of traditional morals and religious references was exposed to the whole of society. The violent and apparently 'sudden' collapse of the official imagery and the following laceration of the body politic in place, created a moment for the oppressed repercussion of state oppression to vehemently emerge. This spontaneous iconoclastic chain of subversion produced new ways of seeing the political, until, historical ideological formations were again staged against each other, paving the way for a certain restoration of the old regime . Under the presidency of Beji Caid Essebsi, the regime tried – as already envisioned in his 2009 book "Habib Bourguiba: the wheat and the chaff" – to rehabilitate its historic neo-destourian legacy, by reintroducing the symbolic power subsumed in the image of the 'Father of the Nation.' Despite the fact that society is still deeply affected by deep generational, regional and religious divides, a non-negligible part of the activist and artistic sphere did not lose its revolutionary core and is now actively challenging the ongoing symbolic process of re-bourguibisation, maybe again sensing the next battle coming.

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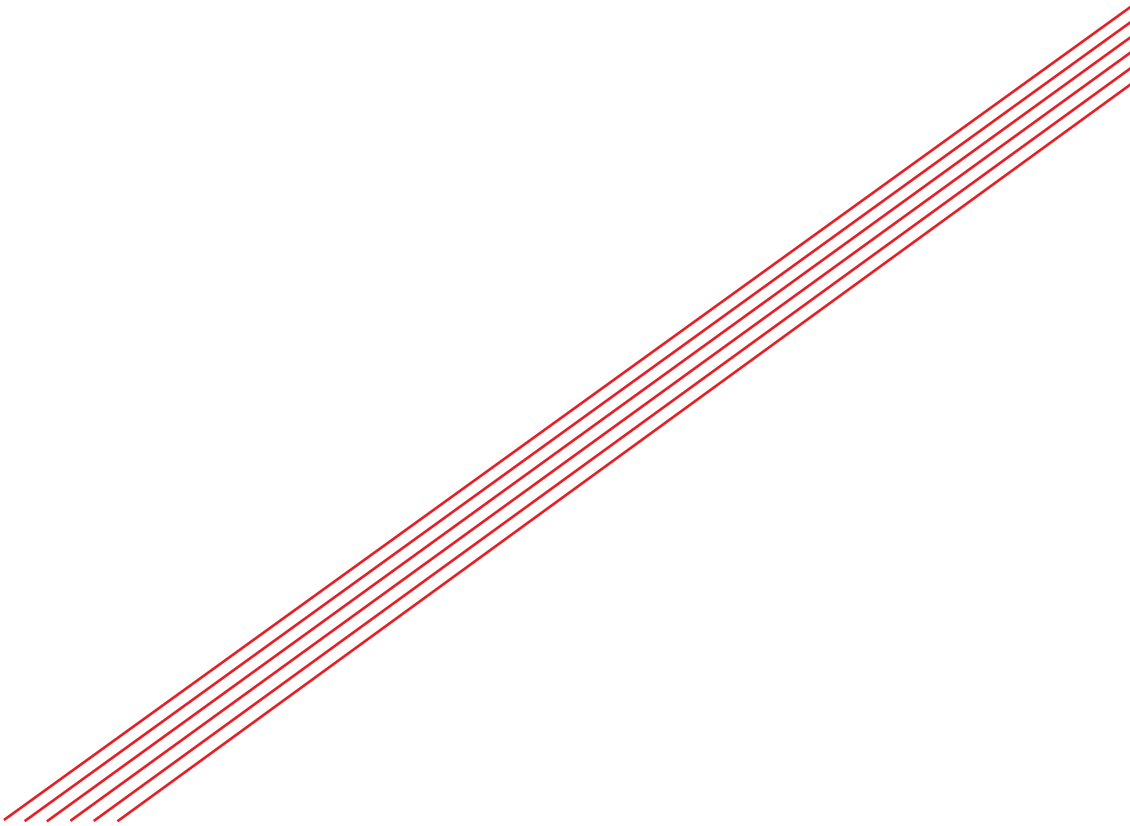
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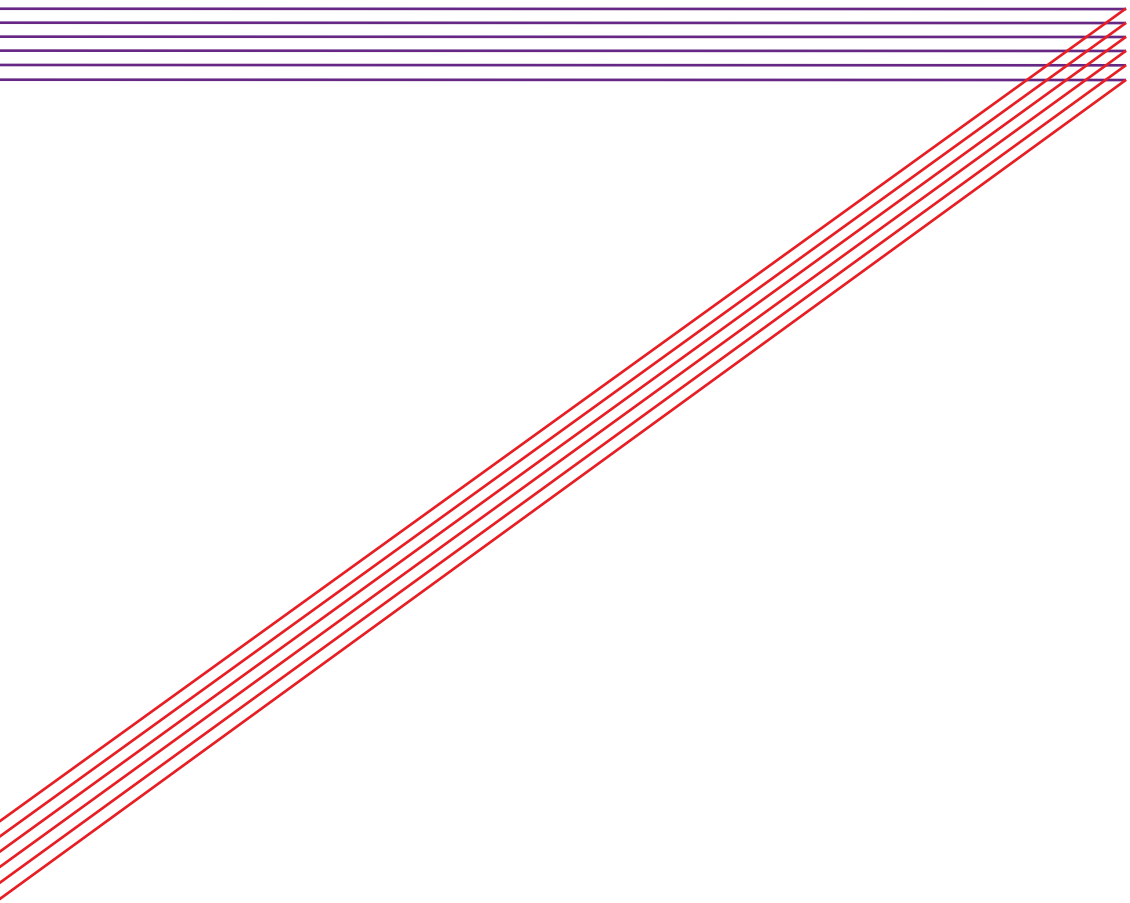
Chapter 2



TURNING A CITY INSIDE-OUT

Urban and aesthetic processes of
revolt in Tunisia





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/ Currently still under review.

TURNING A CITY INSIDE-OUT

In order to build his private palace on the hilltop overlooking the Mediterranean in Sidi Dhrif in the Northern suburb of the capital, the former Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had to remove the tomb of the Sufi saint Hmida Bennour. The outrage of the local population in the face of this sacrilegious act translated into a myth that resonates until today. Local legend says Hmida Bennour haunted Ben Ali's dreams, threatening to eject him from power, just as the president had ejected the saint from his mausoleum. The truth behind the myth remains opaque, but the guards of the palace witnessed kilos of incense consumed and a sheep sacrificed every day during the time the presidential family still lived in the palace, hinting at a strong superstition at the highest top of the regime. In the summer of 2010, the palace was tagged by activists with '26-26', referring to the postal account number of the 'National Solidarity Fund' which officially claimed to invest in developing in the marginalized regions, but behind which in fact the regime hid its corruption. ²⁵ Furthermore, contrary to the other prestigious villas comprising the monumental state architecture of the regime, the bombastic and excessively luxurious palace of Sidi Dhrif - hiding several million dollars in cash and fine jewelry - was neither looted nor diverted by the revolutionary movement. Leïla Abid, the magistrate in charge of the confiscated private property of regime members after the revolution, struggled in vain to establish the palace as a public museum. ²⁶

In what follows, I will make intelligible the proposal of Judge Abid to transform the presidential palace into a public museum, as it speaks to the spirit of revolt that succeeded in ousting a well seated authoritarian after 23 years of rule. The role of space and place in affecting societal change is considered in detail. Engaging with urban space as an ambiguous instrument of both political control and resistance, I will redefine revolt as a violent but aesthetic process of diversion or reappropriation that contests territorialized sovereign power. Frantz Fanon's (1961) analysis

25. Interview with artist Karoui,
Selima.
26. Interview with judge Abid,
Leïla.

of the spatial dynamics of decolonization in the context of the Algerian struggle for independence serves as a point of departure, not only for analyzing the spatial and aesthetic dynamics of revolt, but also for sharpening Henri Lefebvre's (1991) implicit critique on the situationist process of diversion (*détournement*) or re-appropriation in the production of space. In this way, the analysis in this chapter will complement the academic attention given to the occupation of the square with its often overlooked preliminary and violent processes of destruction and diversion or reappropriation. Both the processes of occupation and their initial destruction and diversion will be scrutinized as visual, sensible and thus heuristic operations that momentarily punctured normative ways of seeing and feeling. Yet any analysis which discusses the occupation of places such as Bourguiba Avenue or Kasbah Square, would be incomplete without also considering a second often overlooked aspect of the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt, the occupation of the mosque and the following grass-roots Islamist activism, further contesting and occupying public space. In the hope to invigorate the scholarly endeavor to "capture the pulse of the street" (Lipietz & de Souza 2012: 357), I will argue that, altogether the movements of revolt did not succeed to consolidate the production of new spaces the body politic brought into being, that could safeguard the dignity it was aspiring for. To understand the tenacity of the structuration of space and the consequent difficulty to sustainably divert or reappropriate territorialized sovereign power and thus to produce new spaces, it will be necessary to first consider the recent movements of revolt through a long-term historical lens. I will thus contend that the recent movement of revolt began with the liberation struggle, when the body politic contested the colonial compartmentalization of urban space (Fanon 1961) as this compartmentalization endured and transformed into a geography of fragmentation (Kanna 2012).

1/ THE SPATIALIZATION OF SOVEREIGN POWER

From a colonial perspective, as convincingly argued by Mbembe (2003: 25-26), space can be defined as "the raw material of sovereignty" as sovereignty coincided with territorial occupation and was thus "a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area - of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations". Through the

processes of territorialization new zones were hierarchically delineated, existing property plans were altered and resources extracted from the colony. People were classified and categorized and a large reservoir of imaginaries was produced that legitimized the differentiation of rights within the same space. In short “sovereignty meant occupation, occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood”. The colonial world, Fanon (1961) further argued, is a motionless essentializing world divided into compartments. It reduces space through a Manicheist division in two mutual exclusive zones: the spacious zone of the colonizer is forcefully and violently separated and opposed to the claustrophobic zone of the native. The colonized is hemmed in, immobilized in its own zone. The spatial dynamics of compartmentalization further delimits the city against the medina and the countryside. Fanon thus underlines the process of colonization as a spatial organization of immobilizing separation and static confinement (if not a form of imprisonment) that permanently keeps the colonized in place by not only generating visible coercive relations but also by embedding the resulting spatial relations in daily practices, bodily and affective experiences and representations (Kipfer 2007).

Far from being liberated during the struggle for independence in the first half of the 20th century, the colonial compartmentalization of urban space endured and transformed into a “geography of fragmentation” (Kanna 2012: 364). This fragmented spatial reality is materially inscribed in the urban fabric and part and parcel of the visual apparatus of state power and thus strongly invested in neoliberal capitalism. In Tunisia, the compartmentalization or fragmentation of space articulated into the separation between the ‘New City’ and the ‘Indigenous City’, but also between the city center and its peripheries (Ben Amor 2015). On a national scale, in continuity with the colonial logic of governing and to further develop and command the hinterlands, the successive post-colonial governments have constantly redrawn the map of the territory’s administrative compartmentalization, creating and recreating new governorates, municipalities and delegations (Belhedi in Salman 2017). These fragmenting logics of governing resulted in a division between wealthy northern coastal regions and damned interior south-western regions (Moudoud 1985). This division can be considered as one of the main causes of the recent revolution (Ayebe 2001) that until today pushes unanswered demands not only for decentralization, but also for territorial justice (Yousfi 2017) and reparations (Salman 2017).

What interests us here is the post-colonial turn towards an urbanism of control through forms of sovereign city planning (Mariana Valverde in Bogaert 2018) that rely on territorial techniques of power, not only to supervise the city and govern, but also to contain riots and subjugate dissent. I will thus go deeper into the spatial mechanisms of glorification of sovereign power by engaging with the way the monumental state architecture of the Ben Ali regime engendered loyalty and facilitated obedience. Cities and their symbolic markers are restructured not only as a representational endeavor to mark the country's full adherence to modernity but also to turn the city into a more governable space, by controlling its users and reducing their capacity to mobilize and resist (Bogaert 2018).

Tunis, as the capital of Tunisia, is a rather recent construction (Giudice 2009; Binous 2011) and a fine example of what Lefebvre (1991) would call dominated and appropriated space. The "New City" was constructed by the French next to the "Indigenous City", on the swampy area between the relocated 'Sea Gate' and the Lake of Tunis. It was constructed in the latter half of the 19th century as a new center of power, around the first monument to be erected outside the medina, the French consulate later re-baptized as the 'General Residency'. What is now the 'Bourguiba Avenue' was initially conceived as the 'Navy Promenade', the focal point of colonial urbanization linking the lake with the Medina, around which the "New City" emerged. It developed into a three-lined arboreal artery, reminiscent of Haussmann's Paris 'Champs-Élysées', baptized 'Jules Ferry Avenue', after the French statesman and instigator of colonial expansion. It was originally built not only as a commercial and social center, but also a spectacular stage for military, religious and political events. It stands out as a showcase or a public vitrine for colonial power. The boulevard represented the values of the French 'civilizing mission' order, regularity and civilization in contrast to the winding alleys of the medina traditionally structured and revolving around the central Zeitouna Mosque. Haussmannian-style boulevards and public squares were drawn by colonial authorities with the finality of (military) control of rebellion, as a strategy to pacify and police indigenous urban populations in general and the nationalist movements in particular (Rabba 2012; Schwedler 2013; Sebastiani & Turki 2016).

Reclaimed during the national liberation struggle, the avenue was re-used as a space for the promotion of postcolonial power. Both the first president of independent Tunisia Habib

Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali highlighted the avenue for staged political events and to show off their civil and military powers. Throughout the years of independence, it transformed into a highly symbolic space of authoritarian control. The strategic installation of the RCD party (Democratic Constitutional Rally) headquarters, the looming building of the Ministry of the Interior, the indispensable information hall of the Ministry of Information and of course the omnipresent personality cult in the form of sculptures and portrait billboards made the avenue into a space of suspense. Moreover, the constant surveillance together with a dense police presence made any outcry of dissent or public gathering virtually impossible. The centrality of the Interior Ministry functioned as a powerful reminder of the threat of repression by the police state, evoking fear and indignation. The massive concrete modernist edifice was initially built in the first half of the twentieth century by the French as the central police station of the protectorate, with a large inner courtyard overlooking cells used to imprison and torture anti-colonial activists and protesters until today (Abdelkafi 2017).

During authoritarian times, urban space is homogenized, sealed and controlled by a compartmentalized or fragmented power dispositif. The lines of force it implies keep everyday movements in place. In the writings of Fanon (1961) three different symbolic markers of monumental state architecture can be distinguished that as spatial nodes of power hold these lines of force together: the police station, prestigious buildings and the presidential portraits and monuments. The police station, as one of the key spatial nodes, is imbued with an institutionalized intermediary function, that renders visible by its direct presence the oppressive and mutually exclusive separation and compartmentalization of urban space. Alongside the police station, the prosaic erection of prestigious and grandiose buildings in the urban centers function as another spatial node of territorialized sovereign power. For Fanon these buildings are spectacular impositions of a deteriorating state that lacks the economic means to ensure its domination over the whole country, that is, beyond these urban centers where the buildings are located. With the erection of monuments the centralized postcolonial regime hid its failure to bridge the spatial divisions between city and countryside, center and periphery as it turned its back to the interior regions. Finally, the postcolonial state stabilized and perpetuated its domination and capital accumulation by setting up mundane presidential portraits and sculptures, to emphasize the moral power of its sole leader.

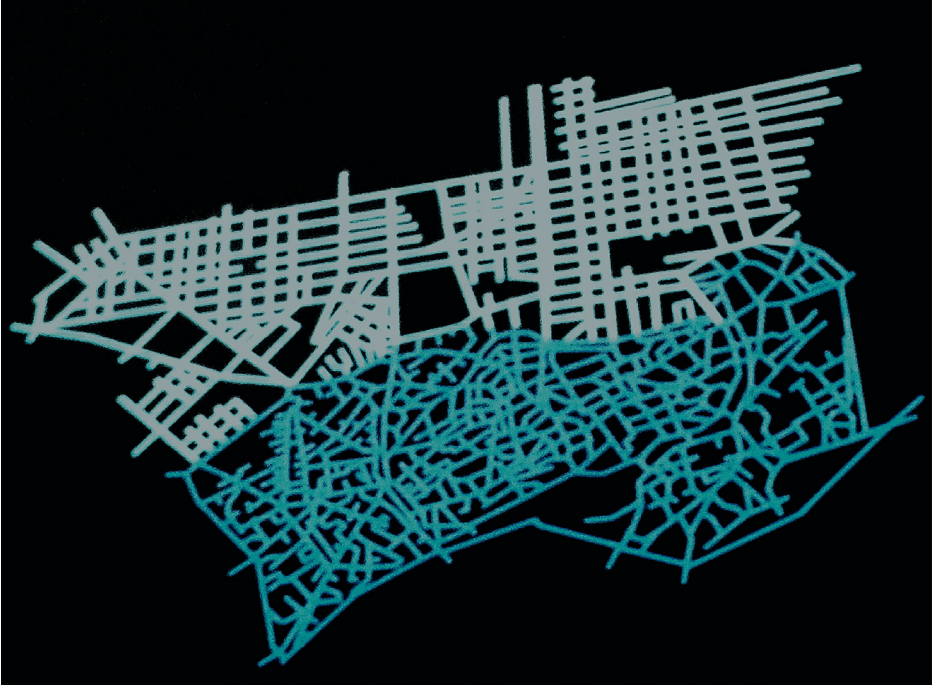


Figure 30. Ville Nouvelle versus Medina, Daniel E Coslett



Figure 31. Ministry of Interior, Wikipedia



Figure 32. City Hall Tunis, La Molte Photographique

The first upsurge of revolt succeeded in defying a firmly seated police state (Aleya-Sghaier 2012). When Ben Ali set Bourguiba aside in November 1987, he was serving as a general in the police force, a power base he consolidated and expanded during his 23 years as president, at the expense of the army. Relying on internal security and intelligence services as a power base and instrument for suppressing dissent, a regime of police surveillance was further implemented, centralized in the Ministry of the Interior and supported by the party in power. It should in this light be noted that the basic structure of the police state was already introduced long before Ben Ali, during the French colonial period and further elaborated after independence by Bourguiba. The structures of internal security with a dual police system at the national level, coordinating the police and the gendarmerie follows the structure of the French internal security model. This model facilitated an exceptional centrality of the Ministry of Interior, controlling both the police and the gendarmerie in addition to the Presidential Guard, monopolizing the country's internal security forces (Lutterbeck 2015).

One of the most prestigious and grand buildings of the country is the City Hall of Tunis, situated on Kasbah Square next to the Medina. The Kasbah is a highly symbolic space surrounded by most central institutions and government ministries. This square has historically been the place of political, military and administrative power since its foundation by the Aghlabids in the ninth century, and consolidated with the Hafsid Sultanate in the 13th century. Destroyed by the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, the fortress was partly rebuilt by the Ottomans – only to be replaced by a military casern by the French. The remaining ruins of the original Hafsid Kasbah were demolished during the construction of an underground parking, underneath Habib Bourguiba's newly built personal palace (Abdelkafi 2017). First conceived of as a governmental center, but later rebuilt as the monument of Bourguiba's single party, the Socialist Destourian Party, it was transformed into the capital's city hall by the Ben Ali regime in 1998, a function that remains until today. The architectural composition of the building – and more precisely its central balcony – refers to the iconic image of the “Supreme Combatant” cheering the crowd in the aftermath of independence in the same place. Ben Ali only added a crumbed sculpture made out of exactly *seven* pillars surrounded with national flagpoles in the middle of the square, neatly spoiling the panoramic view of the balcony. Apart from this series of prestigious public buildings,

the regime showed off its wealth with luxurious private property scattered in the Northern suburbs of the capital, the most famous of which being the personal palace of the president on the hill of Sidi Dhrif. The family of the First Lady, Leila Trabelsi was known for grabbing any land in their reach to build bombastic villas. The confusion between property development plans and private business strategies made most urban projects more than questionable.

Urban restructuring facilitates the multiplication of monumental state architecture and is instrumental to enhance the visibility of territorial power and thus to give a face to the state (Bogaert 2018). This also happens quite literally, when taking into consideration the three central elements of the presidential personality cult: Ben Ali's omnipresent state portrait, the innumerable numerical sculptures referring to the date of "the historical change" that occurred on November 7, 1987 and the monochromatic purple tone of allegiance (see Chomiak 2013). The internalized gaze of authoritarian rule, through the ambiguous reproduction of the numerological and monochromatic personality cult, not only saturated urban space with the all-seeing eye of the regime, it subjected the body politic through a constant reminder of expected obedience (Wedeen 1999; Hibou 2006; Tripp 2015). Even in private space people refrained to share their political views, as the walls were always listening. Through this symbolic domination, the city's boulevards and squares were no longer public spaces, but rather regime showcases instrumentalized for the production of disciplined subjects, projecting the image of an all-seeing regime. When disassembling the different strata of the palimpsest structure of this remarkable personality cult, we find in its roots the colonial compartmentalization, symbolically crisscrossing and punctuating the city in a powerful way (see chapter 3, for a more detail account).

2/ AN HEURISTIC ENCLAVE OF AN-OTHER ORDER

When analyzing processes of revolt, space and place have been of central importance (de Souza & Lipietz 2011, Harb 2017). The dimensions of space and place cannot be reduced to the mere backdrop of profound societal changes. The historically built material and built environment plays a determining and productive role in ongoing political dynamics. In the authoritarian context prior to the 2011 revolution, urban space was continually

under surveillance and instrumentalized as a platform for official state representation. As the configuration of space is one of the main instruments of authoritarian power, space is also an important dimension of resistance, if not its very condition of possibility (Allal 2012). The way authoritarian dynamics shape certain places thus also determines the way different groups navigate, negotiate, re-appropriate and transform these places to facilitate political resistance. What interests me here is the analysis of these places through which power struggles are articulated and thus the relation of power to material space and resistance.

When places with a high concentration of power, such as Bourguiba Avenue or Kasbah square, are occupied, they transform into meaningful places of dissent. These occupations can be discerned as a form of micro-politics that redefine not only the placeness of the occupied square or avenue but also the distinctive ethical relations and value system it represents. They can transform a place into “an enclave of another order” (Ramadan 2013:146). As these processes of redefinition radiate outside the occupied places through different mediations, the mere presence of previously damned subjectivities in the centre of these occupied places have the potential to puncture state sovereignty. Therefore, considering the occupation of places such as the Kasbah square as a microcosm of the larger society can offer insights into the transforming subjectivities, the outline of possible political orders that the revolution prescribes (Abourahme & Jayyusi 2011; Sadiki 2012; Saidi 2014; Tripp 2015).

The process of revolt transformed the squares and avenues into heuristic enclaves of another order. As the physical characteristics of space intersect with their representation (Schwedler 2013), the dynamics of occupation are not merely physical, but also visual and sensible operations (Mitchell 2012). The ebb and flow of aesthetic practices claiming and reclaiming ideological marked territory emphasize the dynamic character of revolt (Abaza 2013). As urban space is constantly transformed through the interaction with its physical, social and aesthetic elements, the diversion or reappropriation of these urban places has the power to generate new meaning and to render visible political and social demands. The places that are occupied not only open up physically, but also become heuristic spaces that can produce knowledge about ongoing historical transformations (Sassen 2011). They transform into spaces where the powerless can make history through a re-invention of the political. When

analyzing the spatial dimension of revolt, however, four pitfalls can be distinguished. One of the main mediators that helped transmit revolutionary processes outside the surroundings of newly freed places was social media. The internet can not only be regarded as a medium but also as an important space of dissidence, a cyberspace mediating content and facilitating the formation of public political spheres (Aouragh 2012). However, the over-emphasized role of social media as *the* space of revolt not only tends to de-politicize and de-historicize our analysis, it also minimizes the territorial placeness of revolt (Tawil-Souri 2012). Research should thus take into account the reciprocal entanglement between virtual cyberspace and physical public space (Gregory 2013). Secondly, analysis of the spatial dimensions of revolution is often restricted to capital cities (Schwedler 2013; Schriwer 2014; Zemni 2017). The division between urban centers and towns, but also between affluent and poorer neighborhoods is easily overlooked. Scholars repeatedly overlook the momentum of the initial revolt, which to a large extent had already succeeded outside the capital, in smaller cities such as Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine or Thala. A third pitfall that constrains research lies in the analysis of the instantaneous occupation of public squares. The mesmerizing occupation of these squares as an effective strategy fomented abundant research on the role of these squares in contentious dynamics, overlooking the spatial processes outside these enthralling occupations. It is therefore not only necessary to historicize our analysis of these occupied places, but also to enlarge our analysis to different aspects of the urban fabric and indeed go beyond the square (Sharp & Panetta 2016). Finally, even though both the square and the mosque played an essential role in the coming about of movements of revolt (Rabbat 2012), most scholarly attention is given to the square, dismissing the re-appropriation of the mosque as a political public space that converged with the square. Leaving out the revived mosque and the role it played in tandem with the square also entails an omission of the role of the religious sphere in re-inventing the political.

Taking into account these for pitfalls, I distinguish two important obstacles when considering analytically the relation between the aesthetic practices in the recent movements of revolt and urban space. First and foremost, peaceful occupation is often overemphasized, at the expense of its fundamental precondition, namely the violent destruction of spatial nodes of power that kept the structure of urban space in place. These violent and destructive gestures were not only instrumental to the

intensification of the ongoing protest, they disrupted the power imbued in the targeted state symbols. The body politic indeed produced a new public sphere (Zemni 2017), turning the message of protection/surveillance against itself (Tripp 2016), generating new ways of seeing and feeling (Abaza 2013). But the destruction of police stations, the defacement of the omnipresent state portrait, the obliteration of public sculptures and the destruction of luxurious private villas of regime members, always preceded these processes of occupation and diversion or reappropriation that altered the distribution of the visible. Secondly, whereas during the liberation phase monumental state architecture was spontaneously disrupted, occupied and diverted, during the following constitutional phase, the spatial contention continued, but now motivated by various new Islamist ideologies. By contrast this spatial contention did not target monumental state architecture. In addition to the further occupation of central public spaces such as the Bourguiba Avenue or the Kasbah Square, violent and physical attention was directed to urban spaces that hosted aesthetic practices that directly challenged a certain interpretation of the sacred. Furthermore, even Islamic spaces of worship such as mausolea were beleaguered, making this new form of activism increased in visibility. The lack of public support for the continuation of spatial contestation by Islamist activist, widened the ideological discord between Islamism and Modernism and paved the way for a reconfigured old regime to regain control over public space.

3/ **URBAN AND AESTHETIC PROCESSES OF REVOLT**

Drawing on the insights of Lefebvre's book 'The production of space' (1991), Ahmed Kanna (2012) underlines the revolutionary potential of urban space, as it can be utilized to govern and shape structural relations, as much as it can be mobilized by revolutionary energy. Kanna (2012: 364-365) aptly argues that the revolutionary experience or urban processes of revolt can be interpreted as the refutation of the prevailing "geography of fragmentation". According to Fanon (1961) the examination of the ordering and geographical layout of a given place is essential, as it not only draws the lines of force and domination but also those on which a liberated society will be reorganized. In the words of Fanon (1961: 37-38): "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. Yet, if we examine closely this

system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized." Decolonization is thus a socio-spatial strategy that transgresses colonial and postcolonial boundaries; It lays claim to the city and thus re-appropriates and transforms urban spatial relations. For Fanon, this strategy of decolonization moreover implies a fundamental transformation of urban space that rests on counter-hegemonic alliances between the urban and the rural, the city and the countryside, the peasants and the urban dwellers and thus enforces a decentralization from the centers to the peripheries (Kipfer 2007).

Contrary to what Lefebvre (1991) assumes, existing spaces do not outlive their original purpose by themselves, nor do spaces become vacant or susceptible of being diverted by themselves. The fundamental precondition for the diversion or reappropriation of urban space is the violent disruption of spatial nodes that keep sovereign power in place. The violence by which sovereign power is territorialized, is claimed and spontaneously re-directed to the places that delineate the geography of compartmentalization or fragmentation. As stated by Fanon (1961:40): "The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world [...] will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he [sic] surges into the forbidden quarters." The fierce disruption of these strategic places and symbolic markers is not the consequence of the implementation of an explicit strategy but the result of a collective cathartic release that engenders a spontaneous transgression (Petti, Hilal & Weizman 2013). Again, in the words of Fanon (1961: 40-41): "To wreck the colonial world is henceforward a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitute the colonized people." Confronted with these spontaneously liberated places Petti, Hilal & Weizman (2013) distinguish three clear-cut options for the mobilized body politic. Torn between the contradictory desires of complete destruction and re-use, the third option of subversion emerges. For Fanon (1961: 35) however, the first option was the only viable option, the prerequisite of "tabula rasa" being the minimum demand of every fundamental liberation process that changes the whole social structure from bottom up. A second, but diametrically opposite option, lies in the re-use of the liberated space. The restoration

of its initial purpose re-news the original colonial functions and reproduces the previously contested hierarchies and power structures. The third option that emerges from the above dilemma is the subversion of the originally intended function, repurposing it for other ends. The subversion of an evacuated place does not take place to eliminate its power, but rather to redirect its destructive potential towards the fulfilment of other aims.

This last option of subversion strongly resonates with Lefebvre's (1991:167) spatial and critical reading of the situationist concept of "détournement", diversion or re-appropriation, that he contrasted with the idea of appropriation and domination of space, as "a non- negotiable part of any revolutionary agenda". When diverted, the original purpose which determined the forms, functions and structures of an existing space are put to a use in a fundamentally different way. However, Lefebvre (168) underlines the limited productive aspect of diversion, he warns us that diversion is in itself often merely appropriation, not creation – "a re-appropriation which can call but a temporary halt to domination." It is thus necessary to see the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt as a continuous effort. Re-appropriation does not automatically lead to the production of space. It is a precarious accomplishment, easily challenged by further violence. Through the re-appropriation of space existing hegemonic structures and what they represent are blasted, but "what is left or reterritorialized is not necessarily bereft of repressive power. New and old regimes alike seek to (re)gain control over such spaces" (Schweddler 2013: 232).

3/1 VIOLENT DIVERSION OR REAPPROPRIATION

On January 14, 2011 nationwide protests converged towards the Bourguiba Avenue in front the Ministry of Interior, next to November 7 square, demanding the departure of Ben Ali. The spatial concentration of political power on the avenue made it the perfect space for resistance (Chomiak 2013, Tripp 2016). Rallying in front of "the heart of a heartless regime" (Allal 2012: 831) expressed a radical rejection of its entire power structure, especially its police-state and the will to re-appropriate the country as a whole. Fear changed sides. Nonetheless confined with barbed wire concentrated around the French Embassy and the Ministry of Interior, the Avenue transformed into a real agora, re-animated by demonstrations but also by staged events, rallies,

artistic interventions and performances. One of the first unanswered demands after the president fled was the removal of the Ministry of Interior from the Avenue.

During the last decade of authoritarian rule, the Avenue was slowly being reinvested as a site of protest and the monochromatic numerological personality cult was increasingly subjected to subtle forms of popular but also artistic derisions. Domination was not total, there were fissures in the dispositif where power escaped and could be diverted. While police retreated from public space and protests continued, public buildings, such as police stations, prisons, financial state institutions, municipalities, tribunals and party cells together with their respective archives, were deliberately ransacked and put on fire. The personality cult that crisscrossed public space was spontaneously dismantled and the private property of fraudulent regime members looted and diverted. The expansion and systematization of attacks on spatial power symbols brought about the unexpected, rapid but partial collapse of the authoritarian state (Hmed 2016), making the insistence on “non-sovereignty [...] renouncing the face and figure of the charismatic leader in favor of the face in and of the crowd” a key ideological feature of the initial revolt (Mitchell 2012:9).

Under Ben Ali, the relation between the police and the youth was always tense in the margins, where unemployment, drug addiction and the dream to escape was (and remains) a shared condition. Battles with the police were nothing new. Ultra-groups physically fought with police in the confined space of the stadium (Aleya-Sghaier 2012; Chomiak 2013). The anti-police acronym “A.C.A.B.” was already trending as a quick tag on peripheral walls. It is no surprise that the first clashes with the police occurred a day after Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Sidi-Bouزيد. The first but certainly not the last police station that was burned down was the police station of Mensel Bouzeian ²⁷. The clash with the police-state originated in Sidi Bouزيد, but quickly spread to neighboring municipalities and cities, first to the west, especially to Kasserine, and then to the south, around Gafsa, to continue its route to the northern and southern cities before spreading to Sfax, the coastal cities in the Sahel to finally arrive at the capital. The mediation of police brutalities, including the deliberate killing of around 300 protesters, only reinforced the confrontation. Prisons were set on fire causing asphyxiation and provoking deadly riots, but also enabling the evasion of thousands of prisoners. ²⁸ In Thala, one of the damned towns

27. Interview with activist
Bilbri, Myriam.

28. Interview with artist Ammar,
Héla.

29. Interview with artist Nidhal Chamekh.

30. Interview with artist Bouagila Oussama.

31. Interview with activist Bribri Myriam.

32. Interview with artist Bouali Hamdeddine.

33. Interview with artist Driss Hicham and artist Ammar Hela.

that endured the most severe police brutalities, Nemri Bassem occupied the first floor of the burned down police station. Already unemployed since 2004, he would not leave until his right to work was fulfilled. The burnt walls were embellished with slogans and poetry in red and black. The main slogan is an excerpt from a poem of the pre-islamic Arab poet Antar Ibn Chaddad ²⁹ : “I prefer to be offered the water of death while standing up right, then the water of life while standing on my knees.” An altar was installed to commemorate comrade martyrs. The police station transformed into a community space, a breeding ground for local artistic expression and revolutionary action. ³⁰ It was finally re-baptised “House of the Martyrs”. ³¹

It was only after January 10th, after a video went viral featuring youngsters destroying a portrait of Ben Ali in Hammamet, that a nationwide movement took off (Chomiak 2013). Any element of the numerological personality cult referring to November 7, whether in the form of street names or in sculptures on roundabouts was annihilated. Portraits were massively diverted and ostentatiously torn and burned, often in front of a camera to later be shared on (social) media. Proposing any portrait as an alternative was generally dismissed. ³² Nobody could be elevated as the leader of the ongoing revolution, except the martyrs, Bouazizi in the first place. The singular image of the autocrat was replaced by that of the people (Khatib 2013). The body politic drew strength from the visual performance of beheading, as it cleared urban space from the image of surveillance. As an answer to 'Inside Out', a global call for projects by the street artist JR, 'Artocracy in Tunisia', seven photographers traveled to make portraits of random people. The black and white portraits were then pasted in strategic places: on the façade of the burned out RCD office in El Kram, inside the rubble of the plundered police station at La Goulette, on the façade of the RCD headquarter in Sfax, on 5 juxtaposed burnt police cars in a vacant lot in Sidi Bouzid or in the exact spot where moments before a presidential portrait had been forcibly removed alongside the highway Tunis-La Goulette. ³³

Private properties of key fraudulent figures of the regime were plundered, ransacked and burned down. Dozens suddenly abandoned villas of the extended Trabelsi family in the bourgeois suburbs of Tunis, Hammamet and Sousse were targeted as they symbolized wealth, monopolization and state corruption. The sacked villa of Houssein Trabelsi on the heights of Gammarth was the most frequented by artists. The creative



Figure 33. House of the Martyrs, Christinne Moderbacher



Figure 34. Mr Le Président, Nawaat/Splet

process of diversion or reappropriation began in April 2011 with 'Love, glory and beauty' a graffiti by Electro Jay and Selim Tlili, literally depicting the former *head* of state being kicked away as a football. The trashed villa was quickly invested by other artists and collectives, as it was renamed 'The house of the revolution'. The swimming pool was reinvested as a skate bowl by 'The Bedouins', a Middle-Eastern skateboard collective. Different activist and artists collectives mobilized in vain to demand the preservation of re-appropriated place and its transformation into a museum.³⁴ Together with the villas, their luxurious cars went up in smoke, sometimes to be diverted into hopeful sculptures. Dozens of cars were daily collected one by one from the port of La Goulette, only to be battered, burnt, and dumped on a vacant lot on the border between the posh Byrsa and the more popular Kram neighborhood. Faten Rouissi (2011) rallied as many people as possible around her happening 'Street Art in the Neighborhood' to reinvest the mass grave of charred carcasses artistically. The parcel, once an expropriated ground for one of the many real estate projects of Sakher El Materi, the son-in-law of the president, was re-appropriated into a public stage and communal public space where the neighborhood could celebrate the ongoing process of liberation.³⁵

As soon as a government of "National Unity" was proclaimed, people regained the streets. Demands to completely overthrow the government were pushed by damned youth travelling with the 'Liberation Caravan' from Menzel Bouzaïane to the capital. The convoy mobilized under way to finally occupy Government Square, where the Prime Minister and his government held office. The highly centralized state administration around the Kasbah Square, made it the perfect site for deepening popular demands (Tripp 2015). The metal barriers erected by the army to protect the entrance to the Prime Ministry were diverted into structures for makeshift tents to improvise an encampment.³⁶ The balconies of the Ministry of Finance - re-baptized 'The People's Ministry' - were diverted into shelters (Hmed 2011, 2016). The occupation was an extraordinary movement bridging divisions between geographical difference, social groups, classes and movements (Zemni 2017). It was "a collective movement of self-rediscovery" omitting the historical division between the wealthy central coastline and the damned rural interior, eventually overturning an obstinate collective self-image (Saidi 2014) to demand reparations (Hmed 2016). The surrounding walls of the Government Square were reclaimed and diverted into canvasses

34. Interview with artist Tlili, Selim.

35. Interview with artist Rouissi, Faten.

36. Interview with activist, Amami Aziz.



Figure 35. Police cars, Sidi Bouzid, H la Ammar



Figure 36. Kasbah, Wassim Ghozlani



Figure 37. Kasbah, Wassim Ghozlani

37. *Ibid.*

38. Interview with artist Mejri, Elyes.

for the demands of the people. As soon as the occupation of the Kasbah ended, activist Aziz Amami in vain launched the petition “Do not touch the tags of the Kasbah, it’s our heritage” as for him the wall represented the genuine demand of the people, not mediated by party politics.³⁷ ‘Ahl El Kahf’, a self-proclaimed “aesthetic terrorist” movement of “anti-globalist” and “anti-Orientalist” artists was born during the occupation of the Kasbah, spraying the face of the departed president in the streets saying: “Those who misled him are still in here”. The graffiti’s were however quickly overpainted or crossed by anonymous passers-by as a reminder for the cathartic movement of defacement.³⁸ Later the collective of artists used the portrait of the prime minister of the interim government Beji Caid Essebsi with the slogan “I can’t dream with my grandfather”. The collective incited the body politic, to further “rebel against the traces of dictatorship”. Their stencils quickly transformed into mural masterpieces challenging the until then relatively raw tags and graffiti’s.

3 / 2 ISLAMIST RE-APPROPRIATION

The Kasbah occupation compelled the provisional government to resign, and some of its institutions and the party-state to dissolve. The surrounding walls of the square were re-painted in white. Barricades and barbwire obstructed the square. Security forces were closely monitoring again, preventing further political actions. The occupation also led to the announcement of free elections for a constitutional assembly, as it had the first republican constitution abrogated. As I will further show, the outlines of the following electoral debate were drawn by two events: the showing of the documentary ‘Ni Allah Ni Maître’ followed by that of the animated film ‘Persepolis’. The discussions on dignity and regional reparations were pushed back by a debate on the limits of the regained liberty. While the revolutionary process was being institutionalized through the parliament, grass-roots Islamist movements asserted their presence in public space by taking control over different mosques, demonstrating martial arts, organizing collective praying sessions, Dawah or selling Islamist paraphernalia in the streets (Merone 2017). Events deemed blasphemous such as book fairs were attacked, alcohol repositories, bars and hotels burned down and the national flag desecrated (Ben Yakoub 2017). These incursions did not stop after the election of the Islamist Nahda party, but continued with the mediatized raid on ‘El Abdelliya’ palace

and the US embassy. Particularly surprising was a systematic trend of ransacking and burning dozens of mausolea spread over the country.

The first incident occurred during the solidarity event 'Hands off my creators' at the 'CinemAfricArt' in June 2011 in Tunis. Ironically, the event was organized by the federation 'Lam Echaml' against growing hostility by Islamists towards artists, such as filmmaker Nouri Bouzid. The reason for the offensive was the projection of 'Neither Allah, nor master', a documentary criticizing alleged Muslim hypocrisy during Ramadan. In an interview with Hannibal TV, the director of the film, Nadia El Fani, stated her right not to believe in God, which infuriated (social) media, resulting in personal death-treats and a hundred demonstrators charging with a Black Standard on the 'AfricArt'.³⁹ The body politic forced their entrance blowing apart the glass front door, damaging the reception desk and the cinema hall. The 'Africart' finally did not open its doors again, but continued its program a couple of streets down the avenue in 'Le Rio'. When the controversy settled down, the title of the film changed into 'Laïcité Inch'allah'.

Whereas in the first confrontation artists mobilized to defend their creators, in the following strife Islamists mobilized to defend their creator. After Nessma TV aired 'Persepolis', an animated film notorious for a scene in which it depicts God, hundreds of Islamist activists converged, but police prevented them from destroying the siege of the television station. A group of 144 lawyers filed a complaint against Nabil Karoui, the director of the station, considering the broadcast a blasphemous attack which offended the sacred values of Islam and common decency. Dozens of Islamists gathered outside the courthouse, while another crowd damaged the home of Karoui. Although civil society and most political parties condemned the assaults, concerns were voiced about the provocative nature of the film, emphasizing the necessary respect for religious sensitivities in order to preserve social peace.⁴⁰ A significant part of public opinion condemned the broadcasting, witnessing the proliferation of petitions mobilizing against 'Nessma TV', re-baptized 'Neqma TV' ("Curse" TV). The trial finally took place on 'World Press Freedom Day' in 2011, sentencing Nessma to 2,400 dinars damages for disturbing public order and violating prevailing morals. Islamist activists also re-occupied the Bourguiba Avenue. Following confrontations between Islamists demanding the

39. Interview with activist
Belhaïj, Soufiane.

40. Interview with activist
Bousselmi, Ali.



Figure 38. Touche pas a mes createurs, Lam Echami



Figure 39. The Ring, Faten Gaddes



Figure 40. The Ring on fire, Faten Gaddes

implementation of the sharia during the newly proclaimed “Day of the Holy Quran” and artists simultaneously demanding theatre during ‘World Theatre Day’, the Ministry of the Interior decided to ban all demonstrations on the main avenue.⁴¹ During the following national day of the martyrs on April 9, 2012, activists defending the martyrs of the revolution nevertheless tried to occupy the avenue but clashes erupted with the police. Before the ban was repealed, a social media event “L’avenue Tagra” (“The avenue reads”) gathered hundreds of indignant students for a silent read-. Indignation culminated in the ‘Manifesto of Tunisian Intellectuals’ (2012) where the Nahda party was accused of collaborating with “Extremist Salafists”.

A final confrontation occurred on the last day of the 10th annual ‘Springtime of Arts’ fair in June, 2012 at ‘El Abdelliya’ Palace in La Marsa, when a notary official ordered the withdrawal of two artworks judged blasphemous. However lacking an overall theme, different artworks engaged in provocative self-orientalizing aesthetics and straightforward visual criticism on Islam.⁴² The court bailiff spread falsified photos of the exposed artworks via the local mosque and social media, resulting in an infuriated crowd in front of the palace, that was nonetheless outnumbered by those gathering in solidarity with the artists. The police dispersed the crowd, but did not prevent the former group from later vandalizing the art fair. The installation on the courtyard, ‘The Ring’ by Faten Gaddes, was ostensibly put on fire.⁴³ The walls of the palace were marked with the slogans: “Let God Be the Judge”, “Tunisia is an Islamic State”, “With the license of the Ministry of Culture, the Prophet of Allah gets insulted” or “Hey you infidels, Nahda, Et-Tahrir and Salafist are brothers”. The indignation rapidly escalated, riots erupted setting fire to courthouses and police stations leading to the imposition of a nightly curfew over seven different regions. The turmoil resulted in dozens arrested, hundreds wounded as well as one death.⁴⁴

The art fair was condemned by various officials. The Minister of Culture, Mehdi Mabrouk, held artists accountable, since “art shouldn’t be revolutionary, it must be beautiful”. The Nahda Party proposed a bill in the Constituent Assembly to criminalize the mockery of sacred values, which laid the foundation of Article 6 of the new constitution that defines the relation of the state to religion. Houcine Laabidi, then imam of the Zitouna Mosque, declared all participating artists apostates whose blood could be poured. Consequently, dozens of artists received

41. Interview with cultural worker Mrabet, Moez.

42. Interview with art critic, Louati, Ismael.

43. Interview with artist Gaddes, Faten.

44. Interview with curator Lucattini, Luca.

45. Interview with Jelassi, Nadia and Ben Slama, Mohamed.

personal death threats. Two of the artists were brought to trial for disturbing public order and offending decency.⁴⁵ Solidarity campaigns proliferated online and offline. The artist El Seed engaged in a reconciliatory expression by reinvesting the minaret of the central Jara Mosque in his hometown of Gabes with a graffiti inspired by the Qur'an verse "Oh humankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made people and tribes so you may know each other".

Nevertheless, on the 11th anniversary of 9/11, a trailer for 'Innocence of Muslims' was released online. It was the latest in a long line of controversies sparking worldwide outrage, recalling the Rushdie affair, the Muhammad cartoons controversy, to the Charlie Hebdo satiric drawings and likewise insulting films 'Submission' by Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali and 'Fitna' by Wilders (Allen & Isakjee 2015). In Tunisia, about two thousand protesters stormed the US embassy, resulting in a clash between security forces and protesters. The sky above Berges Du Lac turned black, as an annex of the embassy and the neighboring American Cooperative School were looted and torched. The Black Standard was hoisted on the flagpole of the embassy. Surrounding walls were tagged with slogans like "Dirty American, Loving Mohamed," "Tunisia Jihad," "God is Great" and the Islamic creed "There is only one God and Mohamed is his messenger." The firm intervention of security forces resulted in the death of 4 protesters, 91 injuries and dozens more arrested, of whom twenty were brought to trial and charged with committing premeditated attacks organized by an armed gang. The controversy pushed the Nahda party to publicly distance itself from the protesters and announce a definitive rupture with the Jihadi-Salafist movement, previously formalized as 'Ansar El Chariia'.

Finally, in between 2012-2013 a systematic but unclaimed destructive wave targeting Sufi shrines spread over the country. The first attacks affected sacred monuments in smaller localities, such as the mausoleums of Sidi Bou Mendel in Hergla or Sidi Abelkader in Menzel Bouzalfa. The virulent attacks quickly spread to more renowned mausolea such as Sidi Sahbi in Kairouan, and affected important shrines surrounding the capital, such as El Béji in Sidi Bou Saïd and Saïda Manoubia in Manouba. In addition to the priceless manuscripts they contain, they still play an important spiritual, ritualistic, religious and social role in society. The place that these Islamic shrines thus occupy shape the country not only geographically but also



Figure 41. Jara Mosque, El Seed



socially (Khlifi 2015). It has to be noted that the Ben Ali regime managed to co-opt maraboutic space by rehabilitating different mausolea in order to counter political Islam (Werenfels 2014). Even though the Sufi cult was strongly aligned and instrumentalized by the Ben Ali regime, an important part of society still strongly believe to be protected by the benevolence of the saints. The strategy to destroy these sites of muslim worship further delegitimized the violent contestation of Islamist activists.⁴⁶

3/3 GAME (NOT) OVER?

The emergence of Islamist activists did not prevent the spontaneous national dialogue from continuing on different walls in public space. Witness to this stubborn endurance is the proliferation of politicized street art collectives such as 'Zwewla', 'Molotov' or 'Feminist Attack'. The indignation directed against the occupation and contestation of urban space by Islamist activists gained momentum in the summer of 2013. After military fights with Jihadi cells in the mountains on the Algerian border escalated and certainly after the political murder of leftist opposition leaders Chokri Belâid and Mohamed Brahmi, the country fell into a nationwide deadlock, which outlawed the Salafi-Jihadi movement 'Ansar Al Charia'. The 'Rahil-campaign', occupying the Bardo square in front of the Constituent Assembly, demanded the dissolution of the Assembly and the destitution of the Troika government. Dreadful of an Egyptian scenario, Nahda invested in a counter-mobilization at the Kasbah Square. Even if Nahda party offices were violently targeted, the government accepted a plan to step down negotiated by what came to be known as the Quartet, paving the way for the formation of an interim government, the completion of a new constitution and the first free and fair presidential election. Eventually laying the first stone for the re-emergence of the old regime.

In the run-up to presidential elections in November 2014, two underground street artists painted a giant portrait of the upcoming president Beji Caid Essebsi with the baseline "I love Bajbouj" at Barcelona Square in Tunis.⁴⁷ His 'Nidaa Tunes' party eventually won the elections with an anti-Islamist security oriented agenda. Even after three lethal jihadi attacks, it succeeded - through an unexpected coalition with the Nahda party - to maintain control over public space during the post-revolutionary phase, slowly reintroducing the symbolic power subsumed

46. Interview with artist
Touwayma, Karim.

47. Interview with artist
Karoui, Selima.

48. Interview with activist
Amami, Aziz and activist Brihi,
Myriam.

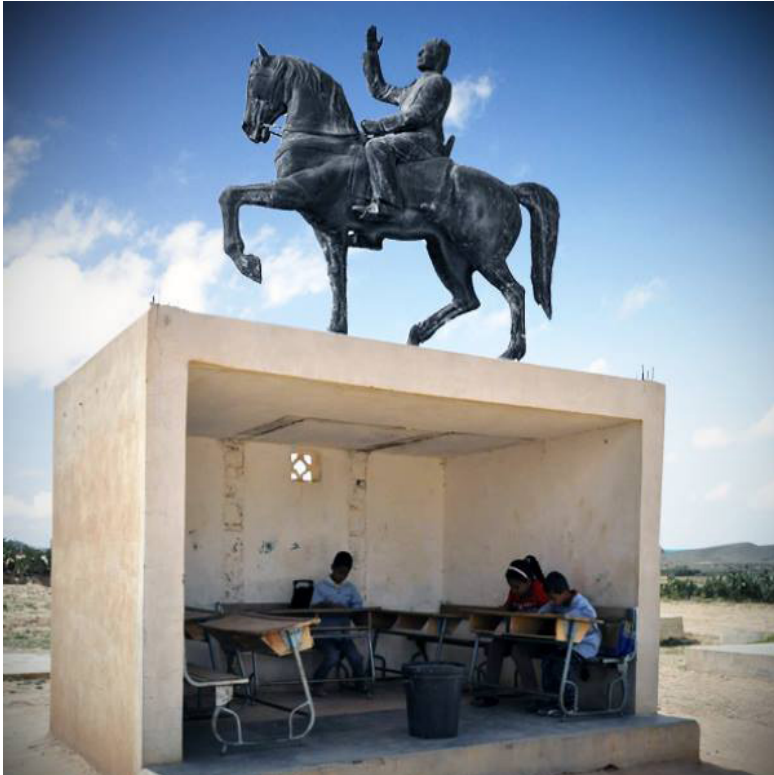


Figure 42. One of the most important achievements, Malek Feki

in the postcolonial imagery of the “Father of the Nation”. After protest rose up again in the region of Kasserine due to unfulfilled employment promises by the government in January 2016, the president addressed the people on public television, from the same setting as Bourguiba’s speech that contained the bread revolts in January 1984. Two months later, the equestrian statue of the “Supreme Combatant”, once displaced by Ben Ali to the port town of La Goulette, made its way back to Bourguiba Avenue. Also in Monastir, a restored equestrian statue with Bourguiba wearing a traditional straw hat was installed in front of the presidential palace. Even a modest personality cult formed around the new president during the commemoration of the 17th anniversary of Bourguiba’s death, as local authorities decorated Monastir with two giant portraits of President Essebsi himself.

Different artists and activists criticized the politics of re-bourguibisation of public space, unbecoming the context of growing marginalization and regional division. Not even one year after its inauguration in March 2013, the public bust of the “Father of the nation” on the Bourguiba esplanade in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, was anonymously vandalized with red paint. Also in Tunis, the reinstalled equestrian statue was tagged with the phrase “Your children In Your house”, a direct message to the president not to favor his son Hafedh’s ascension as head of ‘Nida Tunes’ and to leave the old nepotistic structure of the regime. Ghassan Bouizi, head of the General Union of Tunisian Students, was eventually arrested for vandalizing the statue and accused of offense against the head of state. Under the title “One of the most important achievements” Malek Feki uploaded a series of digitally altered images of the concerned equestrian statue, so it salutes from atop a mountain of garbage in the city center, in the middle of a street blocking the way of a congested bus, on the roof of a concrete container school, somewhere in a desert behind a hungry Bedouin family or as a passive witness to flooding streets.

Driven by the will to prevent a possible return of the old regime, the ‘I too burned a police station’ campaign was launched in 2014 as criminal charges were pronounced against about 130 activists who had violated state property in the revolution of 2011.⁴⁸ These charges were often made against young activists who protested with the families of the martyrs and those injured in the revolution demanding justice, accountability and compensation for those killed or injured by the police forces during the revolution

(Antonakis-Nashif 2016). Despite enduring protests pushed by the same grassroots movement, since 2015 renamed in "I do not forgive", the parliament approved the Economic Reconciliation Act giving amnesty to those accused of financial crimes under the authoritarian regime. Further protest is discouraged as the Kasbah became a fully militarized and a policed zone. A permanent fence privatized the public square in front of the Ministry of Finance. Behind the barrier only the water of a prestigious fountain circulates to welcome the fancy cars of political representatives visiting the ministries. Avenue Bourguiba, too, is under the control of the police. Traffic can no longer pass in front of the Ministry of Interior and Independence Square is occupied by the military. Barbed wire, piled sandbags, concrete bumpers and several tanks occupy half of the surrounding streets to protect the French embassy.

4 / CONCLUSION

Urban space can be an instrument of political control as well as of resistance and revolt. Any place can be imbued with sovereign power, but no place is immune to its inherent ambiguity. As sovereign power can be territorialized, its territorialisation can also be diverted. I have endeavored to show that these practices of diversion or reappropriation are not merely symbolic processes, but visual, sensible and thus heuristic operations through which fundamental political questions can be answered, beyond ideologically staged opposition. Considering in detail the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt, I have sought to show how Tunisia's self-image was turned inside out, installing the damned in the center of societal preoccupations, puncturing state sovereignty. Through a spatial analysis which moves beyond the mesmerizing occupation of places such as the Kasbah Square, this chapter considered the *longue durée* to assess the tenacity of these contested sites and places. These tenacious locations can - in the context of the contested Ben Ali regime - be discerned as stratified spatial nodes or meeting points keeping the compartmentalization of sovereign power in place, such as police stations, state sculptures and portraits as well as grandiose palaces and monuments. Taking a closer look at and recognizing the diversion or reappropriation of the fragmented monumental state architecture as the continuation of a liberation struggle that contested colonial spatial compartmentalization confirmed our suggestion that these stratified places neatly crisscrossing

urban space do not outlive their original structure by themselves. Our inquiry thus underlines that the fundamental precondition for the diversion or reappropriation of urban space is its violent disruption, as violence was in the first place contained in the way sovereign power was territorialized. However re-appropriation can only temporarily stop domination, underlying the limited productive or creative aspect of these diversions or processes of reappropriation. The revolting body politic did include the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt and its constitutive gesture of diversion or reappropriation as a non-negotiable part of their revolution. Diversion or reappropriation is a powerful process that can generate new ways of seeing and feeling and that can structure the construction of another world, only if what is re-territorialized during the process of re-appropriation is bereft of repressive power and thus if the process of re-appropriation consolidates the new spaces it produced. It is difficult to say if the production of a space where the spirit of non-sovereignty so central in the movements of revolt would have materialized, could have prevented the further self-sacrifice of the assembled body politic and thus sentinel the dignity and liberation of the people. It is even more difficult if not impossible to say if – under these conditions – Islamist activists would have been as successful in mobilizing the damned through the occupation of the mosque and if they would have turned violent as they did during the constitutive phase of the revolution. Or if the old regime would have regained control over public space in the same way as they did now. Only history will tell if the current contestation of the renewed Bourguibist imaginary can be interpreted as a premonition for a longer process of spatial contestation. Let alone if this new wave could ever result in the production of a sustainable space that can accommodate the demands for dignity, liberation and reparations, and thus prevent a further escalation of violence.



Figure 43. I too burned a police station

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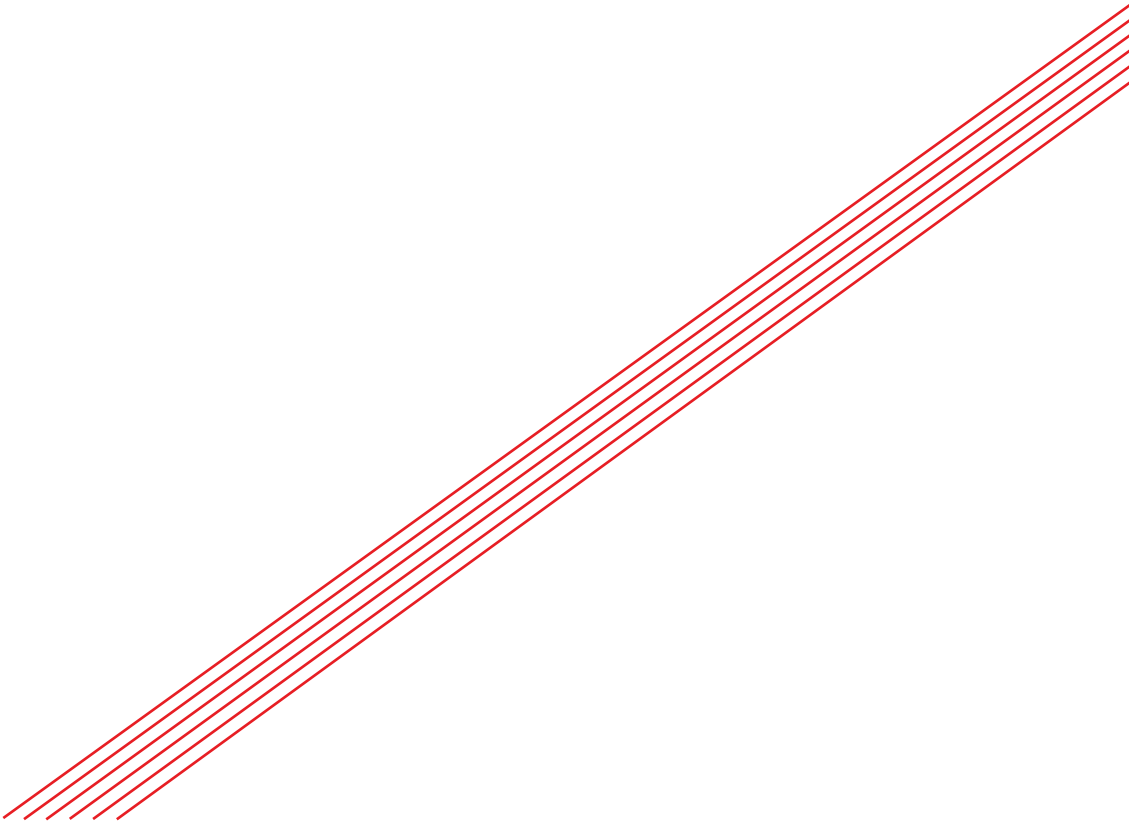
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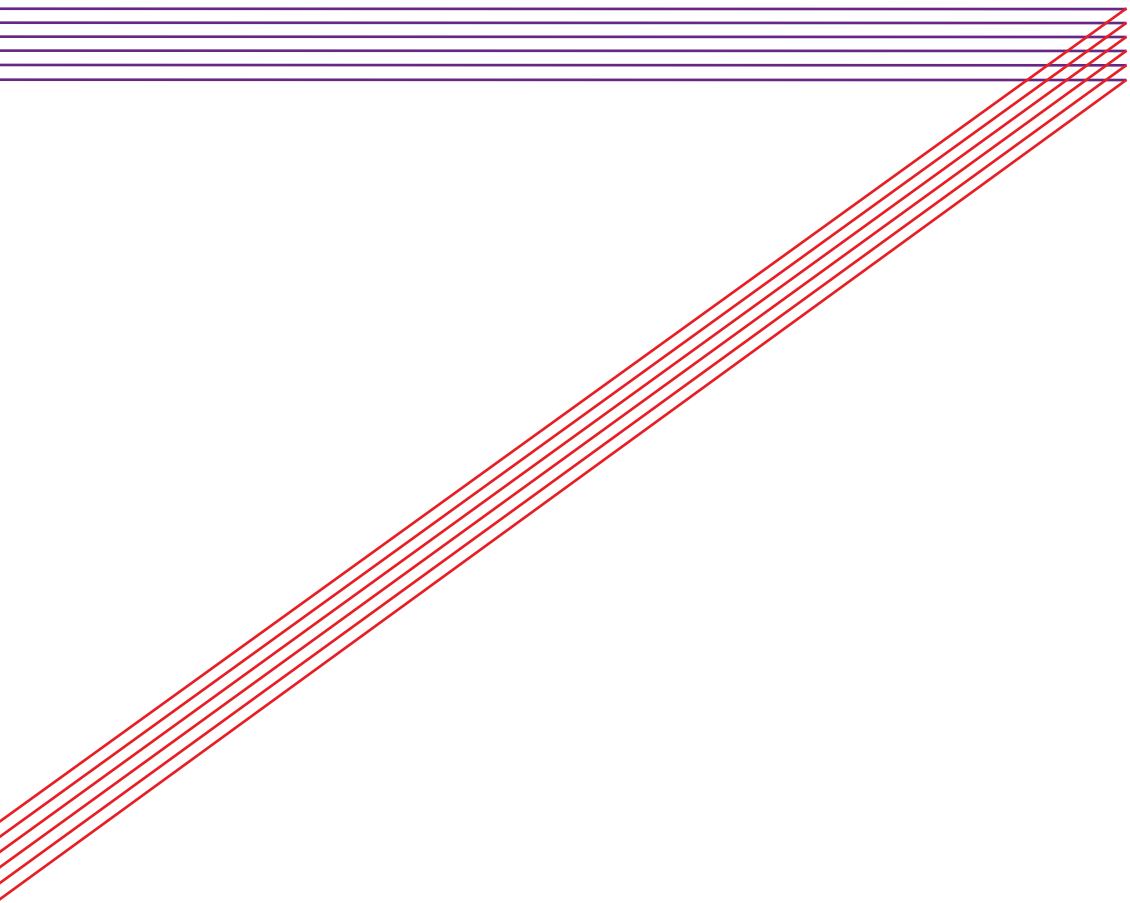
Chapter 3



THE LAST MONUMENT STANDING

The politics of time in the
Tunisian Revolution





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/ Ben Yakoub, J. (2018). The Last Monument Standing. The politics of time in the Tunisian Revolution. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 11 (2).

THE LAST MONUMENT STANDING

In the line of different political manifestos written in the stream of the 2011 revolution in Tunisia, visual artist Nidhal Chamekh (2011) uploaded a post entitled 'Rational Solutions to overcome the artistic and cultural crisis'. Written in the heat of the moment, the manifesto proposed to destroy the November 7 Clock in the center of Tunis. All the references to 'November 7' were destroyed by the revolting body politic except for the central clock monument. Chamekh's manifesto suggested destroying it with the sphere recuperated from the top of the skeleton pillar of the infamous 'City of Culture'. The crushed Clock Tower would then function as a new memorial site of the revolution. Reduced to a miniature model in a 3D printed map of Tunis, Chamekh's iconoclastic proposition materialized four years later in the form of an installation. 'The Anti-Clock Project' was exhibited during 'All the World's Futures', the central exhibition of the 'Venice Biennial' curated by Okwui Enwezor (2015).

Nidhal Chamekh's manifesto and installation will not only guide our journey through the symbolic landscape of Tunis, but through its focus on the last monument standing, the cartographic installation will also prove conducive for our understanding of the politics of time and memory in the Tunisian Revolution and its monumentalization today. Approaching Tunis' urban space as a place imbued with history clarifies how both the pedestal of the last monument standing and the ideology it materializes, were initially conceived and structured during colonial occupation, and slightly transformed during the two consecutive post-colonial regimes. The monumental landscape was a constitutive element of the civilizing mission and the assimilationist urbanization policies of the French colonial administration (Coslett 2009). Independence gradually facilitated an ambiguous entanglement of colonial and nationalist forms, mimicking the original symbolic economy of veneration (Mbembe 2013). The partial destruction of this economy of veneration and its colonial and nationalist entanglement sharply contrasted with "the possibility

of annihilation” or the prerequisite of “*tabula rasa*” as minimum demand of every decolonization process (Fanon 1952:117; 1961:35). As the postcolonial ideal of “*creation ex nihilo*” and “the desire for the purity of new beginnings” faded away, a more pragmatic reading of cities and their monuments as palimpsest of different times and histories imposes itself (Huysens 2009:7).

During the latest revolution, the annihilation of the monumental landscape succeeded in breaking up time and challenging normative notions of temporality in a way that pushed some scholars to exclaim the end of postcolonialism (Dabashi 2012). However, as Chamekh’s installation reminds us, even though the monumental landscape may be annihilated, the landscape’s last monument still stands today and – as we will argue - will probably still stand tomorrow as it materializes a soothing hegemonic modernist and future-oriented temporality that mystifies and restrains political sensibilities to the present time, dismissing certain historical pasts and withholding differential futures.

1/ OUR 14 WILL NEVER BE 7 X 2

In the celebratory demonstrations following their autocrat’s toppling on January 14, 2011, protesters held banners marked with the viral slogan: “Our 14 will never be 7 x 2”. A self-evident slogan for most Tunisians, but a difficult, if not an impossible, one to comprehend for most outsiders. Key to deciphering the slogan is the connotation of number seven: over the last twenty-three consecutive years that president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled over Tunisia, the number seven came to signify regime adherence. It all started on Saturday morning November 7, 1987 when, still in his function as prime minister, Ben Ali sent seven doctors to the palace of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia (Auffray 2011) to slide him aside after over thirty years of uninterrupted presidency. Having built up his military career to become the head of national security, Ben Ali rose in ranks to serve as Minister of State before being appointed Interior Minister and finally Prime Minister. On November 7, 1987 a medical report attested the inability of Bourguiba to continue his duties. Ben Ali then declared on public radio that the president was “senile” and therefore “mentally unfit to govern” as discerned in Art. 57 of the constitution (Saidi 2007). Ben Ali’s first solemn historical radio speech later became known as the ‘November 7 Manifesto’

and quickly acquired the status of founding document, heralding the beginning of a “new era”. Announcing necessary democratic and social reforms, Ben Ali was supported by the majority of Tunisians. He promised “historical change” and thus a radical rupture with the repressive authoritarianism of the former president. A second foundational text arrived with the first (but as we will see certainly not the last) anniversary of the “new era”, when different political formations signed the consensual “National Pact” on November 7, 1988. The historical day Ben Ali took presidential power thus heralded “The New Era of Change”. Pretty soon however, the regime started to lose its consensual legitimacy.

If Habib Bourguiba built his power on behalf his historical legitimacy as the father of independence and was therefore acknowledged to be the personification of power, his successor was pressed to invent another historical legitimacy (Abassi 2009). This was certainly the case since his last legal constitutional mandate in 1999, when the regime started to prepare for a constitutional referendum in 2002 allowing the president to run for an unlimited number of terms and increasing the age limit for presidential candidates to seventy-five. Through consecutive manipulated electoral victories, the official discourse took the form of a future-oriented civilizational project where “change” was underpinned by the “eternal values” that facilitated the necessary adjustments for “democratic and pluralistic progress”.⁴⁹ In the same way that his predecessor put all bets on the refinement of his personality cult to preserve a semblance of legitimacy in 1978, the Ben Ali regime materialized the hegemonic discourse of the “new era” in an ubiquitous monumental landscape. Public space was saturated with monuments referring to ‘November 7’, with or without an inserted standard clock.⁵⁰ ‘November 7’ became “the numerical emblem” of what was called the necessary “change”, which would open “a new era” (Geisser in: Auffray 2011). The date of the coup spread across the country as a symbol of new power relations, forming what we call the ‘Novemberist monumental landscape’. However, the way the annual ‘November 7’ spectacle enfolded (Chomiak 2013), and how different artistic interventions gradually diverted the digit during the last breath of authoritarian rule, speaks volumes about a premonitory sense of revolutionary dissent. During the latest revolution, the monumental landscape was finally almost completely destroyed.

49. See for instance the official press release for “the anniversary of change” in 2009 “an impetus for renewing hope and confidence in the future” (I.A.P. 2009).

50. Since the nineties artist and photographer Hichem Driss obsessively collected photographs of nearly all the 7-monuments. Only after the toppling of the president, he found the freedom to select and put together ‘Sept fois c’est fini, (Seven/This time, it’s over)’ a series of 7x7 black and white photographs of the monumental landscape.

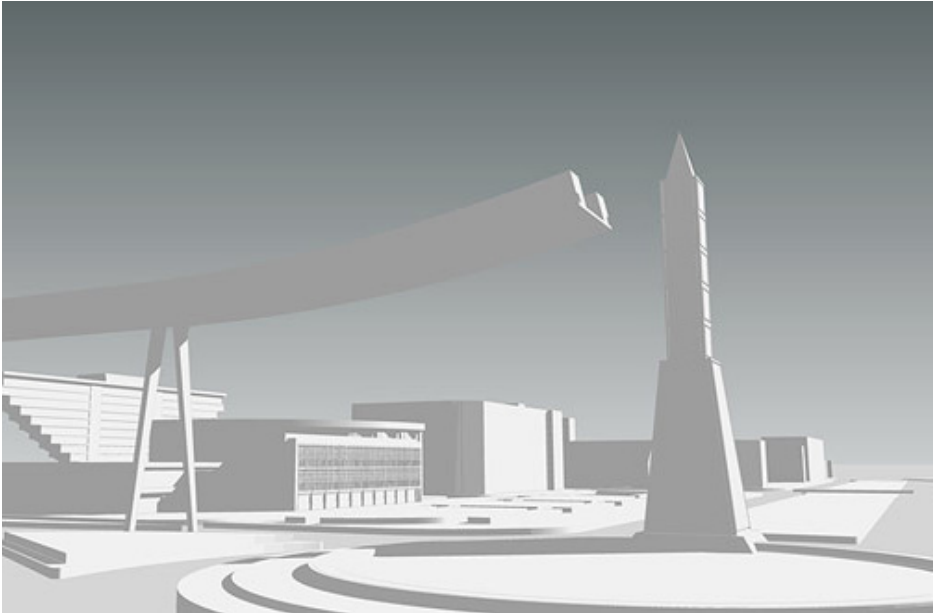


Figure 44. The Anti-Clock Project – 3D Modeling, Julie Grandin & Nidhal Chamekh

Next to material (Hibou 2006) and coercive domination (Ghorbal 2013), symbolic domination is a prerequisite for any self-respecting autocrat (Wedeen 1999). The way political power is symbolically produced, paradoxically invites transgression, as power encloses within itself the framework of its own defiance (Wedeen 1999, Tripp 2013b). The spatial concentration of political power in the 'Novemberist landscape', likewise made it the primary site for political resistance (Chomiak 2013). The revolution could indeed be read as a campaign to dismantle Ben Ali's numerological cult. The spontaneous but systemic destruction of Novemberist monuments was a clear precursor for the demand for the autocrat's departure (Chomiak 2013). The iconoclastic rage of protesters almost destroyed all monuments and street signs referring to 'November 7'. The times they were indeed a-changin (Zemni 2013b).

2 / POLITICS OF TIME

Revolutions are generally acknowledged as historical moments of fundamental political change. The temporal dimension of the Tunisian Revolution however, seems to be an often-overlooked site of contestation (Sadiki 2014), let alone the contestation of its monumentalization. Stimulated by the creative occupation of public squares, an over-emphasis on the category of space threatens to overshadow a growing body of work that focuses on questions of temporality. When time is not overlooked and taken seriously as an element of political analysis, it is regarded as a "scarce and nonrenewable resource" that ought to be managed (Schwedler & Santiso, 1998: 10), and not as a "horizon" created by the interaction of present past and future (1998:6). Moreover, the "largely descriptive chronometric analyses [...] have failed to articulate the revolutions beyond their chaotic, unfolding eventfulness" (Sabry 2012b:80). As Siino's (2012) contribution to the debate shows, political analyses of time can easily be reduced to a simple assessment of the rhythm of presidential succession. The methodological and epistemological importance of the use of different temporal registers in the study of revolution cannot be underestimated (Schwedler 2016). When revolutions are taken as units of analysis, the temporal register of the medium-term is often over-asserted at the expense of the long-term. The fixation on the precarious democratic transition structured by the teleological nature of transitology literature makes one neglect the impact of long-term processes such as the unfolding

51 In the curatorial statement of 'All the World's Future', the international art exhibition where 'The Anti-Clock project' was first shown, Okwui Enwezor (2015) too refers to Walter Benjamin's allegorical interpretation of Paul Klee's painting 'Angel of History Novus' as the 'Angel of History'. By referring to the 9th thesis he invites the public to re-think the representational potentiality of art and its capacity to relate to the current state of things. By underlying the cult status of the artwork obtained through historic clairvoyance of its critic, Enwezor turns his curatorial sight to the past to make sense of "All the World's Futures". Through this differential futures he challenges artists to engage with a certain critical historicism, from the perspective of the unfolding actual disquietful context of crisis, uncertainty and insecurity, but aware and directed to the piled debris of previous modern devastation and catastrophes of the last two centuries.

of capitalism or the persistence of colonial power relations. However, the transformative events of the revolution irreversibly opened up temporal horizons that thoroughly re-imagined the scope of the political (Schwedler 2016). As shown by Chollet's (2011) reading of the revolution, through Walter Benjamin's theses on the Philosophy of History, it becomes clear the revolution was radically contesting the concept of (economic) progress engrained in the everyday politics of the regime⁵¹. Criticizing this hegemonic teleological conception of progress and development, Chollet (2011) manages to analyze the revolution in a perceived progressive line of revolutions that returns to 1789 (French Revolution) continues over 1871 (Paris Commune), 1917 (Russian Revolution), 1956 (Hungarian Revolution), and 1989 (movement of Tiananmen Square in China). This reinforces the idea that Tunisians are late, and are only today becoming truly modern, as they catch up with the train of History (Khiari 2016).

The following analysis of the temporal dimension of the Tunisian Revolution proposes to shift the attention to the multiplicity of times subsumed in the age of the postcolony (Mbembe 2001). In this light, time is understood "not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absence, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians" (Mbembe 2001:8). These emerging and entangled times of existence and experience are characterized by the interlocking of multiple possible presents, pasts, and futures, that through their constant fluctuation and oscillation lose their irreversibility and set the condition to bodily experience time. We do not necessarily want to question the "Western-ness of modernity" (Mbembe 2001:11), but rather propose to further engage in the often-neglected subject of historical time, analyzing how the Tunisian Revolution succeeded in breaking up time and challenging normative notions of temporality through its monumental contestation (Lorenz & Bevernage 2013).

3/ MONUMENTALIZATION OF TEMPORALITIES

Apart from the representation of time in the 'Novemberist monumental landscape' in the form of a clock, and in its reference to the historical day of the coup, the monumental landscape in itself is already inextricably related to a sense of time, as it can be considered the materialization of what Mbembe

(2006) calls the conscious task of symbolization of the past. Even if it might seem to be the last concern for a society pressed by the imperatives of survival, this process of symbolization is a *sine qua non* to form a dignified collective body politic, as was the proper drive of the revolution. Memorial monuments therefore cannot be minimized as mere decorative monuments in the green spaces that enlivened the concrete city (Sebag 1998). The “bodily experience” and the “vivid sensation of intersubjectivity” when encountering a statue, reminds us that it exercises its own power over and above that exercised by the state (Hook in: Kros 2015:153).

As Achille Mbembe (2013) suggests, a monumental landscape can be discerned as a series of artefacts that pretend to be “the latest substitute of the substance of time itself”, whereas it actually is a trap of “a rebellious time” that refuses to be caught between the hands of any potentate. Monuments enhance the illusionary feeling of permanence and intergenerational continuity, and by doing so, elevate in a tangible way the sovereign above all temporal contingencies (Augé 1995). The monumental landscape then fixes and delineates an image of a past, giving it a semblance of “real past” inscribed in stone (Wallerstein & Balibar 1991:78), to avoid that “the past would catch up too fast with the present” (Trouillot 1995:11). It essentializes time and sculpts in bronze the contours in which time can be thought and as such encapsulate the subject within the outlines of an imposed conception, excluding the possibility of experiencing time outside these sculpted lines of the past. In the words of Fanon (1952:180), it “encases”, “enslaves” and provokes oneself to “be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past” (1952:176).

Through the endless reproduction of the date of the coup and the centrality of the image of universal time in the form of a mechanical clock, the Ben Ali regime added an layer of power to its monumental landscape. Time is essentially a concept that organizes repetition and transformation, but it also has a profound ideological nature, as it is subsumed in the imaginary of the global system (Mignolo 2011). The clock, like the steam engine, is the symbol of the industrial standardization necessary for the coming into being of the global modern capitalist age. Metrically pulsed with a fixed rhythm, the clock enables perfect synchronicity and thus universally measured and controlled time management (Stalpaert 2017). What Fabian (1983:29) calls “Western Clock Time” or “Physical Time” is today divided up to nanoseconds to assure high-frequency trading on the volatile

global financial markets. More than a system of reckoning time, the image of the clock encloses ways of knowing, sensing, remembering and understanding the past, present and anticipating the future. Consequently, it does not only determine our conception and experience of time, but our very conception of history and memory (Mignolo 2011). History is then understood as a progressive developmental process or transition following a singular linear notion of time, with a past that is lost and an ever-changing potential present, always creating new departures toward a singular future in which we are all inevitably heading. Or “as a current that carries individuals and societies from a background to a foreground, with the future emerging necessarily from the past and following that past, itself irreversible” (Mbembe 2001:16). The past is considered a fixed entity with only documentary value, whereas the present is supposed to be the only site of the real, one can truly experience (Vázquez 2011) This linear conception of History is characterized by what Walter Benjamin (1968:261) called “homogeneous and empty time” and can be considered as the very notion of historical time that underpins the imagined community of the nation-state (Anderson 1991).

The above-described spatial metaphor of temporality and secularized teleological conception of time and history, has repercussions on prevailing subjectivities (Fabian 1983). The present of the self is depicted as “modern” and “civilized”, whereas the present of the other is imagined as “traditional” and “primitive”, in a progressive and chronological “development” towards “civilization” (Fabian 1983, Chakrabarty 2000, Barba 2017). What according to Mbembe (2001:4) supposedly characterizes a “traditional” society is its facticity and arbitrariness “caught in a relation of pure immediacy to the world and to themselves” and thus its incapacity of “uttering the universal”. The disposition towards the future was the monopoly of the colonizer, and was brought to the colonized as a “magnanimous gift of civilization” (Mbembe 2015). However, and here lies the perverse paradox of colonization, at the same time the indigenous were considered “ontologically incapable of change”, and therefore pre-determined to remain “indigenous”, doomed to “repetition without difference” (2015). In a traditional society, time is seen as “stationary” and “resistant to change”, disintegrating the very idea of progress (Mbembe, 2001:4). Frantz Fanon (in Mbembe, 2015) considered colonization as “a fundamental negation of time”, where the colonized were a people without history, “outside of time”, or whose time was “radically out of joint” and therefore had to be gently lead into

History. Colonialism not only imposed its rule on the present and the future of the oppressed, but also distorted, disfigured and destroyed the past of the colonized (Fanon 1961). Albert Memmi (1965: 91-92) noticed that then “the colonized is out of the game. He [sic] is no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he [sic] carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object”. As a result of this forceful process of historical objectivation, the postcolonial subject interiorized a pre-supposed structural imbalance between tradition and modernity. It not only came to accept a “tragic duality” or “inner twoness” (Mbembe 2001:12) and developed a “bifurcated self-image” (Saidi 2007:21), but also developed a firmly ingrained inferiority complex (Fanon 1952) towards his own supposedly ‘pre-modern’ tradition.

The ‘Novemberist monumental landscape’ can first and foremost be understood as a form of symbolic dominance (Mbembe 2006, 2013). It saturates not only the living space but also inhabits the imagination, troubling its subjects, whose senses can no longer properly function without its master signifier. The monuments and statues in public space exercise a form of dominance much indebted to the colonial world, “a world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manicheistic world [...] a world sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed by whips” (Fanon 1961:51-52). In addition, the reference to the historical date of November 7 and the mechanical image of universal time adds an ingenious layer of power to this symbolic dominance. Together with other time devices, such as the calendar, the clock forms a networked system that make up a “panopticon of time” (Sadiki 2014). When we look at the “oppressive use of Time” (Fabian 1983:2), and the inferiority complex it generates, the omnipresent clocks take the shape of a powerful disciplinary machine that not only regulates time, but disciplines our bodies and movements (Stalpaert 2017) to the point we turn into temporal beings (Rosse in: Stalpaert 2017).

The initial energy of the revolution that destroyed the monumental landscape can be seen as a “Clock-wise protest” that broke up the “authoritarian panopticon of time” (Sadiki 2014:5-6) and provoked an aporia of time (Sabry 2012b). Moreover, as insightfully suggested by Sabry (2013:25), the revolution can be regarded as a “a trans-temporal global event.” that unfolded in “different, fluid and complex political/cultural temporalities” and brought down “the redundant theorizations of Arab historicism”. At the same time, the tenacity of the last monument standing tragically

reminds us of the still-dominant colonial determination to repetition without difference, now no longer waiting for the magnanimous gift of civilization, but for a transition to a dignified future, for the magnanimous gift of democracy. Unless the body politic find different ways to again contest the strongly embedded panopticon of time, “transition” can again make space for “revolution”, as suggested by Jocelyne Dakhliya (2016). In the following section, I think through the proposition of ‘The Anti-Clock project’ to demythologize the hegemonic ubiquitous conception of time and history, and engage with the ambiguity of multiple pasts to create a profusion of possible futures, what in itself is one of the basic function of memory (Mbembe 2006, 2015). This will hopefully contribute to the academic “stammering” that bring us closer to understanding this “historical paradigmatic shift” Tunisia is going through (Sabry 2013:25).

4 / LAST MONUMENT STANDING

The scope of this article does not permit for elaboration on the “artistic and cultural crisis” that motivated the creation of ‘The Anti-Clock project’ (Chamekh 2011). Our reading of this installation serves two purposes. First, methodologically, the installation is employed as a map to navigate the monumental landscape of the capital and prioritize which elements of this landscape to engage with. Through a close reading of the cartographic installation and the surrounding eleven drawings, extending the utopic artwork symbolically, historically and formally (Chubb 2015), I will navigate its three central memorial sites: the ‘City of Culture’, the statue of ‘Ibn Khaldun’, and the ‘November 7 Clock’. Second, and more conceptually, the ‘Anti-Clock project’ as an artwork inspires fundamental reflection on the symbolic struggle over memory and the politics of time at stake today in Tunisia. The rather simple but disruptive questions raised through the ‘Anti-Clock Project’ stimulates a look into the way political temporalities can be spatialized in a postcolonial context and thus how a revolutionary contestation of this postcolonial spacialization can raise profound questions related to the prevailing politics of time and memory. Tunisia is a particular interesting case, with the postcolonial monumentalization thematizing, in its entangled form and content, as a clear modernist idea of change, progress, time and history. In this light, the spontaneous destruction of this ‘Novemberist monumental landscape’ succeeded in provoking an aporia of time. Reclaiming

this historical agency the body politic, at least for that cathartic moment of destruction, expelled their pre-supposed tragically bifurcated self-image. Together with the violent destruction of the 'Novemberist landscape', the prevailing inferiority complex and presupposed incompatibility between tradition and modernity seemed – at least for a moment – annihilated. By shattering the monuments, the experience of time in its inherent multiplicity and reversibility was reclaimed. However, as suggested by the installation of Chamekh, we have to apprehend the deeper meaning of the incompleteness of these revolutionary dynamics of monumental annihilation. The partiality of its destruction emphasizes the ingenuousness and power of the disciplinary structure set in place by the Ben Ali regime, and the difficulty to completely overthrow it. The incompleteness of the destruction process relates to what Timothy Mitchell (2000:18) describes as "the production of modernity", where "the hegemony of the modern over what it displaces as "traditional" is never complete". This incompleteness can then be understood as the main drive of modernizing forces that "continuously reappropriate elements that have been categorized as non-modern [...] in order to produce their own effectiveness". The difficulty of total annihilation can thus be explained by the comforting and normative character of a modern unilinear temporality. The idea of history that reinforces binary oppositions and mutual exclusivities and dismisses the interwovenness of different concurrent temporalities, restrains political sensibilities to the present time and precludes certain historical pasts, withholding differential futures.

5 / **READING TUNIS AS AN URBAN PALIMPSEST**

To clarify how political temporalities can be spatialized, and thus how the recent revolutionary dynamics could consequently readdress these temporalities through a contestation of this spacialization, I navigate the institutional complexity of Tunis following the map outlined in Nidhal Chamekh's cartographic installation. The three central monuments proposed by the 'Anti-Clock project' guide our journey through Tunis' symbolic monumental landscape. I consecutively dwell in the 'City of Culture' on 'Mohammed V Avenue', around the 'Big Ben Ali' on the 'January 14 Square' and the statue of Ibn Khaldun on 'Independence Square'. Each of the three monuments has its own particular symbolism and its own specific history, but together

they are sufficiently representative to be acknowledged as present entry points to thoroughly engage in a precise analysis of possible temporalities materialized by the contemporary monumental landscape.

I approach Tunis' urban space as an "anthropological place", that is, a place that is not only relationally defined and concerned with identity, but also one that is thoroughly historical (Augé 1995). By delving into the symbolic structure of its public open spaces, I further our understanding of the political temporalities and histories at the center of these spatial arrangements. As insightfully suggested by Saidi (2007) and following de Certeau (1988), I approach the city of Tunis and its monumental landscape as "palimpsests". I thus focus on the highly symbolic "stubborn" places which together make up the monumental landscape, as "stratified places" consisting of "imbricated strata", where all epochs survive and "pile up", in the same place, intact but mutually interacting (de Certeau 1988: 200-201). A pitfall in this approach would be to scrutinize only the most recent stratum, whereas, on the contrary, it should be possible to conceive "the interrelations between disparate forces and times" and "to reveal, decode and decipher a system" veiled by "superimposed orders" (1988: 202). According to Huysens (2009), a close reading of the city as a "palimpsest of space" or as an "urban palimpsest", implies taking into account its transformable, permutable and transitory character. Through a palimpsestic reading of Tunis and its monumental landscape, it becomes clear that Tunis' "urban imaginary" is inhabited by "different memories of what there was before", and also by "imagined alternatives to what there is" as "the strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past", albeit with "erasures and losses" (2009:7). Reading the palimpsestic nature of Tunis and its monumental landscape and how the configurations of its urban space unfolded over time in its mediation of memory, will help us "understand the fundamental temporality of even those human endeavors that pretend to transcend time through their material reality and relative durability" (2009:7). By taking a closer look at restored traces or documented erasures, it becomes clear which contrasting "city-texts" are being rewritten and which are being preserved to form the "complex web of historical markers" that Tunis is today (2009:81). In what follows, I share will my reading of Tunis as a vital anthropological place and as an urban palimpsest, to reveal, decode and decipher the ambivalent processes of symbolization the monumental landscape underwent over time.

5/1 CITY OF CULTURE

The opening of the 'The City of Culture' was initially programmed for November 7, 2009 as part of the celebration of the 5th presidential re-election (Bint Nadia 2015). The plans foresaw 52,000 square meters to put up a grand monument housing a theater, a cinema, a library, different production studios, and auditoria, and a national museum for modern and contemporary art. However, due to financial mismanagement the opening date was repeatedly postponed. Designed in 1992, the construction of the bombastic centralizing cultural center on the former site of the International Fair on 'Mohammed V Avenue', began only in 2003, but was interrupted, only to restart in 2006, but then again suddenly stopped in 2008. The main entrance of the city of Culture consists of an architectural copy of the minimalist 'Great Arch of Defense' in Paris, that serves as a doorframe for an oriental Arabic ornate door. The concrete skeleton of the "tower of culture" was also already built.⁵² The glass geodesic sphere on top of the tower characterizes a number of monuments built by the state in the 2000s, visualizing a globe and symbolizing the country's will to be included in the prevailing universal, contemporary and global values (Kazdaghli 2006). Ironically, the construction site gradually became a symbol of the state's (mis) appropriation of public and private funds (Mannone 2015). For most Tunisians, the sputtering real estate project embodied the questionable financial maneuvers deeply ingrained in the corrupted state structure (Karoui 2015). This popular critique resonates with the drawing of the scarabaeus in the installation of Chamekh. Where most beetles use their ball of dung as a food source or brooding chamber, Nidhal proposes to use the geodesic symbol of adherence to globalization to crush the November 7 Clock. Since Ben Ali fled the country, the site laid fallow until the former director of the real estate project, Mohamed Zine El Abidine, was appointed Minister of Culture and announced the resumption of the project.⁵³

52. Interview with visual artist Nidhal Chamekh.

53. Since his appointment as Minister of Culture in August 2016, Mohamed Zine El Abidine is subject to harsh criticism related to his involvement in the affaire of the city of culture and his strong ties to the Ben Ali regime. A petition "Against the Sinister of Culture: for a cultural policy that cuts with propaganda" was in vain signed by hundreds of prominent figures from the cultural and artistic scene to prevent him taking office.

54. Interview with visual artist Nidhal Chamekh.

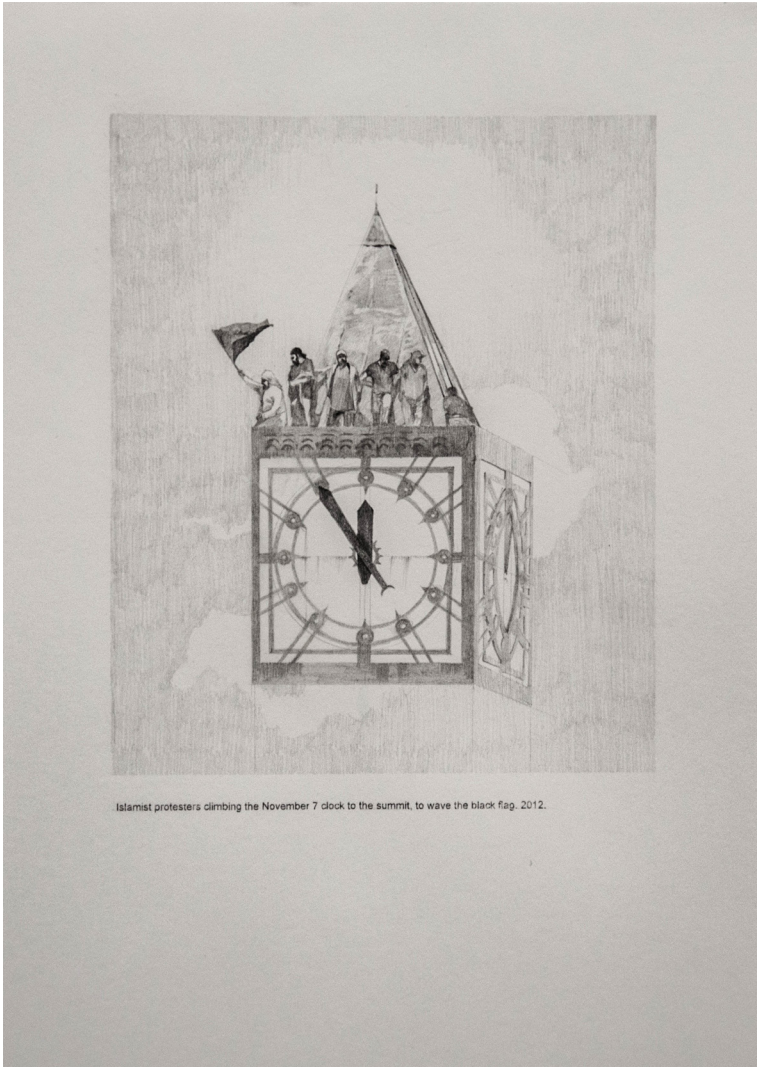
5/2 BIG BEN ALI

The second and central monument on the cartographic installation is the 37 meters high master signifier of the monumental landscape, the last monument standing today on the 'January 14, square'. Before the revolution known as the 'November 7 Square', before the Ben Ali regime as the 'Africa



Scarabaeus Sacer rolling a ball of dung.

Figure 45. Scarabaeus Sacer rolling a ball of dung, Nidhal Chamekh



Islamist protesters climbing the November 7 clock to the summit, to wave the black flag. 2012.

Figure 46. Islamist protesters climbing the November 7 clock to wave the black flag. 2012, Nidhal Chamekh

Square', and finally before independence as the 'Jules Ferry Square'. The Clock-tower was personally commissioned by the president and designed by Hassairi Med Habib. It resembles an abstract but well-balanced fusion of the Big Ben in London and the Luxor Obelisk in Paris. The tower is coated in a bronze traditional mashrabiya (latticework) pattern, enlightened from within, with a golden pyramidal rooftop (Coslett 2009). The four-sided clock-tower is based in a circular reflecting pool with a musical cybernetic fountain. Every side of the monument is identical to the other, so it overlooks the whole capital and remains visible from every perspective.⁵⁴ From the outset, the Ben Ali regime constructed a political image that had to differentiate itself from the previous regime, so that through the idea of reform, renewal and change, wounds caused by the derailed authoritarian legacy of his charismatic predecessor Habib Bourguiba could heal (Saidi 2008). The clock visualizes the need to constantly update oneself and catch up to the continuous changes the country is supposedly going through (Kazdaghli 2006). Through a constant emphasis on the present time, it instigates a desire for the new, and at the same time, a sort of forgetting (Saidi 2008). The monumentalization of the "new era" of "change" paradoxically froze during its twenty-three years of rule; the idea that being up-to-date facilitates general progress, innovation, modernization and development and guarantees a better future for the generations to come. In sum, the clock-tower can be read as a phallic symbol of the prevailing desire for modernity.

The stubbornness of the place casts a shadow on the historical fact that the clock is erected on exact the same place as the master signifier of the colonial monumental landscape. The basic stratum or pedestal of the landscape saw the day of light as a constitutive element of the monumental translation of the French civilizing mission (Coslett 2009). The statue was erected in 1911 in honor of the late Jules Ferry, in the middle of the newly found 'Jules Ferry Square' at the eastern end of the main boulevard connecting the old traditional medina and the newly constructed modern city. The statue sculpted by Antonin Mercie was placed vertically in height, from where he looks over a Bedouin statuette offering him a bundle of freshly harvested alpha grass. A third statue of a sitting settler looks up at Ferry in full admiration. As President of the French Senate, Jules Ferry was at the forefront of the negotiations which led to the establishment of the protectorate in Tunis. When in April 1881, an army of 28,000 marines carried by a dozen French Navy warships set foot on

Tunisian land, absolute domination was acquired not only by the conquest of land and resources, but also through the colonization of time (Gallois 2013).

Having played a key role in the Enlightenment, the French felt morally legitimized to "re-orient North Africans back onto the path of historical progress" towards "a more human future" (Gallois 2013:253). Being in a class of their own, the French administration promised to lead Tunisia towards a better future. The road to progress and the new forms of being contained in the future promise of civilization were however seen as anachronistic. As many of the social and intellectual changes the French foresaw were already carried out, the colonial project failed in its project of "temporal dismantlement and reconstruction" as it promised a vision of the future that was already present (273). During the struggle for national liberation, the different elements of the monumental landscape were vandalized, destroyed, and later replaced (Sebag 1998, Guidice 2009).

In 1956, a state ceremony took place around the unbolted monument on the renamed 'Africa Square', in the presence of several senior officials of the newly founded independent government and surrounded by a celebrating crowd. The empty square was soon neglected and reduced to a simple roundabout until 1978. After twenty-two years of independent rule, and in light of the sharpest social and economic challenges in the history of the post-colonial regime, the square was refurbished with a triumphant equestrian statue of Bourguiba (Fromherz 2011). Sculpted by Hechmi Marzouk and Amor Ben Mahmoud (Karoui, 2012), it eternalized the image of the historical moment when the "eternal leader" returned from exile after signing the Franco-Tunisian agreement recognizing the internal autonomy of Tunisia. The president is monumentalized, strongly perched on a galloping horse, triumphantly saluting the cheering body politic, dressed in both a modern tailored suite and a traditional chechia. Reminiscent of the equestrian statue of Louis XV on the Place de la Concorde, the statue clearly mimics the French Monarchical trend in equestrian monumentalization (Coslett 2009).

Independence provoked an ambiguous process of entanglement of colonial and nationalist forms, representing the replacement of colonial logic by a nationalist one, but in the very facts, recovering colonial senses by mimicking the same symbolic economy of veneration. The postcolonial potentate was molded and

sculpted in metal, creating a “secular cult of the autocrat”, inhabited by the same morbid power against which he was once fighting (Mbembe 2006). This mimicry was but a symptom of a larger emerging disdain for past traditions. Traditions underwent a process of folklorization as they were instrumentalized by a rising tourist industry to satisfy the still predominant and often internalized orientalist gaze (Saidi 2008). It reflects the post-colonial regime’s predilection for the Western myth of progress. The ex-ecration of the past was considered necessary to put the country on the track of modernization to, as often emphasized by Bourguiba himself “raise the country up to the rank of developed countries” (Saidi 2008:106). In June 1988 however, less than one year after Ben Ali’s medical coup, the equestrian statue of Bourguiba in the center of Tunis was relocated to a park space in the northern suburb of La Goulette, where the president literally first set foot when he came back from exile in 1955. It was replaced by the first version of the November 7 Clock. Once the ‘Mujahid El Akbar’ (The Supreme Combatant, as he was surnamed) put aside, republican time would start to flow regularly. What became popularly known as ‘The Alarm-Clock’, was probably the only clock tower in the world with an enlarged number seven to mark six o’clock (Siino 2012). With the renovation of the main avenue in the end of the 1990s, the outdated clock monument was replaced by the ‘Big Ben Ali’ as it stands until today in honor of the third millennium.

The last monument standing nevertheless got an important function assigned in the round-a-clock debates following the ousting of the autocrat. For the first celebration of Labor Day since the revolution, the General Labor Union (UGTI) decided to furnish the clock with prints of iconic pictures of the revolution as a form of tribute. The clock was only embellished for a few hours, as the police instructed that the photographic dress be pulled away. It was considered offensive and harmful for the image of their profession, as it depicted scenes of police violence. Before the labor movement’s action, the theater collective ‘Al Halaka’ had already, in vain, proposed to re-invest the Clock Tower for the celebration of the revolution’s first anniversary. Nevertheless, during the next two anniversaries, the transitional government decided to pack the Clock with the colors and symbols of the national banner to counterbalance ongoing national controversies related to flag desecration by Islamist activists. The image of jihadi activists, who barehanded climbed the Clock to wave the Black Standard during the protests of the

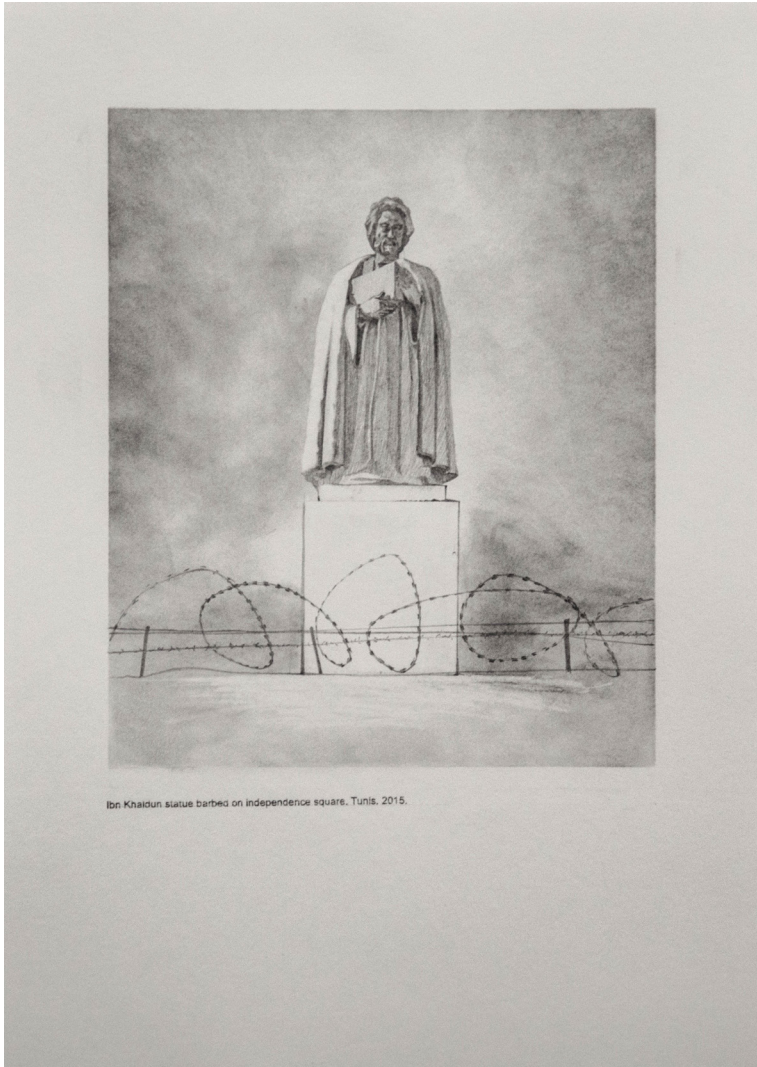
'Holy Koran', is imprinted on the Tunisian collective memory. After the image of the waving militants on the Clock Tower went viral, digital diversions popped-up in the online sphere, implicitly pointing at the supposedly backwardness of these activists in for instance the video 'The invasion of the Clock' (Benyoussef 2016). Comparing, for instance, their "conquest" of the clock in 2013 to the conquest of Mecca by prophet Muhammad in 630 CE. Another meme compared the action to the first human on the moon landing in 1969. Their supposed backwardness was for some commentators confirmed by the irony of History, as their action happened the same day as Europe adjusted its clock to summer time (Chine 2012). On Chamekh's apparently hopeful drawing, the clock points at 5 to instead of 5 past twelve as the viral picture clearly showed. He however drew six instead of 7 jihadis, unconsciously denying them some symbolic subversive agency.⁵⁵

55. Interview with visual artist
Nidhal Chamekh.

It was only in the context of the first presidential elections in November 2014, on the base of the latest instituted constitution, that a political debate started about the 'Novemberist Clock Tower'. The interim president running for re-election, Moncef Marzouki (2014) proposed, in vain, in a public post on social media a symbolic reparation by replacing the Clock-Tower with a monument to the glory of the martyrs. On the other hand, the rival, but winning candidate in the presidential elections, Beji Caid Essebsi stated that if he had the opportunity, he would organize the return of Bourguiba statue to its "natural place". Both presidential candidates proposed during their campaign to expel the 'Novemberist Clock', but as I will show, neither completely succeeded.

5/3 IBN KHALDUN

Finally, the third place on Chamekh's installation refers to 'Independence Square', the square where the statue of Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century father of modern sociology and historiography, is erected. It was elevated together with the equestrian statue of Bourguiba to symbolically counter the rampant feeling of "national disenchantment" (Béji 1982) after the body politic rose up against the liberal turn of the postcolonial regime, culminating in what is now known as the historical 'Black Thursday'. The monument, made by sculptor Amor Ben Mahmoud and Zoubeir Turki, replaced the tomb of the unknown French Soldier of World War II installed during the



Ibn Khaldun statue barbed on independence square, Tunis. 2015.

Figure 47. Ibn Khaldoun statue barbed on independence square. Tunis. 2015, Nidhal Chamekh

French protectorate. After independence, the tomb was moved to the war cemetery, and in 1978 replaced by the statue of Ibn Khaldun, as it stands today facing from afar the 'Big Ben Ali' (Coslett 2009). However, 1.5 meter shorter, the statue of the philosopher holding a book with his two hands and draped in traditional bournous and jalaba, was initially put right across of the Equestrian statue of Bourguiba, so that both statues were connected by the main avenue (Saidi 2007, Fromherz 2011). The established relationship through the juxtaposition of the two iconic monuments seem to imply a hierarchy between the monument of the literally higher positioned "Father of the nation", overseeing the new city, oriented towards the west, and the monument of a lower positioned medieval historian and sociologist, erected close to the old medina and oriented towards the east.⁵⁶ The statue of Ibn Khaldun is popularly known as the "Bedouin lost in the city" or the "Marabout abandoned by its followers" or as the "former Cheikh of the Zitouna Mosque expelled by the Bourguibist regime" (Saidi 2007:156). These processes of allocation, hierarchization and symbolization, not only turned the main avenue connecting the two monuments into a spatio-temporal axis, it also implied general processes of inferiorization of the past and its traditions compared to the present and its modernity (Saidi 2007). As it is shown on the drawing that contextualizes Chamekh's installation, during the latest revolutions the statue of Ibn Khaldun was surrounded by barbed wire. Although at first it looked like it was symbolically intended to protect the personification of the historic philosophic consciousness of the revolution, it soon became clear that the only place the army was protecting was the French Embassy, the former 'Colonial Residence' located right across Ibn Khaldun's 'Independence Square', the former 'Residence Square'.

Exactly seven months after the Venice Biennale closed and the last person could visit the 'Anti-Clock project', the equestrian statue of Bourguiba was brought back into the center of Tunis. As promised by the latest president Beji Caid Essebsi, the statue was effectively unbolted and removed from its previous location in La Goulette where it thus stood for 29 years. As an attempt to re-establish the post-colonial Bourguibist consensus, the "second great return" was inaugurated by the latest president on 'Victory Day', for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the mythical return of Bourguiba from exile in 1955. It now stands in between the November 7 Clock and Ibn Khaldun, on the main avenue carrying his name. Already in 2009, Essebsi stated in his

56. This juxtaposition has been inspiring for many artists, certainly in engaged literary circles during the rule of Bourguiba, for instance in the subversive poem 'Hymn of the Six Days' by Awlad Ahmed (1984), as well as during the rule of Ben Ali, for instance in the plot of the novel of Fawzi Mellah 'Le Conclave de la peur' (1993) or more recently in the premonitory novel of Kamal Al Riahi 'The Gorilla' (2011).

visionary memoir 'Habib Bourguiba: the wheat and the chaff' that "when time will do its work" and "history will override the news", "Habib Bourguiba will be released from purgatory and the equestrian statue of the most illustrious Tunisian resume its place in Tunis on the Habib Bourguiba Avenue, opposite the statue of Abderrahmane Ibn Khaldun, the most illustrious Tunisian sociologist of all time" (Essebsi 2009: 414). The return of the equestrian statue was quickly contested, as the leader of the syndicalist student movement (UGET) critiqued the president's nepotism by tagging the marble pedestal of the monument with the following phrase: "Send your son back home, and your other relatives as well". The statue now stands in front of the ministry of interior, on exact the same place as thousands of protesters stood in January 2011 demanding freedom and dignity.

The counter-proposition to replace the Clock-tower with a monument for the martyrs of the revolution is now long gone. As it spoke of a will to symbolically materialize the process of transitional justice, the latter proposition would have made legible non-measurable values, values that cannot be reduced to money or sheer force. As such, a monument for the martyrs could have been understood as a proper place from which it is possible "to transform in interior presence, the physical absence of those who were lost" and produce "the supplement of life necessary for the recovery of the dead in a new culture that can no longer forget the vanquished" (Mbembe 2006). At least, the former 'November 7 Avenue', the major north-south highway connecting the airport to the city, was renamed 'Avenue Mohamed Bouazizi'.

6/ CONCLUSION

Guided by the 'The Anti-Clock Project', our navigation of the actual urban space of Tunis among three of its most important memorial sites helped us read the palimpsestic nature of the city and analyze in detail how the configuration of this complex web of historical markers and their respective mediation of memory unfolded over time. Like the initial process of decolonization, the latest revolution did not fully annihilate the prevailing monumental landscape. On the contrary, it further enhanced its historical complexity. Throughout our guided journey, the contrasting imbricated strata of the monumental landscape that constitute this historical complexity were clearly spelled out. Although erased during the historical process of national

liberation, the material translation of the colonial civilizing mission still forms the pedestal, or the base stratum, of the monumental landscape today. Although erased by the Novemberist regime, the monumentalization of the modernist ambitions of the first postcolonial regime is re-integrated in the urban space of Tunis. Although erased by the recent revolution, the master signifier of the Novemberist monumental landscape still stands in the middle of the capital. By focusing on the restoration of these historical traces and the documentation of its erasures, it became clear that the initial colonial, and the following 'Bourguibist' and 'Novemberist', city-texts never fully disappeared, but were rather preserved, rewritten and eventually piled-up in what constitutes the contemporary monumental landscape.

While both the formal style elements and the juxtaposition of the different elements in the urban space of Tunis might imply a thoughtful outlined balance between tradition and modernity, none of the historical markers that constitutes the monumental landscape contradicts the fundamental linear conceptions of time ingrained in the normative idea that progress, innovation, modernization and development guarantees a better future. The contemporary city-text in its historical complexity, intertextuality and ambiguity only confirms in its form and content the recomforting and hegemonic character of modern temporal linearity. The tenacity of the last monument standing could therefore be read as an aesthetic translation of a state of social paralysis that freezes social dialectics and upholds a dual self-image or an internalized historical duality and supposed incompatibility between a backward Islamic past and a uniform democratic future. The singular future promise of civilization that constituted the colonial city text was never unleashed, rather only transformed in the singular promise of democratization endlessly repeated in the formation of the postcolonial city texts. Despite the aporia of time provoked by the spontaneous cathartic eradication of the 'Novemberist monumental landscape', and despite the momentary dignifying expulsion of the bifurcated self-image or inner twoness during the ephemeral revolutionary moment, Tunisia resumed its race on the secularized highway of progress and transition in the direction of a singular democratic future the world-system is prescribing. Fueled by a well-delineated and knowledgeable reading of its past sculpted in its monumental landscape, the current regime – again – restrains its political sensibilities to a singular present that withholds any imagination of potential dignifying futures.

The Clock-Tower, and more importantly the regime it represents, will thus probably stand tomorrow, symbolizing the apparently inexhaustible desire for, and transition to, democracy.

Though the slogan "Our 14 will never be 7 x 2" has now been clarified, it should by now also be clear that this promise sounded more convincing directly after Ben Ali fled the country than it does today. As I came to show, the central square of the postcolonial monumental landscape that was renamed 'November 7 Square' during the Ben Ali regime is now renamed 'January 14 Square'. This does not imply that the date the autocrat fled is predestined to become a new form of symbolic domination twice as strong as the Novemberist symbolic domination. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid, the city where the revolution initially started, organize their annual commemoration the day Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, provoking nationwide protests. The yearly commemoration of the revolution on December 17 in Sidi Bouzid not only contributes to a new culture that commemorates the vanquished who sacrifice their life for a liberated and dignified future, it also provisionally refuses to see the revolution as a historical rupture. As the last monument of the 'Novemberist landscape' was not destroyed, and in the absence of a monument in memory of the martyrs of the revolution in the capital of the country, Sidi Bouzid resists the officially instated date of commemoration and saturates time with the remembrance of sacrifice. And thus saturates time with the simple idea that the revolution will only end if this sacrifice is made redundant.

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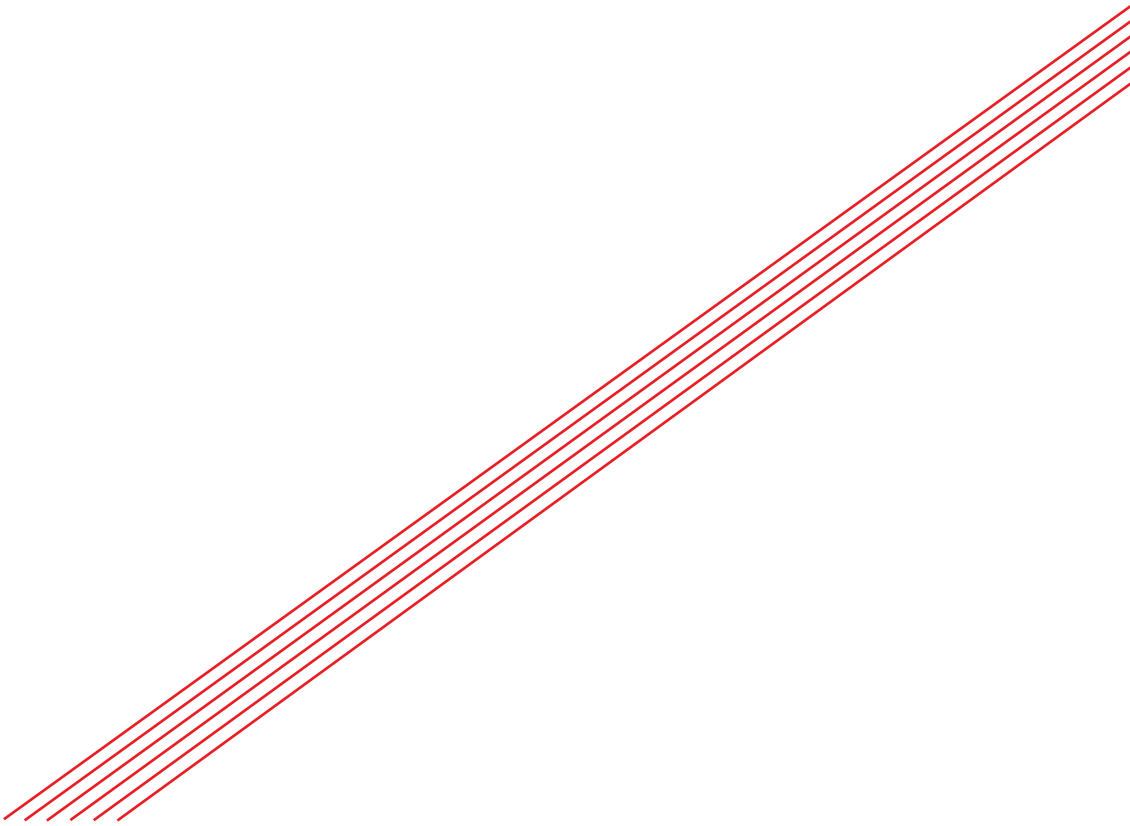
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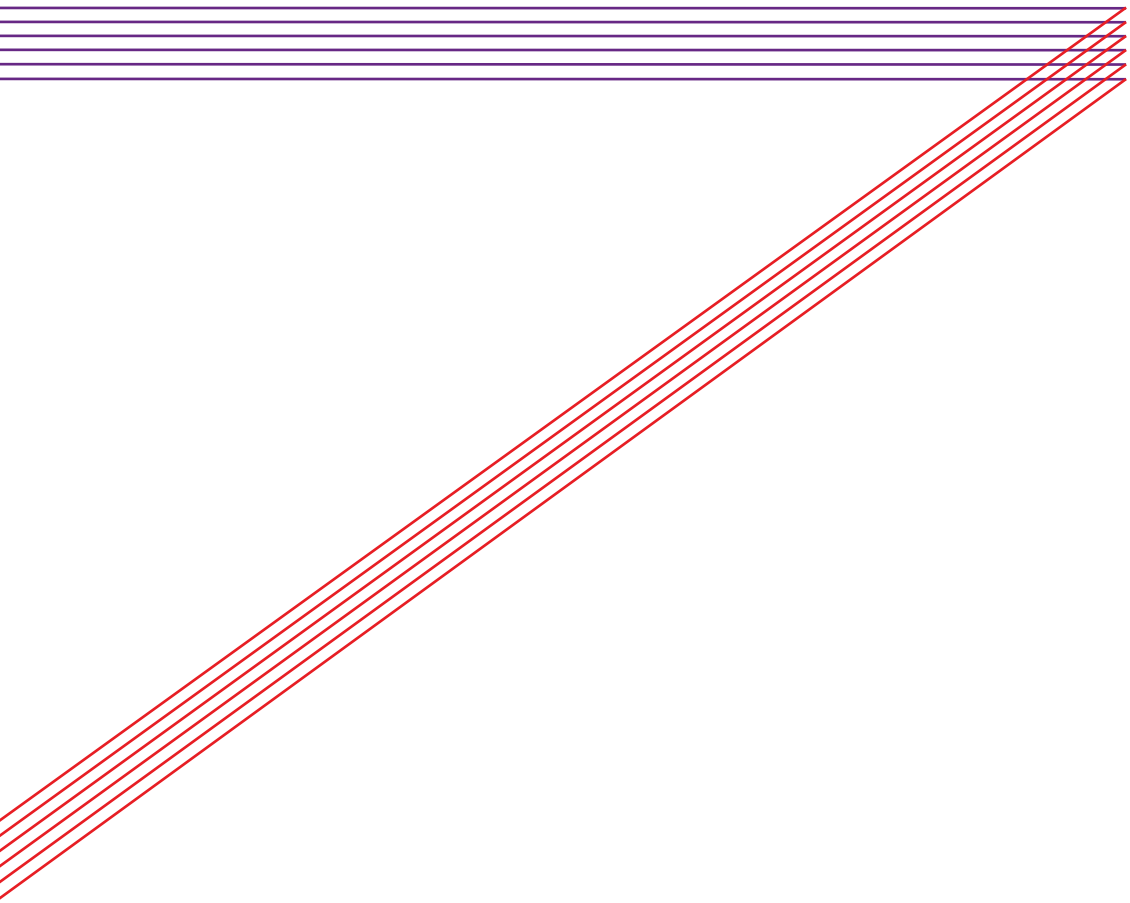
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PERFORMING SELF-SACRIFICE

The embodiment of the Tunisian
Revolution as necro political space
of appearance.





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PERFORMING SELF-SACRIFICE

Real size black and white silhouettes appeared, dispersed in different alleys in Tunis, during the ongoing protests in March 2011. The struggling body politic could now tangibly relate to its martyrs, as the existential offer of young carpenters, teachers, street vendors and the unemployed from Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa and Tunis finally gained an appropriate and magnifying presence in public space. Bilel Kaltoun Berreni, the artist behind “The Zoo Project” was struck by the story of Mohammed Hanchi, a young man who lost his life from a stray bullet during the revolution. By visually revitalizing Hanchi’s presence, Kaltoun vividly reintroduced the contours of sacrifice in the ongoing battle for freedom and dignity. The “Zoo Project” not only illustrated what was in vain being obscured by a defragmenting regime, but made relational the life of the departed, still able to witness the ongoing struggle. In this chapter, I argue that self-sacrifice, as visualized by the “Zoo Project,” has the potential to bring a space into being that one could call a necropolitical space of appearance.

Such a space of appearance, brought into being by bodily sacrifice, and thus by the disruption of biopolitical power and the diversion of necropolitical power through a productive and constitutive relation with the departed, carries the potential to rethink and reimagine fundamentally a given body politic. This volatile revolutionary space will be analyzed through the lens of performance, putting forward the wounded body of the muhamishin (the damned), as a moving object but also as an agent of power. The revolution and the possible liberation processes it entailed are not only captivating when seen as a collective choreography, but also as a historical volatile space that inspired artists and dancers to engage with. Revolutionary dynamics; indeed, pushed artists, theater makers, freerunners and dancers to invest the streets with nothing more than their moving bodies, disrupting the normative rhythm of daily life. The documentary directed by Maxime Avon, “Ceci est mon corps,” is witness to this bodily reinvestment of public space. However, not only individual artists put their body in danger by acting, running,



Figure 48. The Zoo Project, Bilel Kaltoun Berreni



Figure 49. 'Free me' by Hamdi Jouini, Callum Francis Hugh



Figure 50. Danseurs Citoyens, Francesca Oggiano

57. Based on interviews with artists Seif Jlassi, Rochdi Belgasmi, Bilel Jlassi, Hamdi Jouini and Atef Hamdani.

jumping and dancing in the streets. Different collectives such as Fanni Raghman Anni (*My Art in Spite of Myself*) and *Danseurs-Citoyens* (Citizen-Dancers) invested their urban environment during the sometimes physical battlefield for a new constitution. My understanding of the performance of self-sacrifice is not only a theoretical one, but is firmly grounded in an in-depth analysis of these two young artist collectives explicitly engaging in the revolution by performing and dancing in the streets. During the summer of 2014, I followed the work of both collectives. The performances that were the subject of our research emerged in the historical battlefield of defragmentation and regional and religious division that came to the fore after the toppling of the autocratic president. Through a bodily engagement in different interventions in public space and in-depth interviews with different members of both collectives, I was able not only to conceptualize what I coin a necropolitical space of appearance, but through this inductive conception to also grasp their political motivations and strategies. After a brief introduction to the work of both collectives, I will analyze how their performances relate to self-sacrifice on the one hand and to the emerging regional and religious defragmentation on the other. The performances of both collectives will be approached as performed necropolitical spaces of appearance that, to some extent, found munitions in their artistic practice to contribute to the reconfiguration of the space of politics and go to a certain extent beyond the prevailing binary between Modernism and Islamism. Bodily performances—and dance in particular—have the potential to go beyond normative concepts, linguistic forms and discourses, to understand and explain social realities better than any sociological treaty could ever be able to.

After the euphoria that went along with the toppling of the autocrat settled down, students of the Higher Institute of Dramatic and Fine Arts in Tunis were looking for ways to continue their revolutionary engagement. On 25 August 2011 their collective was founded, and their first performance was a fact. With Fanni Raghman Anni these students build up a recognizable corporeal language, putting forward their bodies in public space as mobile sculptures.⁵⁷ The collective defines itself as a group of unemployed youngsters marginalized in different artistic domains. Connecting different forms related to visual arts, drama, action-painting and contemporary dance, they nevertheless reject every reference to any art historical or current and repudiate all existing art philosophical concepts or policy categorizations.

The collective chose bodily performance over words and discourses to create a free space for critical reflection. They consider their practice as a new way to resist, not as art, and themselves as revolutionary fighters, not as artists. With this powerful paradox they are confusing and creating a distance from the institutionalized spheres of media, art and politics.⁵⁸

Danseurs-Citoyens, the second collective I followed in the summer of 2014, also only emerged after the dictator was ousted, as a collective of engaged dancers who invest the streets with spontaneous unannounced performances.⁵⁹ The collective gained popularity with the broader public through a series of four Internet videos entitled "I'll dance, despite everything," that kicked off online in November 2012. The first two videos of the series capture the founders of the collective and their friends dancing in the streets of the capital, on the stairs of the municipal theater, behind a police van or on the main avenue behind military barbed wire, at the Kasbah or close to the Ministry of the Interior. Their movement integrated the codified movements of classical ballet, hip-hop and contemporary dance. In the two last videos of the series, the concept took a participatory turn, integrating more traditional rhythmical elements. They conceive their interventions as participatory and natural expressions, mostly without any *mise-en-scène*, that use the body as a weapon of resistance and dance to reappropriate the streets and public space.⁶⁰ In sum, both Fanni Raghman Anni and Danseurs-Citoyens put their bodies in danger by performing in the streets in a context of regional and religious division. However, as we will see, both thematize sacrifice and deal with the emerging religious division in very different ways.

58. Most of the performances of Fanni Raghman Anni are captured on video uploaded and available on the internet <http://www.youtube.com/user/seif3644/>

59. Based on interviews with artist Bahri Ben Yahmed.

60. Most of the performances of Danseurs-Citoyens are captured on video, uploaded and available on the internet <http://www.youtube.com/user/bahriben/>

1/ NO MORE FEAR

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a damned young man in the southern interior of Tunisia in December 2010 triggered a diversion of the prevailing fear. The angst towards the authoritarian police state changed into anger and resistance. The body politic irrefutably put their bodies in danger, as a radical statement of refusal and suspension of the prevailing political fealty. They stood up to demand dignity. After the first peaceful protesters were killed, people lost all doubts. "No more fear" was a promise made in the very moment when the wall of trepidation broke down. This moment is best illustrated by the iconic picture

of an old man sitting on one knee in the middle of the Avenue Bourguiba, with a cigarette in his mouth, holding a baguette in his hand like a gun pointed towards a group of police officers. The most substantial achievement of the revolution was “the obliteration of the fear factor.” (Massad 2014:128).

The body politic lost their fear and put their bodies at the forefront of what would become a liberation struggle. The bodily diversion triggered by sacrifice culminated in a collective choreography of one-hand movement, on the main avenue of the capital. Bodies spontaneously assembled in front of the Ministry of the Interior, the nervous system and central site of regulation of the regime. “Dégage!”: this one collective-performative movement, translated in one performative word, toppled the dictator and planted the seeds of a possible regime change. A symbolic image held by some, depicting the face of Bouazizi pasted on the body of the ousted president, powerfully illustrates the dignifying aspirations of the body politic, turning the body politic inside out, placing the excluded at its head.

In the following episode, the damned people of the southern interior who travelled with “The Caravan of Liberation” to the center of power, occupied the symbolic Kasbah square until the demand of the complete dissolution of the political structures in power was met. The performed occupation by the interdependent collective of bodies defying the remnants of the beheaded body politic was a key element in the protest that resulted in the consequent shifts of power, the abrogation of the constitution and the partial dissolution of the existing political structures. However, after the first democratic elections in the history of the country and once a new constitution had to be written, the new singular and coherent collective body as quickly defragmented as it was formed, and regional and religious divisions emerged (Marzouki, 2011). Gendered, ideological and class tensions came to the surface (Hasso & Salime 2016). A discursive and sometimes physical battle came to the fore to influence the process of revolutionary constitution and state building. To fully understand these dynamics of redivision during this theater of constitution, it is not only necessary to reconsider the sacrificed body as a locus of power and imagination, but also as a battlefield where different forces fight over history and over a common present and possible futures (Butler, 2011).



Figure 51. Baguette Man, Fred Dufour / AFP



2/ A NECRO-POLITICAL SPACE OF APPEARANCE

“Mad is the person who burns himself like incense for the sake of this foolish and ignorant people and, my friend, I am that mad person.”⁶¹ (Abu al-Qasim Al-Shabbi)

2/1 PERFORMING REVOLT

Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first one to set himself ablaze, let alone to push his body to the fore as a weapon of political contention⁶² (Benslama, 2011; Gelvin 2012, Kraidy 2016). As the above cited fragment of a letter of the renowned poet Abu al-Qasim Al-Shabbi shows, self-immolation was already commonly propagated as an honorable albeit poetic act of political resistance during the struggle for national liberation. During this struggle, the political productivity of sacrifice strongly shaped an Islamic understanding of Tunisia as a sovereign nation (Lewis 2013). Since independence, the lively cost of the liberation movement is symbolically remembered through an annual commemoration of the bloodily suppressed uprising of April 9, 1938. Every year on April 9, the Tunisian national flag covers the tombs of the martyrs on the esplanade of the monument of the martyrs of Sejoumi.

Although the process of martyrization Bouazizi underwent, constructing a death narrative to forge a sense of post-revolutionary national collectivity (Mittermaier 2014), was certainly ambiguous (Rozen 2015), it highlights the importance of self-sacrifice in a revolutionary context. Without romanticizing the initial act of self-immolation that triggered the revolution, it can be considered a spontaneous, solitary but political performance (Uzell 2012, Bargu 2016). A performance that communicated in the right way, at the right moment, in the right place, the social and cultural conditions that motivated the revolution. Moreover, not only the act of self-immolation, but the revolutionary movement in its totality can be discerned as an embodied performance. In the context of modern theater studies, performance studies broadened the concept of theater to the realm of social science, allowing the application of theater theories to the analysis of political performances (Schechner, 2002). The revolution brought our academic gaze down from the intellectual ivory tower to the corporeal and by doing so rehabilitated the necessary agency to the

61. This is a fragment of a letter by Abu al-Qasim Al-Shabbi to his friend Al-Helewi. See: Shabbi, A.-Q. (1984). *The Complete Work*. Vol. 2. Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyah lil-Nashr. p.254 (in: Husni 1995).

62. During the last decade of Ben Ali's rule, oppositional forces had regularly recourse to their body as ultimate weapon of protest against the regime as co-leaders activists resorted to the method of hunger strike. This wave of enduring hunger strikes not always ended successfully and sometimes even continued until death liberated activists from the prevailing dehumanizing conditions in or outside prison (For a reflection on the dilemma's of hungerstrikes in the heat of this contentious wave of hungerstrikes see the reflection of Sadri Khairia (2002) in the *Courier* interational) Not only fatal hungerstrikes were common in the period preceding the revolution. Already in 2008, following corrupted recruitment methods announcement the Gafsa Phosphates Company inhabitants the mining center of the Gafsa region massively took the streets during consecutive six months what resulted in

hundreds of imprisonment, dozens of wounded and three dead (Allal 2010). Contrary to what is commonly acknowledged, Bouazizi was not even the first fatal self-immolation in the period preceding the Tunisian Revolution. In March 2010 Abdesslem Trimech sets himself on fire in front of the building of the general secretary of Monastir after having protested in vain against the repeal of his vending license. The young men was also an itinerant salesman, who was hindered in his work by the municipal administration. While in the hospital angry locals clashed with the police. Tens of thousands appeared at his funeral, that ended in a demonstration of hundreds against the government. Slogans relating to burning political and economic issues were shouted and symbols of authority were attacked by the moving crowd (Benslama 2011; Gelvin 2012; Kraldy 2016). The protests however, only lasted one day. Ap- proximately a month before Bouazizi, a young men from Metlaoui Chams Eddine Hemi had his turn. After a futile fight with his father over money, he needed to burn his papers and

body and the body politic (Sabry 2012b). This humble broadening was productive for the analysis of the Egyptian revolution (Alexandre, 2011, Colla, 2012, Amira & Combs, 2012, Tripp, 2013a), but to a lesser extent for the Tunisian one (Zahrouni 2013a 2013b). Through the lens of performance studies, political events such as revolutions do not happen spontaneously. Politics are directed and performed. In this political performance, one can discern two distinguished theaters (Butler, 2011, Tripp, 2013a). First, the theater of legitimacy is a carefully constructed theater built on an architecture and artifice of domination, where scripted roles are played out, reinforcing established hierarchies as a part of the natural order of things. The second one is the theater of self-constitution, the theater of the struggling people in all its diversity, its civil society, its intellectuals and leaders. During a revolution, the resilience of the established repertoire of the theater of legitimacy is being challenged by its diversion, in function of the reordering of power, bringing a new order into being. Although both theaters, certainly the theater of self-constitution, can appear unscripted, they have a particular dramaturgy and draw their actions and discourses from a repertoire or contribute to a newly constructed repertoire through a structured script, choreography and mise-en-scène. Symbols are reinvented and embodied for an audience on a certain setting or stage. (Alexandre, 2011, Colla 2012, Tripp, 2013a). In this light, a revolution is not something that happens spontaneously, but is also consciously brought into being through performance. Looking at the revolution through the lens of performance helps us grasp the ways in which political power has been bodily constituted, projected, received, accepted, and challenged (Tripp, 2013a).

2 / 2 EMBODIED PERFORMANCE

What is striking about any revolution when looked at from the perspective of performance is its strong embodiment. The glorification of social media as the *primum movens* of the historical shift Tunisia is going through, however, virtually disembodied our view of a complex reality, allowing too often for the body to be neglected as a mediating instance. Media need bodies in the street as much as the street requires media to exist globally. (Butler, 2011). However, through the over-emphasis of the allegedly central role of social media, the embodiment of the revolution together with the violence and bloody sacrifice that conditioned this revolution is too often neglected. Notwithstanding

that the Internet can indisputably be regarded as an important new communication instrument and one of the different public political spheres of dissidence (Aouragh, 2012), we need to reconsider the body not only as a site of biopolitical subjectivation, but also as a critical medium of political contestation (Fassin 2011, Kraidy 2012, Mourad 2014, Bargu 2016, Kraidy 2016, Hasso & Salime 2016). The performance of self-sacrifice is a potent form of disruption of the expected cooperation of the body within a biopolitical power constellation or even “an extreme manifestation of radical—biopolitical—insurgency, echoed in the main slogan of the revolution, ‘If the people one day decide they want life.’” (Kraidy 2016:43). Within a biopolitical imperative bodies must constantly be managed, governed and controlled, bodies are therefore at the same time the strongest medium to enact protest (Kraidy, 2012, Uzell, 2012).

Relying on Foucault, the authoritarian regime in Tunisia can indeed be defined as an intensive biopolitical regime, where disciplinary techniques of surveillance and governmentality are entangled with sovereign logics of exceptionality and decisionism. (Hibou 2006, Rua Wall, 2012, Kassab 2013, Kraidy 2016). In this powerful entanglement, different actors get ascribed distinct roles, ensuring every-body involved on all levels of this entanglement to act out their parts, reproducing the neoliberal attitudes, power relations, and hierarchies (Tripp, 2013a). Biopower is thus “the kind of power that manages people as bare life and decides which are worth continuing and which deserve death.” (Kraidy 2016:43). Since Tunisia signed its “structural adjustment plan” with the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in 1986 and ten years later its “association agreement” with the European Union to assure the installation of a Euro-Mediterranean free trade zone, Tunisia was frequently endorsed as an advanced and flourishing state on the road to progress and democracy. The script of the World Bank and the IMF, staged by the European Union, investors and policymakers contributes to a general belief in the “economic miracle” realized by the Tunisian authorities. Tunisians loyal to the regime were included in the miraculous theater of legitimacy, which guaranteed security, employment and growth. Exclusion, or the mere threat of being cut off from this so-called progress forced people into fealty by pro-active support or habitual obedience. Authority and power were interwoven into every aspect of everyday life and to exceptional instances of the power over life and death. Behind this façade of legitimacy, there was a harsh reality

go to Italy, he kept the honors to himself. Henri was one of the seven young tunisians who died through self-immolation, between Trimech and Bouazizi (Gelvin 2012). Remarkably, albeit in 2006 Sami Tlili, envisaged self-immolation as an ultimate act of resistance, albeit in a fictional way in his short film “Sans Plomb” (“Unloaded”) captured the general mood of everyday desperation that caught the youth in the 2000’s

of growing disparity, as an increasing group of people were not only left out from the contemporary material gains of this “economic miracle,” but also historically excluded from its cultural and social articulation through the secular modernization processes enforced by the respective postcolonial regimes (Merone & Cavatorta 2013). As we will see, under these circumstances, life is not only subjugated to disciplinary- and biopower but also to the power of death, i.e., necropower (Mbembe 2003).

Emerging from the shadow zone of the hinterlands or “the zone of non-being” (Fanon, 1952), the “Mohammishin” (Merone & Cavatorta 2013), appears in full daylight in the center of power. However, used in a derogatory sense, the term can be reclaimed in a Fanonian way to refer to the disenfranchised, who are rightly considered the protagonists of the revolution, as through their (en) countered violence with the security forces, they engaged the rest of society in a revolutionary drive. The damned is not a stranger to Tunisian history, he or she is “not any-body...but some-body” that can historically be perceive as “a body out of place” (Ahmed 2000:55) or as an “unruly body out of order.” (Hasso & Salime 2016:12-15). A body for which its social conditions prevent properly moving and breathing (Butler 2006). A claustrophobic body that has a “sense of being trapped, of having no way out.” (Marcusa 2014:19). A figuratively amputated, dismembered and castrated body (Bentouhami 2014). A body that, when asleep, continuously dreams of jumping, swimming, running, climbing and laughing, but is constantly on its guard and in a continuous state of muscular contraction when awake (Fanon 1961:16). An asphyxiated body (Bentouhami 2014) whose breathing is not only “observed” but “occupied” (Fanon 1967:65), therefore the breathing of the Mohammisshin is a “combat breathing” (Fanon 1967:65). Not a well-delineated and defined historical and ideological program, but the impossibility of breathing, often referred to in Tunisian as “Makhnouk”, becomes the *primum movens* of revolt.

The slogan 'Zaweli fi Tounis meyett hay' (The damned are a living dead in Tunisia) was tagged by Tunisian graffiti collective Zwewla on a university wall in the city of Gabes in November 2011. The damned indeed lives under the constant threat of exclusion from the protection of the postcolonial regime, a violent exclusion, accompanied by torture, disappearance, exile or social death (Hibou, 2006). Social death can in this light be discerned as the full and public exclusion of healthcare, public services or the labor market (Rua Wall, 2012), or in a more structural

understanding of violence, as a possible “form of death-in-life.” (Mbembe 2003:21). A “perpetual lived contradiction” (Butler 2006:7) that leaves the muhammishin no choice that can result in a livable life, doomed “to suffer death [...] at the heart of life itself.” (Butler 2006:17). Social death is closely tied to the denial of the fundamental rights over one’s own body and the loss of any political status, or simply to the “expulsion from humanity altogether.” (Mbembe 2003:21). As argued by Fanon (1967: 128) life is not the “flowering or a development of an essential productiveness” but “a permanent struggle” against an “omnipresent” “ever-menacing” “incomplete” but “close and contagious” death. In sum, for the muhammishin “to live is not to die” and “to exist is to maintain life.” (Fanon 1961:671).

If social death is “the paradox of dying while alive” (Butler 2006: 7), it is through the self-honorable impulse to end the paradox of social death that we must understand how the fatal destruction of more than 300 struggling bodies gave life to the revolution. As it is through the unfolding of life that power establishes its dominion, Foucault (1978: 138-139) saw death as a moment to escape power’s limit and suicide as: “a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone...had the right to exercise...it testifies to the individual and the private right to die, at the borders and the interstices of power that was exercised over life.”⁴⁷ This is why for Hibou (2006: 353) the only freedom left for the muhammishin to constitute themselves as subjects in the hope to finally live is the gesture of turning against themselves, to the only thing they have left, to their bodies. Following Murray (2006) the disruption of the sovereign and biopolitical order by self-sacrifice not only destroys the very conditions for biopolitical regulation and control but also produces extra-discursive or even non-discursive effects outside the biopolitical logic of everyday life. Through self-sacrifice, the body is diverted as agent of power and regains a sense of dignity, as the structural violence inflicted on the body is seized, given a new turn and changes direction (Fanon 1961). The body becomes a weapon of what Banu Bargu (2014:85) aptly names “necro-resistance”, that is a weapon that “negates life and turns death against the power regime, engaging in an ultimate refusal of bio sovereign domination” and by doing so “transforms the body from a site of subjection to a site of insurgency, which by self-destruction presents death as a counter conduct to the administration of life”. As stated by Paul Gilroy (1993) as death is that from and over which an enslaved human has power, it can be represented as agency. Self-sacrifice then not only creates the

possibility to escape the limits of power, the produced necropolitical effects can open up a space to pave the way for new political subjectivities and relationalities. The subversive power of death paradoxically has the potential to give life to new ways of being and relating, to a liberated and dignified body politics.

2 / 3 FOR THE SAKE OF THE PEOPLE

Self-sacrifice can thus bring into being a necropolitical space of appearance that carries the potentiality to rethink and reimagine fundamentally the organization and structure of a political system. As stated by Hannah Arendt (1958) and critically reworked by Judith Butler (2011), acting and speaking together in the streets can bring into being a space of appearance that opens up time and space outside and against the temporality and established architecture of a given regime, that reconfigures what is regarded public and redefines the space of politics. Analyzing the differences between the private and the public realm, Arendt introduced the concept of a space of appearance as a precondition for political action. Her metaphoric, transposable and volatile understanding of the polis is detached from any geographical border or physical location. A space of appearance comes about where people act and speak together to organize politically. Spaces of appearance are not tied to a location but brought into being by action and speech, and thus must always be recreated anew wherever individuals gather and deliberate together politically. This re-creation occurs where and whenever bodies gather together through the performance of deeds or the articulation of words. A space of appearance depends on political power to exist, but at the same time generates and perpetuates power by its coming into being. It disappears as soon as it arises, whenever the gathered bodies finish to act out and deliberate public matters.

For a space of appearance to come into being, one body must appear to others and vice versa. The notion of mutually constitutive agency, the role of the other in the constitution of the self, is central for our understanding what Charles Tripp (2013a) designates as “the ontology of performance and performative power.” By performing in the street, one gains recognition by other bodies and, through this encounter, also self-recognition. This relationality underlines the fundamental ethical component of a space of appearance. The self does not only appear to the other as the other appear to the self, the self also appears for the other as the

other appears for the self. The body establishes a perspective that the self cannot contain (Butler, 2011). This mutuality is further reinforced by collectively performing against the dominant power, defining the mutually constituted collective self against the other, as ruler and regime.

The act of self-immolation can thus be discerned as a “spectacular putting to death of the self” (Mbembe 2003:38) that in an honorable way stops its “fatal splintering,” a way to prevent the virulent shattering of a self “imperilled by shame and fear [...] internally split up and at risk of falling into pieces,” a self that “cannot know itself as a I” as “it has not come to know itself as the ‘you’ addressed by the other.” (Butler 2006:13-17). It concerns an alienated self that is the historical product of a “systematic negation of the other” to whom “any attribute of humanity has been denied.” (Fanon 1961:625). Paradoxically, its destruction through self-immolation opens up a space for the Other that can lead towards “selfhood, agency and even life.” (Butler 2006:13). The ethical dimension of sacrifice can thus be discerned as a collective healing process of self-creation, as a death for the Other. One sacrifices one Self for the Other. One puts one Self to death or is willing to offer one’s death, that is, one’s life for the Other, or as stated by Al-Shabbi “for the sake of this foolish and ignorant people.” Hence, relying on a particular ethic or even an aesthetic or bodily sensation (Murray, 2006), a necropolitical space of appearance has the potential, through this collective healing of the Self, to provoke a “deconstitution of the conditions of social death” and a process of collective bodily self-reconstitution (Butler 2006:16-19). As the Mohammisshin, it literally and metaphorically liberates itself and brings life into being through sacrifice.

3/ A LIBERATING CHOREOGRAPHY

Fanon (1961) saw dance as a form of relaxation that relieves the continuous state of muscular contraction and suffocation, closely connected to processes of purification, and through which prevailing violence is canalized, transformed, and if not expelled at least sublimated. Dance is thus a way to temporally and symbolically externalize the death drive or the necropower in a given situation. It is as such a collective attempt to exorcize, liberate and finally explain and understand oneself. Looking at revolts through the lens of performance and at artistic interventions in public space as necropolitical spaces of appearance, renders visible

what Mbembe (2010:19) coins its “oneiric and aesthetic dimension”. A dimension, that can be understood as “the rise of man [sic] to the highest stage of his symbolic faculties, beginning with the whole body, agitated rhythmically in its limbs and reason by singing and dancing - strident laughter and superabundance of life”. When closely analyzing revolt as a liberating choreography of agitated bodies, it becomes discernible that what makes an embodied performance powerful depends on its form. A performance must speak to an audience, demand attention so that people can identify and relate to what is being performed (Tripp 2013a) .

Starting from an in-depth analysis of Fanni Raghman Anni and Danseurs-Citoyens, I will consider the embodiment of one of the main political tensions that emerged during the theater of self-constitution. Through their bodily performances, both collectives challenged the violence enacted by Islamist activists during this revolutionary period, albeit both in very different ways. An in-depth qualitative comparison of both collectives will hopefully provide insights that can go beyond the re-emerging antagonism between Islamism and Modernism in our understanding of what is at stake in the Tunisian revolution.

3 / 1 **INSPIRED BY SACRIFICE: FANNI RAGHMAN ANNI**

For Fanni Raghman Anni bodily sacrifice is a thematic element in nearly all their performances. We will, however, focus only on three of them: “JaHna,” “ShaHid est Messkien (Khawana)” and “W.C.” “JaHna,” the first defiant performance of Fanni Raghman Anni opens with five bare bodies covered only with white paint and a simple loincloth, chained by their neck and wrists, strolling in the streets. The five aligned performers represent resurrected martyrs and the white paint over their bodies symbolizes their innocence as witnesses of the ongoing revolution. Taking a close look at the situation on the ground after the expulsion of the authoritarian president, the five martyrs wonder if their sacrifice was really worth it. Even though the dictator might have been ousted, their brothers and sisters still seem to be chained and dominated. A bloody fight erupts and red paint flies through the air, not only hitting their white bare bodies, but also bystanders captured by the spontaneous performance. At the end of the performance, the resurrected martyrs lay on the streets, killed for a second time. The title of the

performance "JaHna" is a portmanteau of the words "JHanam" (Hell) and "Janna" (Heaven) and reminds us of the paradoxical imbrication of freedom and death.

In the second performance "ShaHid est Messkien (Khawana)" (The martyr is poor (traitors)), Fanni Raghman Anni put forward the still unresolved responsibility of the killing of the martyrs of the revolution through a poetic and expressive concatenation of Tunisian proverbs. The collective was invited on National Television for the show: "Nawartuna" (You make us proud) to perform their poem. But at the last minute they were not allowed on the set, probably (not officially) because of the text on their T-shirts, referring to the title of the performance. Officially it was said that their CD malfunctioned. After the show, when they asked for an official explanation, a heavy fight erupted with the production crew. After this incident, they were invited to the private Ettounsiya television station to explain to the spectators about the censorship they underwent on national television, to freely perform and state to their audience that the martyrs are muhammishin, and that not acting against their continuous marginalization would thus be an act of treason.

In the third and last performance "W.C." (Water Cycle), colors seem to have died. It opens with five bodies dressed in black robes with pointed hats, followed by a sixth one in a white robe waving a colorless Tunisian flag, marching slowly in the direction of a body covered in white cloth lying motionless on a wooden construction in the streets. The sound of the performer's kabkabs, the traditional wooden bathing shoes, breaks the self-imposed silence before somebody screams: "Allah-o Akbar!" The body is lifted by the men in black, elevating the situation to a symbolic funeral. Out of the motionless body a blue clown drenched in clay emerges, aggressively threatening bystanders. Power is resurrected as the clown pulls apart a baby doll with his teeth and steps out of the wooden construction to undress his carriers and smear their bodies with blue clay. In sum, the resurrection of a new tyrant out of the ashes of the sacrificed martyr during the performed colorless national funeral rite reminds the spectator, as often stated by the Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Najem, that revolutions tend to devour their children.



Figure 52. JaHna by Fanni Raghman Anni, Seif Jlassi



Figure 53. Je danserai malgré tout by Danseurs Citoyens, Ben Yahmed, Bahri

3 / 2 THE BODY AS MEDIATOR: DANSEURS-CITOYENS

Whereas bodily sacrifice is a central element in nearly all of the performances of Fanni Raghman Anni, it is only explicitly present in some of the performances of Danseurs-Citoyens, and this only since the murder of the political opposition figure, Chokri Belaïd.⁶³ The collective was certainly encouraged by Besma Khalfaoui (2013), Belaïd's widow, when she publicly underlined the necessity to support the youth who dance in the street as a form of resistance in a context of national division, in an op-ed for the *Tribune de Genève*. Dozens of online videos have reported the violent reactions of security forces against the impressive but peaceful crowd of millions present at the funeral of Belaïd. One of them, however, was unique, signed by Danseurs-Citoyens. In "Feel it do it," a girl and a boy rise from an anonymous crowd mobilized in the aftermath of the first targeted political murder of the revolution, and perform impromptu dancing in the street indifferent to the tear gas directed at them.⁶⁴

In another video, Danseurs-Citoyens" explicitly pay tribute to Chokri Belaïd. During a manifestation in remembrance of Chokri Belaïd in March 2013, five bodies awoke from the ground, bodily paying tribute to the legacy of the lawyer and political leader and commemorating his unfortunate political death. Surrounded by a circle of spectators, they slowly moved close to the ground, accompanied in the background by the revolutionary poetic words of the late Sghaïer Ouled Ahmed.

In "Resisdance," one of the few choreographies of Danseurs-Citoyens that follows a narrative structure, the sacrifice of one of the enchained dancers plays a pivotal role in the performed historical dynamic of the Tunisian revolution. After the dancers collectively bury and mourn the martyr, the power relation in the performance starts to shift. The enchained dancers regain their power and overthrow their master. The body and its potential suffering and destruction is put forward as a mediator for dignity and an invitation for unity and liberation.

Finally, in the performance "Not to Forget," a dozen young b-boys (breakdancing youth) with a subtle black line dividing their face in two are transporting a wooden box in a precise but open classical contemporary choreography, along the Paris Avenue in the

63. Chokri Belaïd was a charismatic and eloquent lawyer and leftist opposition leader under the Ben Ali regime an even more so during the revolution. On 6 February 2013 however, he was fatally shot outside his house in El Menzah, Tunis. His funeral gained national proportions. It was held on 8 February at the Jellaz cemetery and was attended by more than a million people, provoking clashes between police and protesters. The political murder provoked the most severe political crisis since the start of the revolution.

64. The video "Feel it do it" is later put offline but integrated in the edited version "We are just fucking angry! A.C.A.B". This last video is unfortunately also put offline.

65. In the period following Chokri Belaid's assassination Tunisia witnessed an escalation of deadly fights between its military and jihadi cells (Okba ibn Nafaâ, the al-Qaida cell in the Ansar al-Sharia (AQIM) and Islamic Maghreb) hiding in Charambi mountain in Kasserine near the Tunisia-Algeria border and in Jebel Jelloud in the governorate of Ben Arous (For a detailed account of the military martyrs see: Mejeri 2014).

capital of Tunis. Whereas the case was initially the main object shaping their movements, along the way the performers spontaneously interact with the surrounding street furniture, such as a trash bin, a chair of a fortuitous street vendor, the bumper of a passing car. The group then suddenly aligns and rolls on the ground, blocking the metro line in an apparent collective suicidal move. When the collective stands up again and arrives at the end of the avenue, the only women of the group have the honor of opening the box. The choreography ends when the national flag is collectively pulled out of the so-far mysterious small trunk. The performance was intended as a tribute to the sacrifice of the soldier martyrs of the national army.⁶⁵ The black line dividing the dancing bodies in this last performance is a part of the artistic project by Mouna Jmal Siala (2014). Driven by her fear of what she coins as an emerging "obscurantism" that would "weaken, divide, destabilize the nation and lead to barbarism," she collected profile pictures divided with a black marker of hundreds of different Tunisians she encountered on her way to say "No to division!"

3/3 DE-FRAGMENTATION AND DIVISION

In the direct aftermath of the ousting of the president, a "Caravan of liberation" marched from different damned regions to the center of the capital to demand the total dissolution of the authoritarian power structures still in place. After the first occupation of the Kasbah square, a "Caravan of thanks," that is a four-kilometer-long convoy travelled back from the capital to the symbolic region of Sidi Bousid, to praise the interior regions for their sacrifice. This process of mutual regional reconciliation left an important mark on the minds of those who fought against the re-emerging regional division in the constitutional phase of the revolution. Transregional solidarity was also an essential aspect of the artistic practice of both collectives that explicitly engaged in the damned interior and rural areas of Tunisia, bridging the tenacious regional breach.

Through the explosion of the energy of the oppressed youth, Fanni Raghman Anni attacks different cities. They come out in the street and challenge the rhythm of everyday life and its cultural norms anchored in entrenched traditions. The performances of Fanni Raghman Anni were repeated several times in different cities over Tunisia, from Bizerte to Sousse over Gafsa,

Nabeul but also in Kef, Tozeur, Kasserine, and even in a small village next to Mount Chaambi.

With the aforementioned performance "Resisdanse," Danseurs-Citoyens engage with a tour in the damned interior and rural areas of Tunisia, in the souks, markets and medinas of Gafsa, Elkar, Metlaoui, Sbeilta, Mornaguia, Hazaira, Cité Ezzouhour, Meknassi and Kasserine. Their outspoken prejudices about the civilized urban Tunisia versus the rural backward mentality in the villages are severely crushed. They encountered a crowd willing to listen and warmly showing their appreciation. The collective then understood the creative and participatory potential of the Tunisian people, as well as the true reality, not the one constructed by the media who facilitate the regional split.

Although both collectives were deeply affected by a physical attack committed by Islamist activists, each collective developed its own way to deal with the religious rift they were violently confronted with. The viral video series "I'll dance despite everything" that laid the foundation of Danseurs-Citoyens was initially triggered and inspired by an incident during the event "The People Demand Theater" in the course of the World Theater Day in the spring of 2012 in Tunis. On 25 March 2012, the Association for Drama Arts held a celebration. Classic dramatic theater in Renaissance costumes was playing on the stairs of the municipal theater. The same day, Islamists demonstrated for the National Day of the Holy Quran, which was instituted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs after several cases of Koran desecration had caused commotion. The Ministry of Interior gave permits for both demonstrations to be held at the same time. The theater event had to be held between the Municipal Theater and Hotel Africia in Tunis, while the Koran event took place between January 14 Square and the TGM metro station, at the other end of the Bourguiba Avenue. The Islamist protesters however came closer to the theater and several activists attacked the event. They destroyed the first stage, took possession of the second one and chanted back: "The people demand a new caliphate!" They attacked the artists, until the police came and asked the artists to withdraw into the Municipal Theater. There the actors decided to continue their performance of Romeo and Juliet, dressed in the national white and red. Around the performance, people held the Tunisian flag and banners saying: "Give me theater, and I give you a great people" or "Art is a form of resistance."

The Islamist activists, pushed back by the police, started throwing eggs, mugs and bottles at the artists. In reaction to the violence, a group of artists waved the Tunisian flag and sang the national hymn several times. When tempers flared up, the police interrupted the performance, pushing the actors back into the theater for their security. The activists rushed to the steps of the theater and knocked heavily on its doors.⁶⁶ Artists performing in front of the Municipal Theater were aggressively pushed back by Islamist activists who shouted they had to go back inside their theaters, as the street did not belong to artists anymore.

Inspired by the Deleuzian words of Stéphane Hessel "To create is to resist," Danseurs-Citoyens regards dance as a duty to pass on hope. They use their bodies as weapons of resistance, defending life against obscurantism and retrograde forces that propagate death. Danseurs-Citoyens wants to act against division and their purpose is precisely coexistence. Since they were pushed back between the four walls of the theater during "The People Demand Theater" event they conceived their performance as a spontaneous reaction to a perceived Islamization of public space and reclaimed the streets against obscurantism. They are at war over public space and art, and dance is their weapon. Not only in real life but also on the Internet, they lead a cyberwarfare. Driven by fear, they are fighting with their love for life, against death propagated by Islamists. At the same time, they do not simply want to be a reaction to this perceived Islamization. By combining traditional and more contemporary music and dance, Danseurs-Citoyens leaves an open space at the end of every performance for passers-by to abandon their role as spectators, to become citizen-dancers themselves, and escape the tense political and religious insecurity and pessimism. Using traditional dance, they want to bring the people back to their essential identity of being Tunisian, and the joy of living the good life, despite everything.

Although the founding members of Fanni Raghman Anni were also present during the struggle in the middle of the event "The People Demand Theater," they were not known to the general public until a performance in El Kef was violently interrupted by Islamist activists. After an arson attack on the local theater of El Kef in July 2013, Fanni Raghman Anni showed their solidarity by travelling south to perform "Guétlouh" (They Killed Him), a tribute to the assassinated opposition leader Chokri Belaïd. The collective took the risk even though they were aware of a possible confrontation as the central market downtown they chose

to perform at is known for its high concentration of Islamist activists. Nineteen bare bodies performing in the streets only covered with a loincloth reminded some of a pilgrimage and considered it a blasphemy. The presence of a banner in the background of the performance with a portrait asking, "Who killed Chokri Belaïd?" worked like a red rag to a bull. The actors were verbally and physically attacked (with glass and stones) and even received death threats. They again had to take refuge in a theater. This event was covered strongly by the media; not because artists were attacked by Islamists, but because the police arrested the artists and not their attackers.⁶⁷ The incident took place in a period when the government was accused by the members of the opposition and human rights groups of seeking to curb civil liberties, when journalists and artists questioned the independence of the judiciary system and condemned the frequent attacks by the police on the freedom of (artistic) expression.

Despite the violent event and the ensuing court case Fanni Raghman Anni choose to stay on view, to resonate with what is living in society and to continue overcoming exclusion by explicitly choosing the side of the oppressed. Even after the attack by Islamist activist in El Kef, they do not consider Islamist activists as their enemies, but as an essential part of their audience and therefore as a part of their performance, as they are conceived as a virus to contaminate and include others. Everyone who even just pronounces the name of the collective, be it in a critical or aggressive way, will through the enunciation of its possessive form, appropriate art, despite him/herself.

Their performances take possession of their audience, not only through the pronunciation of the collective's name but through the formal explosion of colors that accompanies each performance, and contaminates and leaves indelible traces not only on their audience, but also on the surrounding private and public property. Some passers-by might hit back with paint, sometimes with words of outrage, empty bottles or stones. Others are moved by and move along with, interact and become part of the performance, despite themselves. Spontaneously performing in the street is an unconditional invitation to others. The performance then becomes a reflection on the collective experience elaborated through an open and unpredictable interaction, without any salute or applause. Standing face to face, staring their audience in the eyes, they provoke, shock and break the prevailing passivity. The performances are radically open and free, without

66. Following this symbolic incident, the Interior Ministry banned all demonstrations on the Bourguiba Avenue. During the following national day of the martyrs, people nevertheless tried to occupy the Avenue but clashes erupted with the police. In the following period the police found inventive ways to prevent people to gather on the streets of the Municipal Theatre, they for instance occupied themselves or sometimes even covered the stairs with oil. Finally, before the ban was repealed, a Facebook event gathered hundreds of youngsters for a read-in on the Avenue.

67. After having taken refuge in the theater they called the police. Nevertheless, the police did not intervene, but arrested the artists. The attackers followed to the police station to file a complaint. They denounced the show as indecent as the actors were partially naked. In the official complaint filed at the police station, the attackers do not mention any religious motivations. Finally, the artists and not the attackers had to appear for the public prosecutor. They were expected to be charged with indecent behavior/public indecency and potential violation of public morals. The collective called through social media for a rally in front of the court of El Kef to defend their (artistic) freedom. Leila Toubel, artistic director of theatre El Hamra formed, together with Azedine Ganounne (El Hamra), Fadel Jaabi (Familia), Raje Benhammar (Mad'art), members of Tof ahadi (defiance) and the El Massar party, among others formed a support committee to demand a fair trial and to defend freedom of expression. The general prosecutor questioned the 15 actors charged with "public indecency", a charge that

a fixed outcome. Fanni Raghman Anni is fully prepared to sacrifice itself collectively to liberate the way for others. This radical devotion pushes its audience to pose unexpected questions and reconsider themselves and their relation to what and whom they see and experience. The spectator might be disappointed today, tomorrow he will question, and finally he will revolt again too.

4 / CONCLUSION

Looking at political reality through the lens of performance, as a tense entanglement of a theater of self-constitution and a theater of legitimacy, putting forward the body as a central unit of analysis and aesthetics as an empowering condition, precisely sharpened existing political insights in the Tunisian revolution. After the wall of fear broke down and the autocrats fled the uprising, and after the demand for the dissolution of the power structures in place through the occupation of public space was partially met, the body politic left the streets, or at least only sporadically reinvested the streets for punctual mobilizations. While generational, regional and religious divisions regained the surface, aesthetic performances dealing with bodily sacrifice symbolically blew life into a collapsing revolutionary space. Both collectives researched in this paper succeed, albeit symbolically, to make necropolitical spaces of appearance come into being in a context of political division.

Where Fanni Raghman Anni is not only inspired by self-sacrifice, but thematizes it and elaborates a new corporeal language based on its aesthetics, Danseurs-Citoyens reproduce rigid codified corporeal movements such as ballet, breakdance or contemporary dance, and only discursively relates to self-sacrifice. Both practices also enact the youthful potentiality to put the Tunisian people in its diversity back in the center of attention and bridge the generational gap, as was the case in the heyday of the revolution. Also, the regional divide is actively contested and overcome by prioritizing the damned interior south of the country over the wealthy coastal regions and capital center.

The obvious point of dissonance between the two collectives lies in the religious division. While both collective were physically attacked by Islamist activists, Danseurs-Citoyens anxiously reinforces the divisions which they are trying to fight by defending life over death and obscurantism, by reducing and

expelling religious activism to the sphere of death. Despite everything, the life of the “muhammishin” is again expelled, doomed to remain the outsider and to continue his or her struggle against an omnipresent death. Its body is claustrophobically hemmed in once more, suffocating with the prevailing pressure of social death. On the other hand, Fanni Raghman Anni through their viral and inclusive embodied practice, not only disrupt prevailing biopolitical power, but also divert necropower and transform their bodies into weapons of necroresistance, despite themselves. By persevering in a continuous reimagination of death in their embodied theater of self-constitution, they produce extra-discursive and even non-discursive effects outside prevailing biopolitics: to prevent the muhammishin losing the struggle against an omnipresent death; to prevent the Harraga (the contemporary North African nomads) from burning their papers and existing border and risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean; to prevent the Jihadi, the radicalized youth, from engaging in a Manichean bloody war; to prevent the Bouazizi, the forlorn ones, from committing suicide and self-immolation. Life cannot be defended against death or obscurantism but only through its total imbrication with freedom and death. A contentious choreography with a collective dramaturgy that united all the people at the same moment in the same space to contest the biopolitical power of the ancient regime could only come into being through self-sacrifice. Not only the collective will to get rid of the dictator constituted the people; the space of appearance that came into being through the collective distress about the destruction of human life, the martyrs of the revolution, mutually constituted the people in all its diversity. The sacrifice of more than 300 unruly bodies entailed a space where a fundamentally ethical redefinition of the ontological relation between the Self and the Other could take place. Everybody is included by the universalizing power of death in the center of the struggle for a better life. This fundamentally ethical ontological redefinition can plant the seeds for a possible regime change, redefining and restructuring the space of politics, only in relation to the sacrifice of life and the suspension of the paradox of social death.

Every time a necropolitical space of appearance comes into being, it provokes a possible deconstitution of the conditions of social death and a process of collective bodily self-reconstitution, as it is through sacrifice that the muhammishin liberate themselves and paradoxically bring life for the other into being. Citing the poem “Facing the night” of the Haitian writer René Depestre, Frantz

can potentially carry a sentence of up to six months prison. They were accused to have thrown bags with dirt and to be naked with pilgrim clothes, which the locals saw as a provocation. The collective denied and countered the accusation. After further police investigation, the tribunal of El Kef finally dismissed the 19 actors. While leaving the court, the accused members of the collective were welcomed by dozens of people chanting the national anthem and repeated their demands with the slogan «El Fan, Horyya, Karama Watania» (“Art, Freedom and dignity for the nation”).

Fanon (1961: 604) reminds us that it is impossible to engage in art that truly shakes and awakes the people without the “fundamental concession” of “flesh and blood” of “oneself to others” so central in every liberation struggle. These concessions can be regarded as the precondition for any artwork to avoid reproducing prevailing colonial stereotypes, alienated romanticized or exotic images, and to be able to attain the real demystified authentic and present “boiling place where knowledge is prefigured.” (603) This “renewed gesture” (616-617) can then finally relax the prevailing muscular tensions, enhance and dignify the respiratory rhythms, and nourish a take-off of the imagination.

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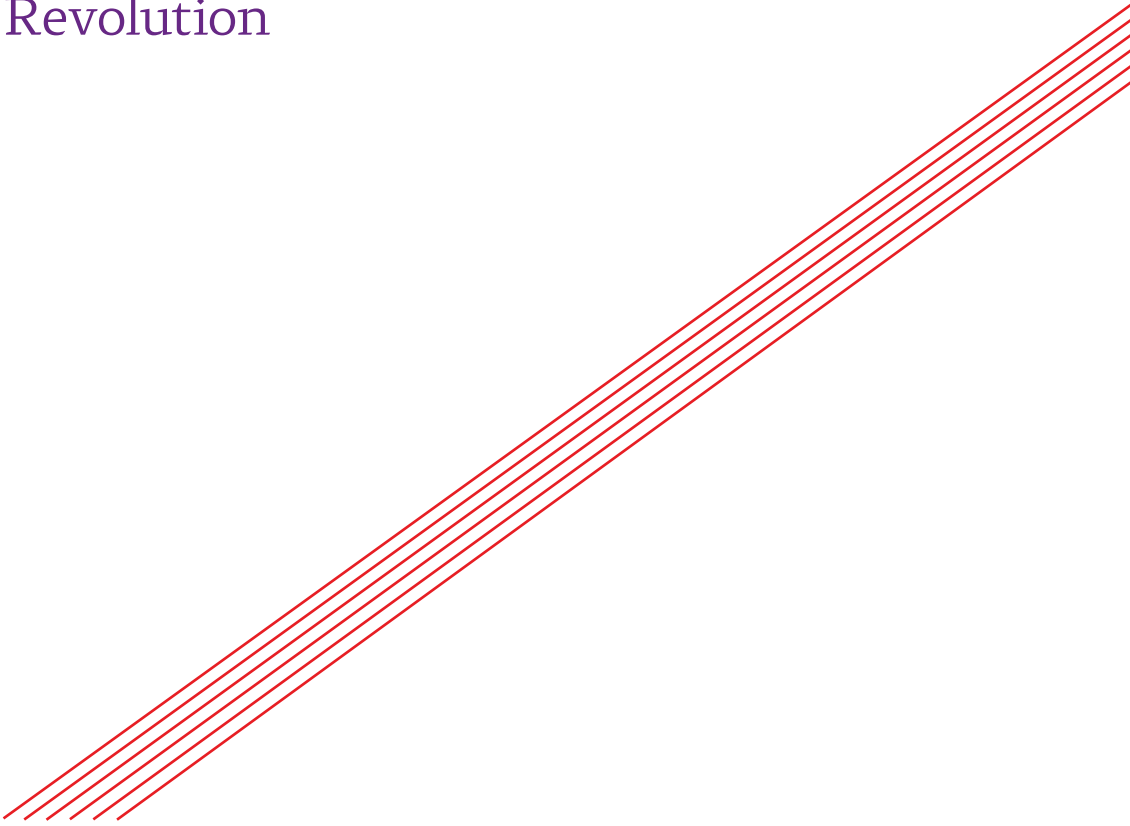
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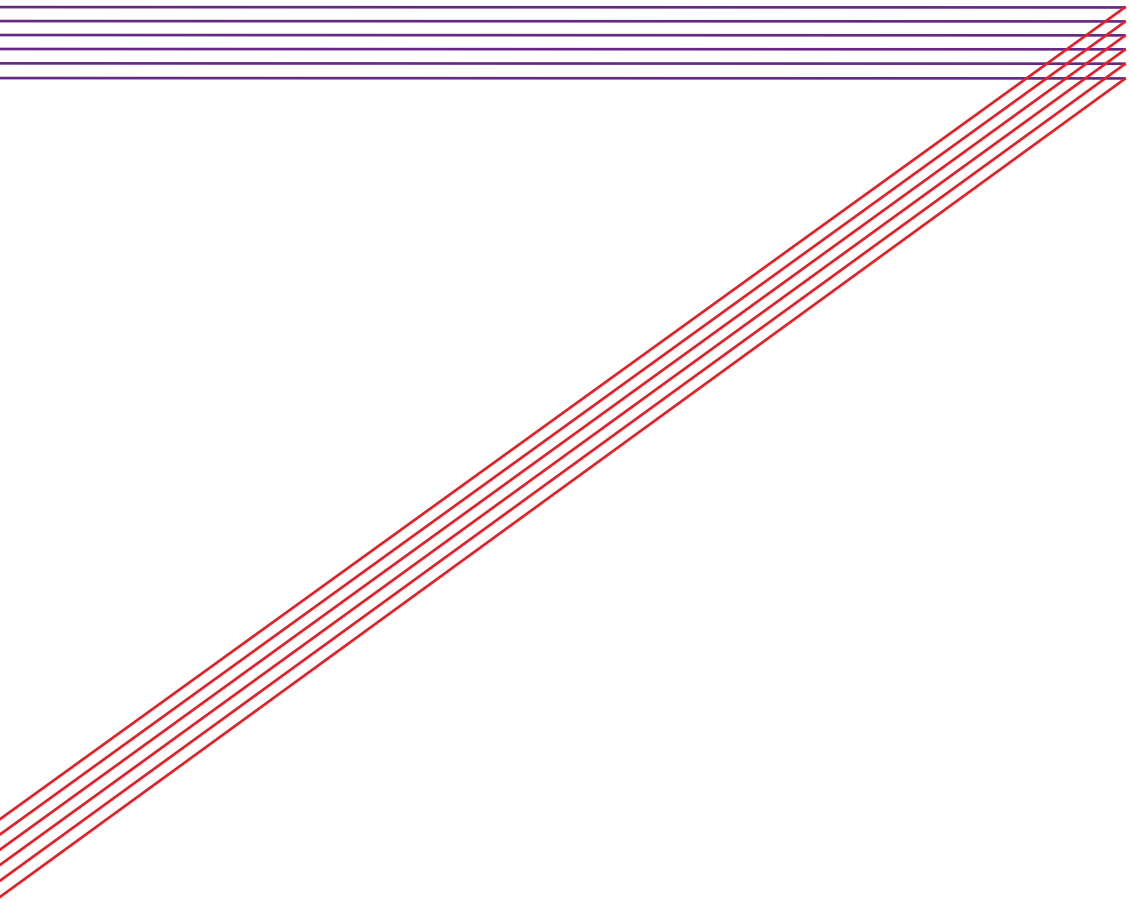
Chapter 5



COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES OF THE NATION

A Visual Analysis of the Tunisian
Revolution





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COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES OF THE NATION

1/ THE COLORS AND FORMS OF SUBJECTIVITY

Reflected in the glass case of a popcorn machine during the tumultuous occupation of the Kasbah square in February 2011, the image of a fluttering national banner poetically suggests the irreversibility of subject formation, popping like corn during the revolution. The layered video, shot by visual artist Halim Karabibene, reminds us of how the unified Tunisian body politic regained a sense of collective agency through the creative reappropriation of the quintessential icon of the nation, the Tunisian flag.

For decades the Tunisian population was depicted, not only externally by an Orientalist gaze, but also by an internalized inferiority complex, as a homogeneous, passive and apolitical mass under the control of a resilient authoritarian regime. Not only through the enunciation of *the people* (Marzouki 2011; De Smet 2015; Zemni 2016), but also through the creative reappropriation and diversion or reappropriation of the rallying image of the nation, the local revolt in the damned interior and south of the country gradually shifted into a national insurrection. Consequently, the body politic, unified under the reclaimed national banner, not only succeeded in their spontaneous effort to expel their tyrant, but also provoked an irreversible disruption to how the Tunisian population was globally conceived and how it conceived itself. New political subjectivities emerged and existing ones fundamentally changed.

After the ousting of president Zine el-'Abidine Ben 'Ali, however, the singular revolutionary body fragmented as quickly as it was formed in the first place. Generational, regional and cultural divisions came to the surface (Marzouki 2011), gendered, ideological

and class tensions materialized (Hasso and Salime 2016), and – as I will point out – unsettled post-colonial tensions over the delineation of these changing subjectivities re-emerged. The process of subversion and re-imagination of the colors and forms of the national flag intensified. Not only artists and (Islamist) activists, but the population in all its diversity, in the informal as well as in the more formal parts of civil society, engaged in a – sometimes violent – visual battlefield over the symbolic delineation of the new polis that they were all respectively striving for. Though the white crescent and five pointed star of the flag pictorially refer to the nation's Islamic history, when Tunis was an administrative division of the Ottoman Caliphate, and mark its pan-Islamic adherence (Wills 2008), the flag was most fundamentally questioned by the re-emergence of strongly affirmed Islamist subjectivities. As most movements, parties and civil society organizations shared a certain patriotism (Zemni 2016), the reinstatement of the officially defined proportions and colors of the national symbol facilitated a historical compromise between different – sometimes conflicting – political demands. Certainly after the proclamation of a new constitution in 2014, the flag ceased to be re-imagined. The unaddressed historical tensions that resurfaced after the expulsion of the authoritarian ruler were swept under the rug.

The Tunisian Revolution was leaderless. It was not led by a highly politicized and organized group nor by a party with a clear-cut ideology (Allal 2012; Levine 2013). In the light of what Fanon (1961) extensively conceptualized as the spontaneity of liberation struggle, it is understandable that most scholars regarded political categories such as leftist, secularist or Islamist obsolete (Levine 2013). However, directly after “the Tunisian people raised their star” (Dakhli 2011), academics delineated a new political subjectivity characterized by a certain reflexivity that goes beyond expected neoliberal individualism or Islamist collectivism (Hanafi 2012): a democratic subjectivity (Sadiki 2014) marked by a new sense of pragmatic, leaderless patriotism (Bamyeh 2011) that leaves any Islamic or Islamist imaginary behind (Challand 2011). Nonetheless, a lack of stable reference to designate new emerging subjectivities during the initial phase of the revolution (Levine 2013), make these interpretations look too precipitous. De Smet (2015:26) sharply argued that “there was no protagonist simply waiting behind the curtains of history only to make his scripted appearance at the scene of revolution”. Subjectivities are indeed spontaneously re-imagined and re-invented during

the revolutionary struggle itself. The process of re-imagination the national flag underwent during the Tunisian Revolution is evidence of these changing subjectivities. Moreover, the revolution did not stop after Ben 'Ali and his government were overthrown. Nor did the post-revolutionary phase start after his ousting. Following Hannah Arendt's analysis *On Revolution* (in: Zemni 2015; 2016), the overthrow of the government can be regarded as merely the first phase of liberation. After this first phase a new political order had to be created. The constitutive phase then discloses the struggle of all the fragmented, pluralistic and conflicting forces that made up the unified people in the phase of liberation. It is in the light of this constitutive phase that some academics openly accused Islamist parties and groups of attempting to *hijack* and *steal* the revolution (Omri 2013). Others saw it as a continuation of unresolved historical questions over identity and symbolic meanings related to how the nation understands itself, that not only included Islamists, but society as a whole (Zemni 2016; McCarthy 2016). If the post-revolutionary phase thus only started with the promulgation of the new constitution, I will indeed have to include in our analysis the struggle by all the different political actors engaged in a battle for a new collective political subjectivity, through the contestation of the historic delineation of the national flag.

From a grounded visual analysis of the Tunisian flag, emerging subjectivities will be spelled out through the entangled process of re-imagination of the national flag, starting from the liberation phase in 2010, through the constitutional phase and the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, until the inauguration of the National Flag Square in March 2017. The dynamics of difference or alterity at the core of every visual struggle makes it the perfect site to scrutinize the processes of subject formation and go beyond prevailing divisions and mutual exclusivities in the building of this new polis that the revolution is striving for (Kathib 2013). The Tunisian Revolution and the subjectivities emerging out of the revolution have hitherto too often been read teleologically instead of genealogically, missing not only the histories but also the presents these histories produce (Levine 2013). To better grasp the power mechanisms behind these emergences, a post-colonial perspective can provide proper insights (Mullin 2016). Present in the revolutionary dynamics, often described as a second independence, postcolonial fault-lines are too often overlooked when considering how new political subjects emerge or existing ones fundamentally change throughout revolutionary dynamics (De Smet 2015).



Figure 54.. The Popcorn Revolution, Halim Karabibene

The intricate connection between the re-imagination of the national flag and the formation of new subjectivities during the Tunisian Revolution are analyzed taking into account possible pitfalls of national consciousness as elaborated by Frantz Fanon (1961). Processes of liberation fundamentally transform prevailing subjectivities, as they forcefully pierce interiorized forms of depreciated self-understanding. Subject (trans)formations are not the product of supernatural powers, but born out of revolutionary processes directed to liberated forms of self-understanding. As “men [*sic*] change at the same time that they change the world”, struggle “remodels the consciousness that man [*sic*] has of himself, and of his former dominators or of the world, at last within his reach” (Fanon 1965:30). It is in this national process of *becoming* that the seeds of new dignified subjectivities are located. This process is essential for our analysis, as it “renews the symbols, the myths, the beliefs, the emotional responsiveness of the people” (Fanon 1965:30). I will thus analyze this process of becoming through a visual analysis of the dynamics of re-imagination that the national flag underwent during the Tunisian Revolution.

However, Fanon (1961:148) extensively warns of possible pitfalls for national consciousness. “Instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people”, it can become nothing more than an “empty shell” confined in a mimetical sterile formalism, doomed to become a caricature of itself. Consequently, the body politic “do not manage, in spite of public holidays and flags, new and brightly colored though they may be, to convince themselves that anything has really changed” (1961:169). If it does not want to become a caricature of itself, mystified by mere formalism, nationalism, understood as the consciousness of the spontaneity of liberation struggle, has to be explicitly dissolved into a dignifying project that, through a conscious and sovereign subjectivity, answers concrete economic and social needs. When this transformation happens, nationalist symbols would become superfluous as “the nation deserts these brightly lit, empty shells and takes shelter in the country, where it is given life and dynamic power” (1961:204). In such a dignified humanist regime, “the living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people” as “it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women” (1961:204). In Tunisia, the liberation was indeed imbued with a unifying national consciousness facilitated by the flag. However, the nationalist colors have not yet dissolved into a dignifying societal project that tackles the concrete economic and social

68. The youth unemployment rate is excessively high and almost doubled between 2006 and 2014, increasing from 17% to 31.4% by 2014. Figures regarding access to work also point to gendered inequalities. Women (43.5%) suffer from unemployment more than men (20.9%). Inequalities also affect regions. In the central west (of the country), the unemployment rate stands at 28.6%, 26.9% in the southwest; 24.8% in the central east; and 11.1% in the south. The structural imbalances that initially triggered the Tunisian revolution have thus continued to increase (Zammit 2017).

needs that motivated the initial movement. On the contrary, youth unemployment seems even to increase.⁶⁸ In the meantime, the official national flag was massively reproduced, and the bigger the better, instigating a caricatural national pride as an answer to the spontaneous proliferation of the Black Standard and different symbolic actions of flag desecration.

The pervading reproduction and ubiquity of the gradually reinstated banner in its official pictorial structure since the summer of 2013, and certainly since the promulgation of the new constitution in 2014, are – as I will argue – not only paradoxically witness to the very limitation of the power of icons to engender dignified relationalities within a given nation, but are also witness to the slow closure of the revolutionary space and the gradual blockage of revolutionary processes of subject formation. This blockage was productive for the precarious restoration of national unity and state prestige necessary for the completion of the new constitution, but less for the demands for liberation, social justice and dignity so central to the revolution.

2 / A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL FLAG

Building upon the nation's colors and forms, the Ben 'Ali regime kept up an exceptional image of itself, creating a "Tunisian fiction" (Hibou 2006). This constructed fiction, constituted by an entangled web of interconnected mythologies, obfuscated a reality of severe economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation of traditional morals and religious references (Cavatorta & Haugbølle 2012). The revolution, however, fiercely punctured the official image of the Tunisian exception and fundamentally transformed the prevailing image of Tunisia and its underlying subjectivities, as through the reclamation of the right to look at these – until recently hidden – economic and political problems, new subjectivities are formed (Mirzoeff 2011). Visibility was the strength of the revolutionary movement, as it turned the structure of the surveillance state against itself (Tripp 2016). In the storm of images that accompanied the revolution, an "iconography of anonymity" could indeed be ascertained, as the ubiquitous portrait of the authoritarian leader was massively destroyed, as observed by W.J.T. Mitchell (2012:9). However, "the image that promised to become a monument" was not the image of empty space, but the lively processes of reversal,

appropriation and rejection of the national flag, at least in the Tunisian context. For Eriksen and Jenkins (2007), a flag is a condensed symbol that imagines cohesion and solidarity in a given nation-state. Through its multi-vocality it can efficiently imagine the unity of complex and heterogeneous societies, as it encompasses a diversity of possible interpretations. At the same time it is always historically rooted in a certain cultural and political past and associated with specific interests, and thus it categorically excludes certain minorities. However, the flag can undergo processes of pictorial transformation over time. The more multi-vocal a flag, the lower its reductionist, essentialist, conflictual or even murderous potentialities in concrete political situations. Hence, it is the simultaneous unifying and dividing character of the flag that makes it a visual site and thus a barometer of (potential) conflicts. Even though it is broadly assumed to be “the most revered among symbols, icons and markers associated with nation and nationalism in [the] twentieth-century” (Jha 2016:2), conflicts over the delineation of a given nation can be scrutinized by analyzing the way the flag is received in a given society.

The spontaneity of the revolutionary process demands empirically grounded methodologies to capture the dissemination and contention of power and agency to thoroughly understand the struggle over the formation of political subjectivities (Levine 2013). As suggested by Lina Khatib (2013), the visual struggle over presence and visibility through competing images took center stage during in times of revolt. The image, as a “construct infused with meanings, attributes and projected perceptions”, was invested by different actors as a key site of political struggle, not only for the construction of social and political realities, but also for the legitimation of emerging subjectivities (Khatib 2013:2-3). Following the pictorial turn introduced by W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), this analysis proposes to contribute to a fundamental and critical understanding of images in their own right, beyond their presupposed semiotic and linguistic structure. By delving into the dynamic pictorial structure of the national flag and the proliferation of its diversion or reappropriation and subversion through different online and offline media by different revolutionary protagonists, I hope to contribute to the ongoing analytical-methodological inquiry of the political productivity of mass-mediated icons (Haugbølle and Kuzmanovic 2015).

2 / 1 UNRESOLVED HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

Struck by an image of the national flag bending over a revolting city with a bleeding eye in its red center in the front-page of a journal, Hela Béji's dream of a new humanism collapsed. This image of profound discontent was not related to the latest revolution, but to the historical *Black Thursday* of 1978, when the government killed about 200 protesters during the first general strike since independence. Tunisia fell into what Béji (1982) calls "national disenchantment". Following independence, the government reinforced a process of *Tunisification*, to radiate a strong national subjectivity that, unlike during colonial times, gained the support of the totality of the population, beyond pre-nationalist pluralistic clan and tribal collectivities (Anderson 1986; Sadiki 2002). *Tunisian-ness* had to be invented to oppose colonial rule (Sadiki 2002). Since 1922, the then still-subversive image of the flag was proudly reclaimed and brandished by the liberation movement formed around the new militant nationalist *Destour* movement (Lewis 2013), pictorially relating to an oppositional subjectivity grounded in Islamic terms.⁶⁹ With the successful rise of the Neo-Destour, however, these terms were slowly re-negotiated in the direction of more territorially oriented and national rather than religious belongings (Sadiki 2002). Illustrative in this light is the mythical story of actress Habiba Msika causing a scandal in 1928 during the première of *The Martyrs of Liberty*, as she got arrested by the colonial authorities who prohibited the play after she wrapped herself in the Tunisian flag and chanted slogans of liberation (Bessis 2017). With independence, the French flag - or what was commonly named "the civilizing flag of France" - which was officially hoisted during the proclamation of the occupation in 1881 at the Kasbah in Tunis, was replaced (Cattedra 2013). The Tunisian flag initially visualized the national process of subject formation, from an interiorized inferiority as colonial object, to the Tunisian people as subject of its own history. After independence, however, divisions within the Neo-Destour came to the surface. Its Arab Nationalist stream was violently marginalized, together with the elimination of its leader Salah Ben Youssef in 1961. The Bourguibist stream reinforced its nationalist ideology but took a secular turn in the imagination of the nation, mimicking Western modernization (Sadiki 2002). As the regime moved towards authoritarianism and the socialist experiment of the 1960s was abandoned, the body politic was confronted

with the alienating and oppressive nature of the ideals of the nation-state turned authoritarian (Béji 1982). Moreover, efforts of national unification and homogenization hegemonized and singularized in an exclusive way the political landscape, precluding political dissidence in general, but especially Islamist subjectivities (Sadiki 2002). Behind the façade of the homogeneous nation, the regional marginalization of the interior and south of the country that originated in the colonial era, and the class division this entailed, remained unaddressed and were consolidated by the post-colonial regime (Mullin 2016). The national flag was hollowed and reduced to the background of the portrait of a long expired authoritarian and patrimonial leader. Nonetheless, the crescent and star survived the Bourguiba era. It even underwent a short revival, as it was embraced by the newly instated Ben 'Ali regime. The flag, however, was quickly seized by the regime and soon no longer reflected national belonging, but association with the ruling party (Bouzouita 2011). As the coercive character of the state was further legitimized through a sustained Islamist threat (Sadiki 2002), the colors of the nation were further hollowed-out as an essential and non-negotiable element in the repertoire of performance of regime adherence. In 1999 the national flag's pictorial structure was officially defined at the level of the law, further elaborating the 4th article of the Republican Constitution of 1959. To breathe life into the captured flag, the Ministry of National Defense published a collective book entirely dedicated to the national flag in June 2006, attempting to infuse the national symbol with pre-Islamic historical legitimacy. The process of national disenchantment rapidly intensified under Ben 'Ali, leaving only a "façade of national uniformity" (Dakhli 2011: 90), an empty shell hiding state corruption and the continued marginalization of Tunisia's peripheries.

2 / 2 RE-APPROPRIATING THE NATIONAL COLORS

Despite its extensive use as an exclusive symbol of power during the successive authoritarian regimes, the revolutionary body politic in 2011 reappropriated the national flag together with its moral and political legitimacy, facilitating a unification and nationalization of the protest (Bouzouita 2011; Hawkins 2014). The national symbol floated in the streets as a symbol of power during the initial locally dispersed clashes between the mobilized youth and security forces in the interior



Figure 55. Le peuple Uni, Leila chaouachi



Figure 56. Bloody Revolt, Cyrenaica

and south of the country. The massive diversion or reappropriation of the flag used as profile pictures on social media, constructed a virtual representation of a united people that preceded its physical unification. It was only when the body politic felt that together they could topple the president that the flag was also physically reappropriated and waved offline. During the initial liberation, virtually subverted flags formally mourned the sacrifice of the martyrs. Once Ben Ali fled, however, a celebratory and embodied aesthetic emphasized the pride and hope of a successful revolution on- and offline. The reappropriation of the rallying image of the national flag by the struggling population not only facilitated their unification, but also punctured the idealized image of the Tunisian exception, rendering visible the state of corruption and intensified marginalization outside the capital and coastal regions.

After Ben 'Ali was toppled, revolutionary demands to overthrow the government still in place were pushed by damned youth who had traveled from the interior and the south to the capital and occupied the Kasbah square, where the Prime Minister and his government hold office. Through the Freedom Caravan and the occupation of the Kasbah, the body politic rediscovered an oppressed part of the national self (Saidi 2015). The reappropriated national banner was quintessential in the performed occupation of the square, not only as a cape in the struggle against a persisting government, but also as a blanket covering historical regional, class and political divisions. The flag altogether incorporated the subjectivities previously overshadowed in what Fanon (1952: 2) calls a "zone of nonbeing". Diverse subjectivities underlying the feelings of injustice related to the access to land in the interior-south, the extraction of natural resources in the mining regions, the repression of informal local economies at the border with Libya, and the corruption in the urban coastal centers and the capital were unified at the Kasbah (Zemni 2016). Under the national banner, those inhabiting this zone of non-being reclaimed their sovereign right to be.

However, not everyone cheered the arrival of the Freedom Caravan. A call for a return to *normality* was voiced during manifestations at the Kobbah in Al Menzah, echoing the will of the interim government of National Unity, gathering against what they considered a radical minority that would destabilize the country's economy and security. They demanded clear leadership in the name of a *silent majority*, also identifying in patriotic

70. The flag incident at the Manouba was the first real case of flag desecration. However, the rapper Psycho-M in December 2010 – that is a month before the start of the revolution – already distanced himself politically from the national flag in favor of what he calls the Tawhid flag in his popular song ‘Mani-pulation’ (Ovshieva, ‘Stomping for Tunisia’, Benyoussef 2016). Known for his sharp letter to the president ‘Rais LeBled’ followed by ‘El General (2012)’, followed by the Islamist proposition in his song ‘Allahu Akbar’, declaring ‘The banner of Islam always comes first’. The enormous popularity of both artists is evidence of the broad popular support for radical Islamist ideologies among youth.

terms, for the good of the Tunisian nation (Chennaoui 2015; Zemni 2015). Though both the Kasbah and Kobbah protesters acted under the same the national banner, conflicting subjectivities were at stake (Zemni 2016). After the fall of the interim government of National Unity, the occupation of the Kasbah made way for a collective but bumpy journey to the country’s first free elections. From the moment street politics were translated to new official political structures and institutions, the revolutionary space closed down and the formation of revolutionary subjectivities were challenged and – as I will show – sometimes even blocked from the political game (Levine 2013).

2/3 NATIONAL RE-IMAGINATION

The debates in the elected National Constitutional Assembly and the newly appointed transition government were pushed forth by three contentious phases of national re-imagination. In a first phase, the national flag underwent a wave of desecration and the Black Standard gained more and more visibility. In a second phase, the national flag was revitalized as the country mourned its first political killings. Finally, the flag was massively waved in front of the Bardo square to demand, in vain, the dissolution of the constitutional assembly.

It all started at Manouba University when, during protests, an activist climbed up the roof of the janitor’s building and, thanks to another student, in vain tried to replace the Tunisian flag with the Black Standard.⁷⁰ The incident rapidly grew from a local student opposition to a nationwide political question (Le Pape 2014), and was but the first in a series of actions questioning the outline of the nation and out-loud “recalling the caliphate” (Sayyid 2015:186). More Salafi-oriented Islamist groups settled in different places in Tunisia’s peripheries and hoisted the black flag. Under the impulse of the later-outlawed Salafi-jihadi movement *Ansār al-Sharia*, Islamist symbols were adopted and ostensibly waved during different actions and mobilizations (Merone 2017). When, after the diffusion of the film *Innocence of Muslims* in September 2012, the American Embassy was attacked by Salafi activists, they replaced the American flag with the Black Standard. The pinnacle of this phase of flag desecration was the mobilization during the *Holy Koran Day*, proclaimed by the Minister of Religious Affairs Nouredine El Khademi of the *an-Nahda* party to protest against ongoing profanations of the Koran.

Thousands of Islamist activists gathered on the newly renamed *January 14 Square* demanding the implementation of the *Shari'a*, while seven of the best trained protesters waved their black banner on the highest point of the clock tower. The *Al-Amen* party suggested as a compromise in the Constitutive Assembly to add the calligraphic inscription of the Shahada to the national flag, to no avail. To counterbalance the ongoing phase of desecration, the transitional government packed the central clock tower with the national flag on the second and third anniversary of the revolution.

A second phase of national re-imagination started with the murder of the leading member of the Popular Front, Chokri Belaïd. His funeral provoked a national mobilization, unseen since the days of the Kasbah. The people reused the banner as a blanket to cover national mourning. In response to the French Minister of the Interior, who linked the assassination to the rise of Islamic fascism, the French flag was ostentatiously burned. The pro-*an-Nahda* demonstrations following the assassination were not homogenous red and white, but also colored blue, red and white, referring to the colors of the party. The black standards were also present, engendering further suspicion with the opposition. To strengthen the support of the army in the escalating fights with jihadist cells, the government hoisted a giant national flag on top of Mount Chaâmbi. Finally, during the national celebrations for Women's Day and the anniversary of the institution of the progressive personal code, national forms and colors again took center stage, this time as a trending clothing style. Another feminist strategy was used by Femen when burning the Black Standard in front of Great Mosque of Paris during International Topless Jihad Day.

The third phase of re-imagination occurred when civil society merged "For a civil and solidary Republic" to denounce the Constitutional Assembly. The private sector also engaged in the dynamics of national unity, when The National Union of Communication and Advertising Agencies set up a national campaign together with billboard owners, using the national forms and colors around the slogan "There is no allegiance, but to Tunisia". It didn't take more than a day before it was diverted to: "There is no allegiance but to Allah". This spectacle gained momentum in the summer of 2013 with the 'Rahil' campaign and sit-in when the national flag was diverted into a red card and pulled in front of the Constituent Assembly at Bardo Square



Figure 57. Manouba Incident, Mozaïque FM



Figure 58. Chokri, Willis From Tunis



Figure 59. "There is no allegiance, but to Tunisia Allah", Leyla Dakhli

to demand its dissolution. Protesters on both sides of the friction got well-defined orders from the party top which flag (not) to wave. For instance, while the national flag, the party flag and the *Tawhid* flag were waved together during mobilization organized by the an-Nahda party in the slipstream of the first political murders, militants now got a script from the party top only to wave the national flag and the party flag.

As state efforts to instill patriotism intensified, “flag-waving from below” that prevailed during the initial liberation phase made way for a certain form of “flag-waving from above” (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007:9). The political landscape again became a staged and scripted landscape (Dakhli 2013). The imposition of the official pictorial structure of the national flag gradually fixed the delineation of the dynamized subjectivities since the revolution, pacifying and silencing disagreement and opposition into a historical modernist nationalist frame. The maturation of subjectivities confidently relating to Islamist ideologies in various new ways were decelerated and criminalized, as the *Ansār al-Sharī’a* movement was outlawed. The “black flag hysteria” that accompanied the reception of different provocative Islamist actions overshadowed the nuances and ambiguities in the formation of these new subjectivities, sometimes combining nationalist and political Salafi references (Rogers 2012, *unpaginated*). Nevertheless, the three aforementioned phases of national re-imagination made visible the urgent necessity of a federating and stabilizing national compromise. The national flag thus generated from above the symbolic conditions for the rehabilitation of national unity and the prestige of the state, and by doing so facilitated the adoption of a new constitution (Zemni 2016).

2 / 4 INTENSIFIED NATIONAL PRIDE

“The first democratic constitution in the Arab World” was finally adopted “in the name of the Tunisian people” and “with the help of God” as stated in its preamble. Despite the clear outcome of the following legislative and presidential elections, the struggle over the outline of the nation is still ongoing, as three different jihadist attacks in the center and coastal region fundamentally challenged the newly proclaimed second republic.

of national pride" (Dakhli 2013, *unpaginated*), the ministry of tourism successfully challenged the world record for the largest flag. In his *Ascent of a Nation*, Tahar Manai proudly planted the Tunisian flag on the top of the Himalayas, conquering the highest peak in the world. With the project *Tounes Alia* the banner even fluttered in the stratosphere. After the attack at the Imperial Marhaba Hotel at Port El Kantaoui, president Béji Caïd Essebsi called on the Prime Minister to revise the license granted to a political party still waving the *black flag*, alluding to *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the last Pan-Islamist party still recognized by the government. At the same time, a social media campaign went viral featuring postcards of fatal jihadi attacks in Western capitals, posing the question of whether you would also stop visiting Paris after the Charlie attacks, New York after 9/11 or London after the 7/7 bombings.

In contrast with the worldwide indignation at attacks in the heart of Europe, after the third jihadist attack targeting the presidential guard on the Mohamed V Boulevard, indignation grew as there was with no security check nor a flag-layer designed on social media for solidarity with Tunisia. As in the aftermath of the second Paris attacks in November that same year, where international buildings in different world cities effectively colored white red and blue, photoshopped images went viral depicting the Statue of Liberty in New York and The Eiffel Tower, among others, in red and white. The collective wound caused by the three consecutive jihadist assaults were healed with the multiplication of national colors during different manifestations mourning the victims and condemning Islamist politics in general. Finally, in March 2017, on the occasion of the 61st anniversary of independence, the government inaugurated a newly constructed National Flag Square and a raised a giant flag up the flagpole in Belvedere Park, overseeing the whole capital from its height. Whereas the reception of the three consecutive jihadist attacks clearly alluded to the international dimension of the political problems Tunisia is facing today, an already hyperbolic national pride further intensified in a caricatural way. Subjectivities could no longer be imagined outside the constitutional compromise sharply delineated by the imposed pictorial structure of the national flag.

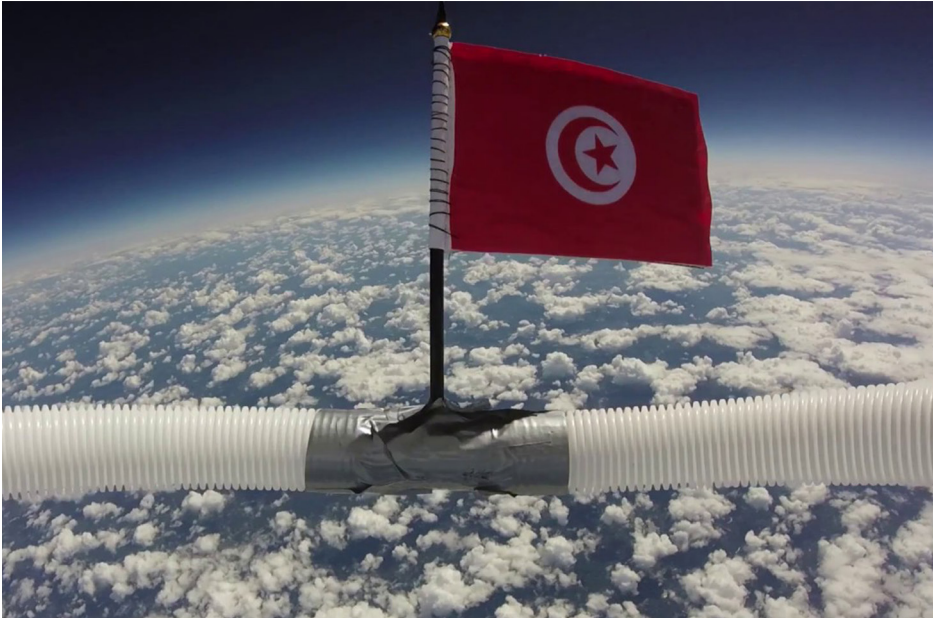


Figure 60. Tounes Alia

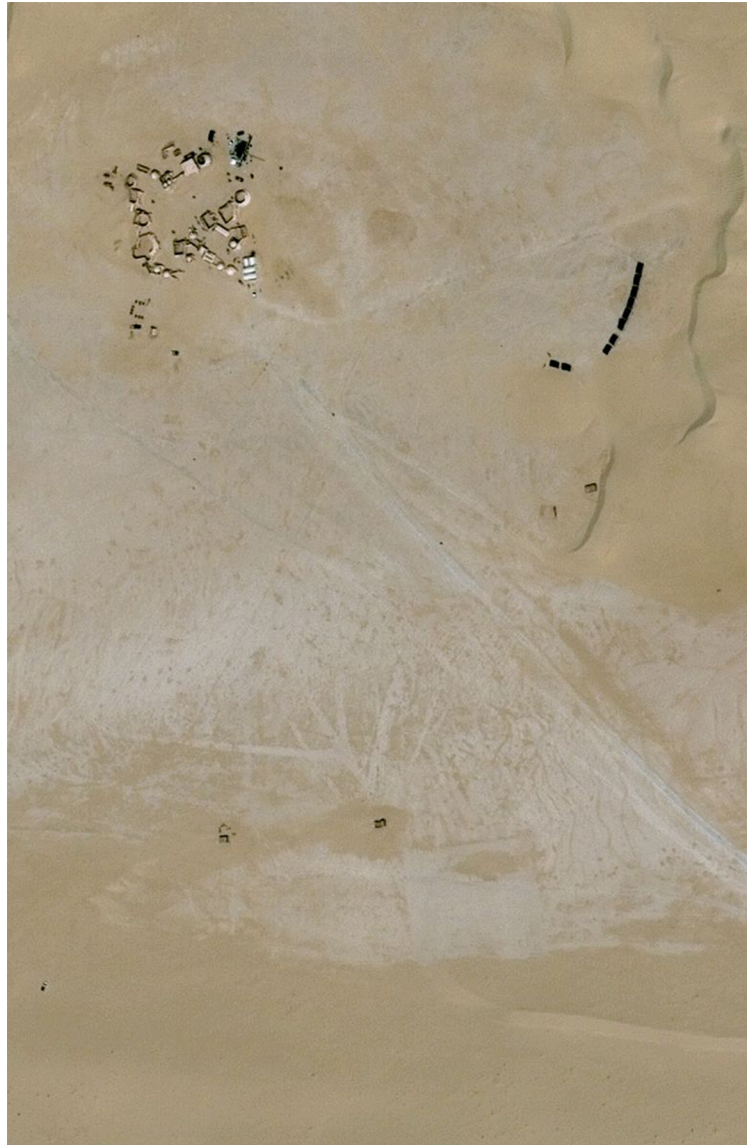




Figure 61. We are Tunisia, Ministry of Tourism

3/ CONCLUSION

The creative re-appropriation and diversion or re-appropriation of the national flag during the initial liberation phase was an essential mediator of the unity necessary for pushing forward revolutionary demands. Even a short time after Ben 'Ali was toppled, the national flag held the people together beyond historical regional, generational, class and political differences, as it lost its rigid form and underwent a process of pictorial transformation. It no longer imagined allegiance to the regime, but revolutionary affiliation, sacrifice, liberation, justice, dignity, inter-regional unity and cross-class solidarity. United under the colors of the nation, excluded subjectivities reclaimed their sovereign right to be. The very symbol of this unity, however, quickly became a subject in a violent battlefield, following three contentious phases of re-imagination, further addressing unresolved historical issues. From the Manouba incident, through the national mourning of political opposition figures such as Chokri Belaid and the red card pulled in front of the Bardo, to the creation of National Flag Square on the hilltop of Belvedere Park, the youth unemployment, the postcolonial regional marginalization of the interior and south of the country and the related class divisions largely remain unaddressed. Though the national flag is supposed to mark its Islamic adherence once necessary to mobilize against French colonial occupation, it was contested by new emerging Islamist subjectivities and later by more Salafist- and jihadist-asserted subjectivities coloring outside the lines of the nation. This contradiction points to a pictorial transformation of the flag throughout history, as it seems to depict religious alienation rather than the Islamic imaginary it is supposed to trigger.

The national flag hence lost its foundation and thus its multi-vo-cality and capacity to imagine national unity beyond historic divisions, not only categorically excluding nascent ambiguous Salafist- and jihadist-oriented Islamist subjectivities that contest the constitutional compromise of 2014, but also the once-unified subjectivities underlying the feelings of injustice related to access to land, the extraction of natural resources, the repression of informal local economies and prevailing corruption. When street politics was translated into official political structures after the occupation of the Kasbah, the ongoing formation of revolutionary subjectivities was challenged, and after three tragic jihadist attacks was even blocked from the political game. The recovery from this last phase of deadly contention assured

the consolidation of the historical compromise that underpinned the new constitution. However, the further intensification of the hyberbolization of national pride, from the world record of biggest flag or the need to send the national colors to the stratosphere, convincingly shows how – unfortunately – the nation becomes a caricature of itself.

Together with the loss of its multi-vocal capacities, the flag re-activated a certain reductionist, essentialist and even oppressive potentiality. The re-imposition of the official pictorial structure of the national flag, and the blockage of revolutionary forms of becoming it facilitated, were productive for the restoration of national unity and state prestige, but less so for the demands for liberation, social justice and dignity. As argued by Fanon (1961:205), if a given state wants to be national, it does not need to over-emphasize the forms of its flag, how beautifully colored it might be, it just has to give “form and body” to the prevailing national consciousness of liberation and find a way to constitute a dignifying state “by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts”.

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BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Before closing this dissertation with concluding remarks on the contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt, I want to rewind and quickly replay one last time the reconstructed lifecycle of revolt in Tunisia. By connecting the various dots of my extended fieldwork chattered over the different chapters of this thesis, I will hopefully offer a last clear overview on how the intricate constellations of politics and aesthetics unfolded on the ground over time. To ground this present lifecycle historically, I will concisely reformulate how this research made sense of the revolution through a long-term interpretation, taking into consideration the palimpsestic character of the state aesthetics under scrutiny. Abiding by an engaged and at times even passionate interpretative and hermeneutic approach and informed by a transdisciplinary frame, combining key insights from art and political theory and more precisely from aesthetic philosophy and theories committed to various postcolonial critiques, I was able to look into the various original ways the accumulated subversive aesthetic agency contested state aesthetics by diverting the symbolic power circulating in the postcolonial authoritarian police order, redetermining the distribution of the roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and restructuring the shared division of the sensible, its properties of space and the possibilities of time. Finally, to end this dissertation, I will point at some of the limitations I now identify in my research and at corresponding possible avenues for future research.

A LAST REWIND

Whereas from a regional reading, the different pockets of revolt that now constitute the Tunisian Revolution were by some observers dubbed a second 'Awakening', restoring a pan-Arabic lineage from the first Nahda or renaissance in the 19th century until today (Dawisha 2013, Muasher 2014, Amin 2015), in Western eyes the term 'Arab Awakening' reinforced the persevering orientalist myth of a narcoleptic people, who were finally awakening from their decennia long political sleep (Scheid 2012). Such

readings of history put the recent dynamics of revolt in a progressive teleological line, implicitly reinforcing the idea that Tunisians, and by extension Arabs or Muslims, are late, only today becoming truly modern, as they only now catch up with the train of History. It moreover glosses over the legacy of protest happening in Tunisia before the self-immolation of Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. The misapprehensions issued around the concept of an 'Arab Awakening', together with the (over)glorification of the spark that awakened the – until recently – narcoleptic Arab people, made most observer overlook the pre-history and the slow molecular accumulation of aesthetic agency. As I have shown, it was already since April 2000 – after the physical death of Bourguiba and the consequent political death of Ben Ali (Kilani 2000) – that the authority of the regime started to crumble as different artists and activists began to subtly turn prevailing state aesthetics against itself, titillating the shared distribution of the sensible that supported the police order. The coming revolt became increasingly sensible through the dauntless diversion or reappropriation of the three central elements of prevailing state aesthetics in numerous stimulating ways and in a diverse range of aesthetic practices. The purple references to November 7 were thus not any longer only reproduced as a formal fashion to signal regime allegiance, but were also extensively diverted to bypass prevailing censorship and to attack the state legitimacy of a firmly seated authoritarian regime. However, the omnipresent and omniscient classic portrait of the head of state remained rather untouchable, the imagery of the First Lady was not spared. Also, the portrait of the first president of independent Tunisia was retrieved from under its historical dust.

The intrepid series of diversions or reappropriations that characterized the premonitory phase grew into a generalized practice, as they seemed to be a precise mediator of the fundamental changes the body politic was aspiring. The molecular accumulation of these subversive interventions during the 2000s, was only fully completed during the liberation phase, when different elements of state esthetics were literally torn apart, making the authoritarian head of state flee the country. Local protest in the interior South of the country finally culminated in a collective choreography forming an agitated and unruly swarm of indignant bodies in front of the Ministry of Interior in the capital. A collective performance of one elegant arm movement toppled the dictator and planted the seeds of a possible regime change that could alter the order of the sensible. Before the spectacular



Figure 62. Ben Ali Burns, Jean-Paul Pelissier



Figure 63. Ben Ali Burns, Lionel Bonaventure



sculptures and images with purple references to November 7 and the thousands eyes of the omnipresent portraits were ostensibly destroyed, different strategic police stations, the offices of the single party and private villas of the seven families surrounding the presidency were plundered and burned down. In a consequent movement – as suggested by the *Inside Out Project - Artocracy in Tunisia* – this looted and burned down monumental state architecture was diverted and reappropriated in various spectacular ways. The burned down police station in Thala became a hub for artists and activists and was renamed ‘House of the Martyrs’. The looted Trabelsi house in Gammarth was transformed into an art gallery as it was rebaptized the ‘House of the Revolution’. The happening *Street Art in the Neighborhood* facilitated the creation of a colossal installation composed of what remained of the confiscated and burned down cars, radiating the will of the revolted body politic and its demands for liberation and dignity. When the different elements that constituted the prevailing state aesthetics, together with the ‘Tunisian miracle’ it represented, were torn apart, the previously obfuscated reality of economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation of traditional morals and religious references was exposed to the whole of society. Directly after the ousting of the authoritarian head of state, a government of ‘national unity’ was proclaimed, mostly formed by members of the ancient regime. Demands to completely overthrow the government were consequently pushed by the damned youth who travelled with the ‘liberation caravan’ from Menzel Bouzaïane and Sidi Bouzid to the capital. The convoy mobilized under way to finally occupy Kasbah Square in Tunis, where the Prime Minister and his government held office until the national constitution was abrogated. During the mesmerizing occupation the Kasbah Square transformed into a microcosm of the ideal society the moving body politic was striving for. The Ministry of Finance was transformed into ‘The People’s Ministry’ and its walls into a canvas for the prevalent popular demands. Ephemeral artistic collectivities emerged, like Ahl El Kahf to name but one of the most inspiring. As I insisted in the fourth chapter of this dissertation and as strongly illustrated by the intriguing life-size silhouettes meticulously crafted by Bilel Kaltoun, the artist behind *The Zoo Project*, the upsurge of revolt that liberated the country of its tenacious head of state, occasioned the death of more than three hundred human beings and injured about two thousand bodies more. At the same time, the remembrance of the martyrs who sacrificed their life so dignity could reign, created the necessary conditions for the wall

of fear to break down and the revolution to gain momentum. The creative diversion or reappropriation of the national flag was another essential mediator of the necessary unity for the body politic to appear as an indivisible moving swarm. The national flag held the people together beyond historical differences, as it lost its fixed form and no longer represented allegiance to the state party, but triggered subversive affiliation, sacrifice, liberation, justice, dignity, interregional unity and cross-class solidarity. Tunisia's self-image was turned inside out, firmly installing the damned or those who had no part in the distribution of the sensible in the center of societal preoccupations, puncturing state sovereignty. The singular image of the autocrat was replaced by that of the multiplicity of the moving body politic. It enabled the damned to move and breathe again, making them once again proud to be Tunisian, at least for a short moment. Confronted with the remnants of state aesthetics after the first and fiercest upsurge of revolt, different, until then, key elements of prevalent monumental landscape were about to be fundamentally discussed. The possibility to transform the presidential palace of Sidi Dhrif into a museum, recalling the spirit of the revolution, was seriously considered. The question was posed whether the construction of the 'City of Culture' should be further financed, even if the ill-famed Ministry of Interior should stay on the Bourguiba Avenue. As shown in the third chapter, most discussed was the central Clock Tower, as – thanks to, inter alia, the *Rational Manifest* of founding member of the Politiques/Politics collective Nidhal Chamekh – more people became aware of the last Novemberist monument standing. A public debate imposed itself asking if the Clock Tower should be destroyed, moved or replaced by a participatory sculpture or by a monument commemorating the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the freedom and dignity of the nation.

After the exalting occupation of the Kasbah and the demand for the total dissolution of the power structures in place was partially met, certainly after the first elections for a constitutional assembly, the streets were only sporadically reinvested, only for officially requested and regulated punctual and linear political demonstrations. However, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, newly constituted Islamist activists collectivities were successful in mobilizing the damned through the reappropriation of public spaces, the mosque in particular, but also through the violent and often controversial disruption of spaces hosting or linked to cultural and artistic events that questioned

certain interpretations of the sacred. The Tawhid flag made its first public appearance during the violent protests that prevented the projection of the documentary *Ni Allah Ni Maître* during the solidarity event 'Touche Pas à Nos Createurs'. The spectacular street protests after the broadcast of the animation *Persepolis* or the online circulation of the film *Innocence of Muslims* and the consequent attack on the American Embassy made the public aware of the power of this new Islamist constituency. The intrusion in the collective exhibition *Printemps des Arts* at the El Abdelliya palace in La Marsa and the following street protests are etched in the collective memory. The reappropriation of public space gained momentum with the conquest of the Novemberist Clock Tower by Islamist activists during the physical confrontation between different groups mobilized for the Day of the K'ran and The World Day of Theater that simultaneously took place on the Bourguiba Avenue. The series of flag desecrations that culminated in the mediatized controversy at the Manouba University, provoked a form of hyperbolization of national proud through the excessive reproduction of national colors and forms. On top of this contentious atmosphere, a systematic but unclaimed destructive wave burned down Sufi shrines all over the country. Throughout the different chapters of this thesis, I have shown how another vital line was crossed with the political murder of leftist opposition figures such as Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. While generational, regional and certainly religious divisions came back to the surface, ephemeral performances in the streets of different central and more peripheral cities, like the interventions of Fanni Raghman Anni and Danseurs-Citoyens, embodied – through the vulnerability of their interventions – the sacrifice necessary to keep alive the spirit of revolt. Street art collectives like Zwewla kept the damned in the center of public attention by continuously painting and repainting revolutionary slogans on the walls. Nevertheless, the red card was pulled in front of the Bardo during the Rahil mobilization against the constitutional political body. The end of the playtime was whistled. Civil society unified in what later would be known as the Quartet, to facilitate the national dialogue between the secular modernist and moderate Islamist forces necessary for the promulgation of the first – but as I have shown, also most fragile – democratic constitution of the Arab world.

The first postrevolutionary government was not properly installed and different consecutive, lethal jihadi attacks shook its legitimacy to its foundation. The ongoing fights between the



Figure 64. Flag Walk, Anis Mili / Reuters

military and jihadi cells hiding in the mountains in Kasserine and Ben Arous escalated and reperculated in a hotel resort in the coastal city of Sousse and in the Bardo museum in the capital. Throughout this dissertation, I made clear how under the presidency of Beji Caid Essebsi (2009), the regime tried – as already envisioned in *Habib Bourguiba: The Wheat and the Chaff* – to rehabilitate its historic Neo-Destourian legacy, by reintroducing the symbolic power subsumed in the image of the ‘Supreme Combatant’. It started with the presidential elections, when two underground street artists painted a giant ‘I love Bajbouj’ graffiti portrait at Barcelona Square in Tunis, but deepened with different public appearances of the president himself, not in the least with the by now legendary speech that had to contain a new wave of revolt in the region of Kasserine and beyond in January 2016 and that was filmed from exact the same decorative setting as Habib Bourguiba’s speech that contained the bread revolt in January 1984. The recycled Bourguibist spectacular power was consolidated with the reinstallation of Bourguiba’s equine statues in Monastir and Tunis, but later also in the city of Sousse and in Sfax. Together with the intensification of the hyperbolization of national pride – from winning the world record of the biggest flag and the need to send the national colors to the stratosphere, to the creation of the National Flag Square on the hilltop of Belvedere Park – I have showed how the imagery of the nation sadly became a caricature of its historical self. The reimposition of the official pictorial structure of the national flag, together with the comeback of the imagery of the ‘Father of the Nation’, were productive for the restoration of national unity and state prestige, but less so when it came to the demands for liberation, social justice and dignity. The youth unemployment, the postcolonial regional marginalization of the interior and south of the country and the related class divisions remained largely unaddressed. Despite the fact that society is still deeply affected by generational, regional and religious divides, I have demonstrated how a non-negligible part of the activist and artistic sphere did not lose its revolutionary core and is now actively challenging the ongoing symbolic process of re-Bourguibization, maybe again sensing the next battle coming. Only history will tell if the current contestation of the renewed Bourguibist imaginary can be construed as a premonition for a longer process of contestation, let alone if this new wave would ever result in the production of a sustainable space that can accommodate the demands for dignity, liberation and reparations, and thus prevent a further escalation of the violence. As the last monument of the Novemberist

landscape remains unquestioned – and in absence of a collective marker in memory of those who gave life to the still burning hope for dignity – some collectives are still struggling to make sure “our 14 will never be 7 x 2”. They resist the officially instated date of remembrance and saturate time with the remembrance of the sacrifice of the damned, thus with the simple understanding that the ongoing upsurges of revolt will only constitute a true revolution if this sacrifice will be made redundant.

Having replayed the sequence of what is now generally codified as the Tunisian Revolution, it becomes clear why the lifecycle as a time frame for my analysis appeared to be insufficient to grasp the complexity of aesthetics contrapuntally. It was therefore consequently clarified and elucidated with a long-term interpretation, shedding light on the palimpsestic structure of prevailing state aesthetics, revealing, decoding and deciphering the ambivalent processes of symbolization this complex constellation of historical markers underwent over time. Despite the fact that the first traces of state aesthetics already made their appearance during the period of defensive modernization and Islamic reformism, I have shown how it was only with the consolidation of the French colonial project that it found its way outside the confined walls of the Ottoman palaces into public space. The national struggle for liberation did not provoke a tabula rasa, nor did it annihilate all elements of state aesthetics, it also engaged in processes of reappropriation or diversion that, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, are still enduring until today. The Haussmannian Avenue of the newly built center of the capital and its original function as a commercial and social center and a spectacular stage for military, religious and political events, was for instance reappropriated as a showcase or a public vitrine for political power, but also as a site of dissent. The central police station of the protectorate on the Avenue was transformed into the Ministry of Interior that grew out to become the heart of a heartless regime, but it was also the center of discontent when the body politic flocked together to demand the fall of the regime in 2011. The foundations of the structure of the contemporary police state and its internal security model, which was severely and violently opposed, were already laid by the French colonial enterprise. I have also shown that the colonial statue of the main protagonist of the colonial doctrine of the Third Republic on what is now Avenue Bourguiba, can be considered the historical pedestal or the base stratum of the still contested state aesthetics. Contemporary spectacular power still radiates the civilizational

determination that emanated from the original statue of Jules Ferry, that can be summarized in the very words of the instigator of the colonial project himself (Luizard 2006:89,109) as “the duty of superior races to civilize inferior peoples”, driven by the will of “the triumph of civilization over barbarism”. The disciplining and controlling techniques, proper to modern state aesthetics advanced during the French colonial civilizing missions, were slowly furthered and improved after the birth of the young nation through the two- or three-dimensional reproductions of the image of the ‘Supreme Combatant’. However, it is important to remind that I have shown how not all elements of prevailing modern state aesthetics followed the same genealogy and how they can thus not all be assigned the same structuring modalities. While some elements were historically crucial for the reinvention of a certain nationalist ideology to oppose colonial rule in a context of collective struggle, other elements were instrumental to reinforce state legitimacy in a context of social and economic crisis. During the struggle for independence, the national flag for instance – as opposed to the civilizing flag of France – had the power to bring together and assemble the body politic, beyond prenatalist, pluralistic clan and tribal collectivities. Over time, it nevertheless hollowed itself out as an essential and non-negotiable element in the repertoire of performance of regime adherence, and transformed in an empty shell hiding state corruption, severe inequalities and the continued damnation of the interior regions and other urban peripheries after the independence. By contrast, the equine Bourguiba statue or the statue of Ibn Khaldun in downtown Tunis are aesthetically powerful products designed to counter insurgent body politic protesting against the newly installed modernist and neoliberal regime. As I have pointed out, the postcolonial state only resorted to a renewed aesthetics after twenty-two years of rule, in the light of the sharpest social and economic challenges, to counter the then widespread feeling of what Hele Béji (1982) pertinently coined “national disenchantment”. While the Ben Ali regime attempted to erase the aesthetic translation of the modernizing mission of the first post-colonial regime, the Bourguibist imagery is now slowly being reintegrated and re-accommodated in most of the main cities throughout the country in a very similar attempt to control and unify the insurgent and divided body politic. Although destroyed or diverted in the recent moments and movements of revolt, the master signifier of state aesthetics of the Ben Ali police order still stands in the middle of the capital next to the reinstated master signifier of Bourguibist state aesthetics.



Figure 65. Bourguiba émeutes de pain, Myles Mylae/You Tube



Figure 66. Essebsi émeutes Kasserine, Anouar, L./You Tube

CONCLUDING THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Passionately engaged with the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia, and setting off from unprecedented findings collected in these extraordinary moments in the field, this dissertation brought forth different theoretical insights on the intersection between politics, revolt and aesthetics. Accounting for the revolutionary and thus per definition unstable, ongoing and open-ended character of the research subject – beyond disciplinary categorizations and thus from an interdisciplinary perspective – the findings presented here were led by my inescapable engagements in the world I inhabit. While constantly moving back and forth between the whole and the parts, between the detailed observation informed by the data gathered online and offline and its more abstract theoretical interpretations inspired by ongoing discussions in aesthetic and postcolonial critiques, the main themes, in which I positioned my research, were distilled. Proposing the recent sequences of revolts in Tunisia as a case study and thus starting from an extensive and intensive fieldwork, a research was conducted that in various ways contributed to the aesthetic turn in political science and thus to the further development of a more confident and epistemologically self-conscious and more recognizable academic field of study or discipline that engages with aesthetics, politics and revolt in the region, the continent and beyond in the Global South.

By unraveling contrapuntally the complex entanglement of processes of the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics, I have shown how state aesthetics is historically formed and how the sensible is consequently shared, divided and distributed, but also how a certain accumulated aesthetic agency can question and possibly alter this shared distribution in times of revolt. I did not study the revolutionary flows through all the various existing sense experiences, but directed my attention on the (in)visible and corporeal or embodied qualities of sense experience. I concentrated on the various ways revolt can phenomenologically be understood as a process of reappropriation of sovereign and disciplinary power engrained in state aesthetics, as a lived, embodied and visual experience. Throughout the different chapters of this dissertation, I overall tempered the precipitated and therefore too optimistic statement by Moosa (2011) that the moving body politic would have radically altered the order of the sensible. I have pointed at the intricacies that

accompany the processes of revolt against a firmly seated authoritarian police order, especially at the difficulty of creating different conditions of intelligibility and possibility that entail a fundamental transformation of what commonly appears to sense experiences. These particular complexities could somehow have been foreseen, as aesthetics was explicitly grasped as a historically formed contrapuntal ensemble or an all-encompassing realm that is made of different intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories traversed by a still very present colonial divide.

Aesthetics do not suddenly politicize. I have shown how the slow and molecular accumulation and confluence of subversive aesthetic practices turned the power subsumed in prevailing state aesthetics against itself. Almost all the references to the numerical and monochromatic state aesthetics were annihilated. The creative diversion of the most visual element of state aesthetics – the national flag – was furthermore an essential mediator of the convergence of the body politic. Through this process of re-appropriation, a moving body politic can be held together beyond historical regional, generational, class and political differences. United under the reclaimed colors of the nation, damned subjectivities could salvage their sovereign right to be. Another striking aspect of the aesthetic agency accumulating from the margins, was the way it disrupted and opened up a closely policed and firmly sealed public space. Diving into the highly salient spatial quality of revolt, led to the basic insight that if sovereign power can be territorialized, its territorialization can also be diverted. In this light, I have demonstrated that aesthetic practices of diversion or reappropriation are not merely symbolic processes, but visual, sensible and thus heuristic operations. The heuristic character of the process of reappropriation or diversion central in this dissertation facilitated – beyond ideologically staged oppositions – an aesthetic understanding of the fundamental political questions under scrutiny. I have furthermore exposed how different historically stratified spatial nodes or meeting points, keeping the compartmentalization or fragmentation of sovereign power in place and precisely crisscrossing urban space – such as police stations, monumental building or the sculptural landscapes that constitute a given personality cult – do not outlive their original structure by themselves. This research revealed that the violent disruption of these tenacious spatial nodes is a vital precondition of the diversion or reappropriation of urban space, as violence is contained in the way sovereign power is territorialized in the first place.

As state aesthetics mediated the exceptional façade or fiction of a firmly installed regime, the inflation of ingenious diversion or reappropriation rendered sensible the gap between the intended state aesthetics and the various ways in which these were received, (re)interpreted and contested. The accumulation of aesthetic practices enforced an irrevocable divorce between the official spectacle and the everyday life, between the public and the hidden transcript. The violent and sudden collapse of the official imagery and the following laceration of the state aesthetics in place, created a moment for the imperceptible repercussion of state oppression to fervidly arise. As the authoritarian regime was challenged by the various sequences of diversion, reappropriation and revolt, it was the very structure of the police order that shook to its foundation. While diverting states aesthetics, the converging body politic questioned the structure of implicit rules and conventions, which determines the distribution of roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, its division of collectivities in smaller entities, positions and functions. The swarm of revolt provoked a fissure in the partition of the sensible where new political subjectivities could possibly appear, overcoming a deeply entrenched inferiority complex.

In this light, I have shown how looking at revolt as a lived experience can render sensible the hazardous possibility of bodily sacrifice as a fundamental precondition for an accumulated aesthetic agency to fully foster. Defying the risk of martyrdom could in other words be grasped as a necessary element of the repertoire of a contentious choreography that made the moving horde converge at the same time in the same place in a theater of self-constitution. The mere presence of different vulnerable bodies in the streets and squares contested the biopolitical power that unimpededly circulated in a well-honed authoritarian regime. What constituted the body politic and facilitated generalized revolt was thus not only the collective will to get rid of the oppressive autocrat and its theater of legitimacy, but, as I have argued, the will to live of the most precarious and damned bodies, driven by a collective annihilation of the prevailing fear of death and a collective and fearless confrontation with the odds of sacrifice. I have spelled out how a space of appearance can come into being through the collective mourning of the destruction of the most vulnerable bodies, claustrophobically hemmed in, suffocating and constantly confronted with the possibility of death at the heart of life itself. The universalizing power of death, unleashed by the sacrifice of more than three hundred unruly bodies,

facilitated a space where a quite fundamental ethical redefinition of the ontological relation inherent to prevailing subjectivities could take place, overcoming a deeply incrustated inferiority complex and – at least for a mesmerizing moment – suspending the paradox of social death. Every time, what I conceptualized as a necropolitical space of appearance came into being, it provoked a possible deconstitution of the conditions of social death and a process of collective bodily self-reconstitution, as it was through sacrifice that damned subjectivities liberated themselves and paradoxically brought life for the other into being. It was through the diversion or reappropriation of necropolitical power, producing extra-discursive and even non-discursive effects outside prevailing biopolitics, that prevailing subjectivities were reimagined.

The mirrored images of the microcosm of the Kasbah reflected in the glass case of a popcorn machine in the video of Halim Karabibene, suggested the irreversibility of subject formation. They reminded us of how the unified body politics spontaneously converged and by moving together and fusing into one collective and indivisible swarm regained a sense of collective agency. The body politic regained a certain – but apparently very volatile – proudness to be an autonomous agent defining a common political will. Through a collective process of subjectivization, proper politics was brought into being, confronting a crumbling police order. Moved by the swarm, each and every one stood up to demand nothing less than dignity. Nevertheless, the question should be posed if the different movements of revolt really “opened the possibility for genuinely new subjectivity” as confidently stated by Abourahme & Jayyusi (2011:626). With the elections of a constituent assembly, the new singular and coherent swarm united through the collective diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power, as quickly defragmented as it was formed. Newly formed Islamist and later more Salafist- and jihadist-asserted subjectivities appeared on the stage of revolt. The ongoing process of subjectivization was challenged, and after different tragic jihadist attacks even blocked and kept outside the political play. The violent re-emergence of the binary and oppositional Islamism-modernism divide, not only categorically excluded the nascent ambiguous Islamist subjectivities through an almost generalized disdain or contempt, but also the once unified subjectivities formed through shared feelings of injustice related to access to land, the extraction of natural resources, the repression of informal local economies and prevailing corruption. The blockage of renewed forms of becoming, were productive for the

restoration of the police order, but less so for the demands for decentralization, redistribution and reparations. The metaphoric question how to prevent the figure of the jihadi to engage in a bloody Manichean war, how to stop the figure of the Harraga, to burn his papers and risk his life crossing the Mediterranean, how to discourage the figure of the Bouazizi, to perform suicide and self-immolate, how to thwart those without part in the distribution of the sensible, to give up their struggle against an omnipresent death, linger on until today.

Throughout this dissertation, diversion or reappropriation proved to be a powerful gesture that has the potential to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible, yet I have shown that this is only the case when if what is reterritorialized during the process of reappropriation is bereft of repressive power and if it thus consolidates the new spaces it produced. The original functions of all the diverted squares, reappropriated mosques, reclaimed streets and avenues, visually altered or damaged monuments, squatted villas and police stations are restored today. Not one significant space, memorial or monument that emanates the will of liberation and dignity of the revolting body politic is truly consolidated. The ambiguous entanglement of state aesthetics and aesthetic agency could further be demonstrated through the way the national flag transformed, almost at the same time as the ongoing sequences of revolt were ossified in the myths and symbols that now constitute the Tunisian Revolution. As initially the national flag was one of the very few consensual images that facilitated the convergence of the body politic, it quickly transformed into a central object of violent contestations, gradually losing its inclusive capacities. New forms contested the white crescent and star, coloring outside the lines of the nation and furthering the imagination of religiously inspired, transnational ideological constellations. The flag lost its foundation, its multi-vocality and capacity to imagine a national unity beyond prevailing historic divisions. As a reaction, it activated a certain reductionist, essentialist and even oppressive potentiality. Through the image of the flag, I have shown how during times of revolt, elements of state aesthetics can easily regain their rigid original forms, even ending up becoming a caricature of their earliest shape and appearance. The reactionary imposition of hyperbolic versions of certain state aesthetics can be temporary productive for the restoration of national unity and state prestige in the context of a deep political crisis, but can at the same time block processes of subjectivization.

The apparently self-evident possibilities of time that determine the shared distribution of the sensible in the postcolonial context of Tunisia turned out to be a particularly persevering condition to alter. Going deeper into the possible transformations of prevailing politics of time and its concomitant normative conceptions of history during processes of revolt, disclosed the stubbornness, tenacity or the authoritarian resilience of prevailing state aesthetics. It confirmed the difficulty to find practices that in their imaginary appellation go against the grain of the fundamental linear conceptions of time ingrained in the normative idea that progress, innovation, modernization and development guarantee a better future. The historical complexity and ambiguity of state aesthetics only confirms the comforting and hegemonic character of modern temporal linearity. The apparent impossibility to reinvent state aesthetics outside of modernity, could therefore be read as a symptom of prevailing postcolonial paralysis that freezes the politicization of aesthetics and upholds a dual self-image or an internalized historical duality and supposed incompatibility between a backward traditional or religious past and a homogenous one-dimensional democratic future. The singular future promise of civilization that constituted the colonial state aesthetics seemed difficult to puncture, as it transformed in the singular promise of democratization, endlessly repeated in the formation of postcolonial state aesthetics. Despite the fleeting aporia of time provoked by the spontaneously formed aesthetic agency, and despite the momentary dignifying expulsion of the bifurcated self-image or inner twoness proper to the prevalent interiorized inferiority complex, the race on the secularized highway of progress and transition was resumed in the direction of the democratic future the world-system is prescribing.

Although destroyed, diverted or reappropriated in the recent sequences of revolt, the master signifier of state aesthetics of the Ben Ali police order still stands in the middle of the capital next to the master signifier of Bourguibist state aesthetics, making of the Avenue an almost museal dispositif. Reading the palimpsestic nature of state aesthetics and how its configurations unfolded over time, renders visible how the initial colonial, and the following Bourguibist and Novemberist aesthetics never fully disappeared, but were rather preserved, rewritten and eventually piled-up in what constitutes the superimposed order of contemporary state aesthetics, emphasizing its transformable, permutable and thus fundamentally historical character. The upsurges of revolt that constitute the Tunisian Revolution

did not only partially wipe away the state aesthetic proper to the Ben Ali regime, it made the Bourguibist state aesthetics emerge again and revolve back into public space, making both sensible formations coexist and simultaneously relate to each other in the postrevolutionary present. Walking on the central Avenue today makes the palimpsestic character of history or its thousand moving and overlapping plateaus almost palpable. As suggested by de Certeau (1988), all the revolutions of Tunisian history now indeed lie in layers within the Avenue. Imbricated strata where all epochs survive and pile up form its monumental landscape, intact but still trembling and mutually interacting. Beneath the flat and seemingly immobile surface of the present, opaque and stubborn histories survive and move with the rhythm of the everyday, as reminded by Achille Mbembe (2013), leaving indelible traces in the consciousness of its passers-by. Walking in public space is thus never a neutral activity, but a disciplining process that facilitates the symbolic structuring and collective delimitation of a nation-state. In this research, I have shown how the discourse of the civilizing mission, which continued under the guise of modernization, development and democratization discourse, is being reproduced, as spectacular power circulates through the images and monuments that constitute prevailing state aesthetics. When circulating through a panoptic dispositif of a given police order, spectacular power passes effortlessly through the moving bodies in the streets, in a silent and unverifiable way, without interruption. Innumerable repetitive movements around and in between the Clock Tower and the equine statue of the 'Father of the Nation' on January 14 Square permeate the daily routine and subjugate the body politic, leaving indelible marks and determining the understanding of history and thus of the political present. As reminded by Mbembe (2013), the elements that constitute state aesthetics tend to keep alive the repetition of hegemonic colonial and postcolonial differences, and as I have shown throughout this dissertation, also the inferiority complex inherently tight to these stubborn differences, haunting the embodied memories, neglecting the lives of the damned, of those who have no part.

LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR NEW RESEARCH

Before ending this dissertation, I want to highlight some of its analytical and empirical constraints, and at the same time bend these – now inescapable – limitations as opportunities for further research. First I also want to make a short but important point regarding the form of my doctoral thesis. Having made the deliberate choice to write a thesis-by-publication and not a classic monograph, I was compelled to be very thrifty in which data to include in the different chapters and thus to economize my descriptions. Economizing on the rich empirical descriptions that underpin my theoretical arguments was an excruciating but necessary process to abide by the competitive conscriptions of academia, its conditions and rules, but also to benefit from the uncontestable added value of peer-review.

While this research explicitly chose to focus on the aesthetics aspects of creative dissent and more specifically on the ways in which a colonially induced inferiority complex could be surmounted through the reappropriation or diversion of spectacular power, it has omitted from going too deep into the innumerable discursive battlefields encompassing this process of reappropriation. A possible avenue for further research lies in the discursive struggle over the formation of new subjectivities, the discursive battle for the delineation of a shared imagined political space, for instance through the enunciation of the people and the various poetic reiterations of the slogan: “The people want!”. Central in the discursive construction of peoplehood seemed to be a constructed pastness through which an idea of ‘the people’ is invoked. Certainly, in the constitutive phase of the revolution, different collectivities used a certain understanding of Tunisia’s past, to legitimize present claims on the specificity of a presumed Tunisian subjectivity that reinforced their political position, complicating hegemonic readings of history. Learning the local vernacular would not only allow me to venture into the discursive construction of peoplehood and its pastness and thus to further nuance the sensible processes of subject formation that were laid bare in this dissertation, it would also give me access to the poetry, literature and theater and thus to other unexplored qualities of sense experience that constitute the aesthetics of revolt.



Figure 67, 68, 69 The Black Show, Malek Gnaoui

interpretation of the lifecycle of the revolution. Reconstructing the genealogy of the different elements of state aesthetics was less demanding compared to the challenging task of unearthing the historical legacy of aesthetic contestation. I could only find very few traces of this yet unwritten history of dissent. In the context of national liberation, only the dismantlement of the statues of Cardinal Lavigerie and Jules Ferry are to some extent documented. In the light of the Bourguibist regime for instance, I only found the case of five students having defaced the portrait of the president in one of the wrecked offices of the Faculty of Letters in Tunis University in the slipstream of the notorious Black Saturday in 1975. They were sentenced to prison for up to six years for having insulted the head of state and for the theft of official documents. Further archival research should be done on how the first elements of colonial state aesthetics were received, negotiated, reinterpreted and finally also contested. The same holds for the continuation of these dynamics of dissent, once the freshly independent state decided to continue these structuring and disciplining symbolic practices through the personalization of power around the constructed figure of the 'Father of the Nation'. Academic energy will have to be invested in reopening these archives of creative dissent and reconstructing a history of aesthetic agency from below. Additional research could also be directed to providing a deeper historical understanding of memorial and aesthetic practices operating outside of defensive modernist mimicry. Inspiring in this light is the furtive skull tower or 'Borj er Rous', a memorial built next to Borj El Ghazi Mustapha in Houmt El Souk, Djerba. It was erected at the end of the Hafsid Caliphate to mark the Ottoman victory over a joint Christian alliance fleet, led by the Spanish conquerors under the command of the Duke of Medina-Celi. The about nine-meter-high tower was made of skulls and bones of the conquering troops of the Spanish garrison who had perished in the battle against the Ottoman naval commander Darghout, warning that future conquerors might await a similar faith. Shocked by its presupposed barbaric appeal, the consul general of France and the apostolic prefect of Tunis obtained an official authorization to demolish the tower skull. The skull tower was replaced by a rather insignificant monument that still stands there today with an inscription recalling this speaking historical controversy. Hence, this example shows that further research needs to address whether the French colonial project not only produced a certain structure for a particular state aesthetics to develop, but also obliterated existing collective memorial and aesthetic practices before Tunisia transformed into a modern nation-state.

Albeit my fieldwork brought me to different astounding places scattered over the country, most of my findings were collected through and mediated by wealthy key informants operating in the capital, Grand Tunis. This geographical delimitation and consequent bourgeois bias constitutes a problematic limit of this study, knowing that the movements of revolt themselves were actuated by this very division, pushing demands for decentralization, territorial justice and reparations from the margins to the heart of societal and political debates. Even though I tried to anticipate this bias by engaging conceptually as much as I could with this fundamental reversal, this limitation made me unwillingly ignore vital processes on the ground in, among other places, Redeyef, where a Novemberist monument was apparently for a moment diverted into a monument for the martyrs of the revolution or where L'Economat, once a colonial administrative building, was diverted into a contemporary art center. My physical restriction to the capital center made me oversee the discussions that preceded and were provoked by different commemoration initiatives of the self-sacrifice of Mohamed Bouazizi, such as the monumentalization of his fruit cart or the nearly presidential portrait hanging on the post office in the city center of Sidi Bouzid. It will be necessary to broaden the geographical scope of future research and further question the various ways state aesthetics was contested in the more damned peripheries of Tunisia, in the regions where the pockets of revolt started in the first place.

Finally, though thought-provoking undercurrents in different contemporary art scenes saw the light of day the past years, I cannot claim any insights pertaining these various flourishing fields. As stated in the introduction, I did not research the impact the recent moments and movements of revolt had on artists, nor did I research the role of artists adopted in these revolts. However, I analyzed specific politicological sequences of revolt through their contrapuntal aesthetics, beyond any artistic disciplinary categorization. I therefore had to deliberately ignore some of the major changes noticeable in these different scenes to focus on my main research questions. I also had to willfully put aside numerous aesthetic practices that blew me away, as they were completely outside, only enveloped or merely inspired by the aesthetics of revolt and thus only distantly reiterating, reflecting or questioning some of its components, but not actually participating in the ongoing aesthetic movement or moment itself, sustaining the repertoire of a continuing liberation struggle. I now, more than ever before, feel the urge to detach my academic preoccupations revolving

around state aesthetics, to look closer into aesthetic practices that are speaking to the political situation in general and that can alter the shared distribution of the sensible outside, or without directly relating to, prevailing state aesthetics.

Illustrative in this light is *The Black Show*, a performance by visual artist Malek Gnaoui, presented as part of the Dream City Biennial in 2015 in El Morkhad, a forlorn but popular square in the medina not far from Bab Jdid. As part of a series of works where Gnaoui explores the imagery around the figure of the sheep and the gesture of sacrifice, *The Black Show* managed to bend the popular practice of ram fighting into a full-fledged fashion show. In doing so, he not only shed an appealing light on this too often marginalized play, a popular and longstanding tradition that has been handed over from father to son in the working-class neighborhoods of Tunis, but also made a powerful and radically pacifist gesture in the midst of the sometimes violent political turbulences the country is working itself through. Working with artisans from the medina, Gnaoui designed various black jewelries, scarfs, coats and necklaces to adorn the rams for this one in a lifetime parade. The most remarkable aspect of *The Black Show* is that it succeeded in neutralizing the seemingly unavoidable violent confrontation between opposite poles, without losing the energy of the agitated crowd who spontaneously gathered around the performance, with at least as much enthusiasm as they would gather around the deepest play. This spectacular performance showed in other words the power of aesthetic practices to go beyond politically staged oppositional binaries. It installed a line of flight, which led its spectators away from the many teleological and essentialized discourses of becoming, a priori excluding certain codified others. With *The Black Sheep*, Gnaoui showed how a desolate square of the medina could easily be transformed in a critical third space and by doing so, he facilitated a double critique, necessary to grapple with and disentangle the sometimes intricate political and violently conflicting constellations, enabling the coming into being of a thought and practice of difference.

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INTERVIEWS

1.	Thabet, Hedi	m	Artist	May 2011	Brussels
2.	Jouini, Faouzi	m	Entrepreneur	August 2011	Soliman
3.	Bousselmi, Hamadi	m	Artisan	August 2011	Tunis
4.	Lamine, Hela	f	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
5.	Bouali, Hamideddine	m	Artist	September 2013 September 2014	Tunis
6.	Werda, Rania	f	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
7.	Khalladi, Tarak	m	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
8.	Tlili, Selim	m	Artist	September 2013 September 2014	Tunis
9.	Fehdila, Moufida	f	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
10.	Gades, Faten	f	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
11.	Khalil Arem, Olfaf		Civil Society	September 2013	Tunis
12.	Triki, Rachida	f	Researcher	September 2013	Tunis
13.	Latif, Chokri	m	Cultural Worker	September 2013	Tunis
14.	Belhadj, Soufiane	m	Activist	September 2013 September 2014	Tunis
15.	Driss, Hichem	m	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
16.	Khaled, Inshaf	f	Professor	September 2013	Tunis
17.	Gorgi, Aicha	f	Curator	September 2013	Tunis
18.	Jelassi, Nadia	f	Artist	September 2013	Tunis
19.	Jelassi, Seif	m	Artist;	September 2014 August 2015	Tunis
20.	Belgasm, Rochdi	m	Artist	September 2014 August 2015	Tunis
21.	Jlassi, Bilel	m	Artist	September 2014	Tunis
22.	Jouini, Hamdi	m	Artist	September 2014	Tunis
23.	Hamdani, Atef	m	Artist	September 2014	Tunis
24.	Ben Yahmed, Bahri	m	Artist;	September 2014	Tunis
25.	Ketata, Nadia	f	Civil Society	September 2014	Djerba
26.	Kilani Tbib, Mohamed	m	Artist	September 2014	Djerba
27.	El Mabrouk, Manel	f	Artist;	September 2014	Tunis
28.	Dunoyer, Béatrice	f	Cultural worker	September 2014 August 2017	Tunis
29.	Ouissi, Selma	f	Artist;	August 2017 October 2017	Tunis
30.	Ouissi, Sofiane	m	Artist;	November 2014 August 2017 October 2017	Tunis
31.	Guellouz, Meriem	f	Researcher;	August 2015	Tunis
32.	Lacquaniti, Luce	f	Researcher	August 2015	Tunis
33.	Bendana, Kmar	f	Researcher	August 2015 August 2017	Tunis

34.	Kaouech, Asma	f	Cultural Worker	August 2015	Tunis
35.	Ghoslani, Wassim	m	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
36.	Tamzini, Sana	f	Curator	August 2015	Tunis
				August 2017	
37.	Nakhli, Alia	f	Researcher	August 2015	Tunis
38.	Bousselmi, Ali	m	Civil Society	August 2015	Tunis
39.	Touwayma, Karim	m	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
				August 2017	
40.	Chaabouni, Nesrine	f	Artist;	August 2015	Tunis
				August 2017	
41.	Fillali, Aicha	f	Artist;	August 2015	Tunis
42.	Garbouj, Soundes	f	Civil Society	August 2015	Tunis
43.	Fida, Hammami	f	Civil Society	August 2015	Tunis
44.	Amar, Hela	f	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
45.	Roussi, Faten	f	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
46.	Farhat, Raja	m	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
47.	Farghi, Amel	f	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
48.	Benani, Mohamed	m	Cultural worker	August 2015	Tunis
49.	Jmal, Mouna	f	Artist	August 2015	Tunis
50.	Snoussi, Saber	m	Cultural worker	August 2015	Tunis
51.	Bousselmi, Meriam	f	Artist	January 2015	Brussels
52.	Dhaou, Hafiz	m	Artist	January 2015	Brussels
53.	Chomiakh, Laryssa	f	Researcher	November 2016	Boston
54.	Chamekh, Nidhal	m	Artist	January 2017	Paris
55.	Ben romdhane, Lili	f	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
56.	Zourgane, Houria	f	Curator	August 2017	Tunis
57.	Rivera M., Alessandro	m	Researcher	August 2017	Tunis.
58.	Boukardougha, Amor	m	Artisan	August 2017	Tunis
59.	Chennaoui, Henda	f	Journalist	August 2017	Tunis
60.	Sehili, Mekdad	m	Cultural worker	August 2017	Tunis
61.	Karoui, Selima	f	Artist, Journalist	August 2017	Tunis
62.	Lucattini, Luca	m	Entrepreneur	August 2017	Tunis
63.	Chalbi, Mahmood	m	Curator	August 2017	Tunis
64.	Ben Ammar, Yosr	f	Curator	August 2017	Tunis
65.	Mekki, Thameur	m	Journalist	August 2017	Tunis
66.	Fellah, Walid	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
67.	Jaibi, Essia	f	Cultural Worker	August 2017	Tunis
68.	Oussi, Selma	f	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
69.	Yousfi, Hela	f	Researcher	August 2017	Tunis
70.	Jdey, Adnen	m	Researcher	August 2017	Tunis
71.	Kaabi, Nour	f	Civil Society	August 2017	Tunis
72.	Abid, Leïla	f	Judge	August 2017	Tunis
73.	Rahmouni, Ahmed	m	Judge	August 2017	Tunis
74.	Ismael Louati	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis

75.	Mohamed Ben Slama,	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
76.	Garnaoui, Wael	m	Researcher	August 2017	Tunis
77.	Bouagila, Oussama	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
78.	Amami, Azyz	m	Activist	August 2017	Tunis
79.	Gnaoui, Malek	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
80.	Bribri, Myriam	f	Activist	August 2017	Tunis
81.	Berriche Chahine	m	Artist	August 2017	Tunis
82.	Mrabet, Moez	m	Cultural Worker	August 2017	Tunis
83.	Khiari, Sadri	m	Researcher	August 2017	Tunis
84.	Mejri, Elyes	m	Artist	November 2017	Paris

