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The Last Monument Standing

The Politics of Time in the Tunisian Revolution

Joachim Ben Yakoub
Ghent University
Joachim.benyakoub@ugent.be

Abstract

During the latest uprising in Tunisia, the agitated crowd almost totally destroyed the autocratic monumental landscape. As the provocative ‘Anti-Clock Project’ by visual artist Nidhal Chamekh shows, the strongest element of this landscape was not destroyed; it still stands in the capital today and illustrates how the imbricated strata of the contemporary monumental landscape can be understood as an inherited palimpsest that reveals hegemonic assumptions about the prevailing politics of time. The monumental translation of the new era promoted by the contested Ben Ali regime paradoxically froze the idea that change would facilitate general progress, innovation, modernization and development and guarantee a better future. In this article, we argue that the Clock Tower and the civilization project it materializes, initiated by colonial occupation and upheld by the consecutive postcolonial regimes, does not necessarily warrant a better future. Rather, it continues to restrain political sensibilities in the present time, dismisses historical pasts and withholds alternative futures.

Keywords

politics of time – memory – revolution – Tunisia – palimpsest – postcolony

In the line of different political manifestos written during 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 rebelling masses, with the exception of the central clock monument. Chamekh’s manifesto suggests destroying it with the sphere from the top of

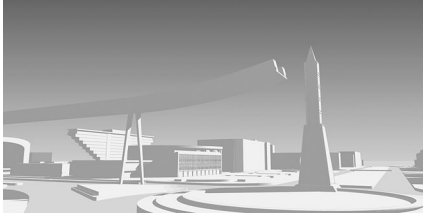


FIGURE 1
The Anti-Clock Project—3D Modeling
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the skeleton pillar of the infamous ‘City of Culture’. The crushed clock tower would then function as a new memorial site of the revolution. Reduced to a miniature model in a 3D printed map of Tunis, Chamekh’s 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.

Nidhal Chamekh’s manifesto and installation not only guides our journey through the symbolic landscape of Tunis, but through its focus on the last monument standing, the cartographic installation also proves conducive to our understanding of the politics of time and memory in the Tunisian Revolution and its monumentalization today. Approaching Tunis’s 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 were slightly transformed during the two consecutive postcolonial regimes. The monumental landscape was a constitutive element of the civilizing mission and the assimilationist urbanization policies of the French colonial administration (Coslett 2017). 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 a minimum demand of every decolonization process (Fanon 1952: 117; Fanon 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 palimpsests of different times and histories imposed itself (Huysen 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 (see fig. 1), even though the monumental landscape may be annihilated, the landscape’s last monument still stands today and—as we argue—will probably still

stand tomorrow as it materializes a soothing hegemonic modernist and future-oriented temporality that mystifies and restrains political sensibilities in the present time, dismissing certain historical pasts and withholding differential futures.

1 Our 14 Will Never Be 7×2

In the celebratory demonstrations following the toppling of their dictator on 14 January 2011, protesters held banners marked with the viral slogan: 'Our 14 will never be 7×2 '. This slogan was self-evident for most Tunisians, but a difficult, if not impossible, one for most non-Tunisians to comprehend. The number seven is key to deciphering the slogan: over the last twenty-three years that president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled Tunisia, the number seven came to signify adherence to the regime. It began on Saturday morning 7 November 1987 when, still acting as prime minister, Ben Ali sent seven doctors to the palace of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia (Auffray 2011) to push him aside after over thirty consecutive years as president. After building 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 7 November 1987 a medical report attested that Bourguiba was unable to continue his duties. Ben Ali then declared on public radio that the president was 'senile' and therefore 'mentally unfit to govern' according to article 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 a founding document, heralding the beginning of a 'new era'. Announcing the 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 certainly not the last) anniversary of the 'new era', when different political formations approved of the 'National Pact' on 7 November 1988. The historical day Ben Ali took presidential power thus heralded the 'New Era of Change'. Soon, however, the regime started to lose its support and legitimacy.

If Habib Bourguiba built his power on behalf his historical legitimacy as the father of independence and was therefore acknowledged as the personification of power, his successor was pressed to invent another historical legitimacy (Abassi 2009). In his last legal constitutional mandate in 1999, the regime prepared for a constitutional referendum in 2002 that would allow the president to run for an unlimited number of terms and increase the age limit for presi-

dential candidates to seventy-five. Through consecutive manipulated electoral victories, the official discourse took the form of a future-oriented civilizational project in which 'change' was underpinned by the 'eternal values' that facilitated the necessary adjustments for 'democratic and pluralistic progress'.¹ In the same way that his predecessor depended on the refinement of a 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.² 'November 7' became 'the numerical emblem' of what was called the necessary 'change', which would open 'a new era' (Auffray 2011). The date of the coup became a symbol of new power relations, forming what I call the 'Novemberist monumental landscape'. However, the way the annual 'November 7' spectacle unfolded (Chomiak 2013), and how different artistic interventions gradually diverted the digit toward the end of authoritarian rule, speaks volumes about a premonitory sense of revolutionary dissent (Ben Yakoub & Zemni 2019). During the latest revolution, the monumental landscape was, finally, almost completely destroyed.

Next to material (Hibou 2006) and coercive domination (Ghorbal 2013), symbolic domination is a prerequisite for autocrats (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 2013). 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 symbolic numerological fixation. The spontaneous but systematic destruction of Novemberist monuments was a clear precursor of 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' (Zemni 2013).

1 See, for instance, the official press release for 'the anniversary of change' in 2009, in which it was called 'an impetus for renewing hope and confidence in the future' (Tunis Afrique Press 2009).

2 Since the 1990s, artist and photographer Hichem Driss has collected photographs of nearly all the '7' monuments. 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 7×7 black and white photographs of the monumental landscape.

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 2015). 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 is taken seriously as an element of political analysis, it is regarded as a 'scarce and nonrenewable resource' that ought to be managed (Schedler and Santiso 1998: 10), and not as a 'horizon' created by the interaction of present, past and future (Schedler and Santiso 1998: 6). Moreover, the 'largely descriptive chronometric analyses ... have failed to articulate the revolutions beyond their chaotic, unfolding eventfulness' (Sabry 2012: 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 the literature on democratization makes one neglect the impact of long-term processes such as the unfolding 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 (2012) reading of the revolution, through Walter Benjamin's theses on the philosophy of history, it becomes clear that the revolution radically contested the concept of (economic) progress ingrained in the everyday politics of the regime.³ Criticizing this hegemonic teleological con-

3 In the curatorial statement of 'All the World's Future', the international art exhibition where the 'Anti-Clock Project' was first shown, Okwui Enwezor also refers to Walter Benjamin's allegorical interpretation of Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus' as the 'Angel of History'. By referring to the 9th thesis on the philosophy of history he invites the public to rethink 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 turn toward the past to grasp differential futures, he challenges artists to engage with a certain critical historicism, from the perspective of the unfolding disquiet context of crisis, uncertainty and insecurity, but by being aware of and focused on the accumulated debris of the devastations and catastrophes of the last two centuries.

ception of progress and development, Chollet (2012) manages to analyze the revolution in what he perceives as a progressive line of revolutions that goes back to 1789 (French Revolution) continues through 1871 (Paris Commune), 1917 (Russian Revolution), 1956 (Hungarian Revolution), and 1989 (the Tiananmen Square movement in China). This reinforces the idea that Tunisians are late, and are only now becoming truly modern and catching up with the train of history (Khiari 2016).

In this analysis of the temporal dimension of the Tunisian revolution I propose to focus on the multiplicity of times subsumed in the age of the post-colony (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 experience time bodily. 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 and 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 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 symbolizing 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, which was the drive behind the revolution. Memorial monuments therefore cannot be minimized as mere decorative objects in the green spaces that enliven concrete cities (Sebag 1998). The 'bodily experience' and the 'vivid sensation of intersubjectivity' when encountering a statue remind us that monuments exercise their own power over and above that exercised by the state (Kros 2015: 153).

As Achille Mbembe (2013) suggests, a monumental landscape can be discerned as a series of artifacts that pretend to be 'the latest substitute of the

substance of time itself', whereas actually it is a trap of 'a rebellious time' that refuses to be caught between the hands of any potentate. Monuments enhance the illusion of permanence and intergenerational continuity, and by doing so, tangibly elevate 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 and Balibar 1991: 78), to avoid 'the past [catching] ... up too fast with the present' (Trouillot 1995: 11). It essentializes time and sculpts in bronze the contours in which time can be thought. Through this process the monumental landscape encapsulates the subject within the outlines of an imposed conception of the past, excluding the possibility of experiencing time outside these sculpted lines. In the words of Fanon (1952: 180), it 'encases', 'enslaves' and provokes oneself to 'be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past' (Fanon 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 a 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 a symbol of the industrial standardization necessary for the global modern capitalist age to come into being. Metrically pulsed with a fixed rhythm, the clock enables perfect synchronicity and thus universally measured and controlled time management (Stalpaert 2016). What Fabian (1983: 29) calls 'Western Clock Time' or 'Physical Time' is today divided up into nanoseconds to ensure the accuracy of high frequency trading on 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 not only determines 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 that continually creates 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 that one can truly experience (Vázquez 2009) This linear conception of history is characterized by what Walter Benjamin (1968: 261) called 'homogeneous and empty

time' and can be considered 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' toward 'civilization' (Fabian 1983; Chakrabarty 2000; Barba 2014). 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 inability to '[utter] the universal'. The disposition toward 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 indigeneous people were considered 'ontologically incapable of change', and therefore pre-determined to remain 'indigenous', doomed to 'repetition without difference' (Mbembe 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) considers 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 led 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 notes that then 'the colonized is out of the game. He is [in] no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object' (Memmi 1965: 91–92). As a result of this forceful process of historical objectification, the postcolonial subject interiorized a presumed 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) toward his own supposedly 'premodern' tradition.

The 'Novemberist monumental landscape' can be understood, first and foremost, as a form of symbolic dominance (Mbembe 2006; Mbembe 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 addi-

tion, 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 makes up a 'panopticon of time' (Sadiki 2015). 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 to the point that we turn into temporal beings (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 2015: 5–6) and provoked an aporia of time (Sabry 2012). Moreover, as Sabry insightfully suggests, 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' (Sabry 2013: 25). 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 masses find different ways to again contest the strongly embedded panopticon of time, 'transition' can again make space for 'revolution', as Jocelyne Dakhli suggests (2016). In the following section, we consider the proposition of the 'Anti-Clock Project' as one that demythologizes the ubiquitous hegemonic conception of time and history, and engages with the ambiguity of multiple pasts to create a profusion of possible futures, what in itself is one of the basic functions of memory (Mbembe 2006; Mbembe 2015). This, we hope, will contribute to the academic 'stammering' that brings us closer to understanding the 'historical paradigmatic shift' Tunisia is experiencing (Sabry 2013: 25).

4 Last Monument Standing

The scope of this article does not permit an 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), we navigate its three central memorial sites:

the 'City of Culture', the statue of Ibn Khaldun, and the 'November 7 Clock'. Second, and more conceptually, as an artwork the 'Anti-Clock Project' 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' stimulate a look into the way political temporalities can be spatialized in a postcolonial context and thus how a revolutionary contestation of this postcolonial spatialization can raise profound questions related to the prevailing politics of time and memory. Tunisia is a particularly interesting case, with the postcolonial monumentalization thematizing, in its entangled form and content, 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 masses, at least for that cathartic moment of destruction, expelled their tragically bifurcated self-image. Together with the violent destruction of the 'Novemberist landscape', the prevailing inferiority complex and alleged incompatibility between tradition and modernity seemed—at least for a moment—to be annihilated. By shattering the monuments, the experience of time in its inherent multiplicity and reversibility was reclaimed. However, as suggested by Chamekh's installation, we have to apprehend the deeper meaning of the incompleteness of these revolutionary dynamics of monumental annihilation. The partial nature of its destruction emphasizes the ingenuity and power of the disciplinary structure set in place by the Ben Ali regime, and the difficulty of completely overthrowing it. The incompleteness of the destruction process relates to what Timothy Mitchell describes as 'the production of modernity', where 'the hegemony of the modern over what it displaces as "traditional" is never complete' Mitchell (2000: 18). 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' (Mitchell 2000: 18). 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 imbrication 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 re-address these temporal-

ities through a contestation of this spatialization, we navigate the 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's symbolic monumental landscape. We focus on 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 entry points to thoroughly engage in a precise analysis of possible temporalities materialized by the contemporary monumental landscape.

We approach Tunis's 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, we further our understanding of the political temporalities and histories at the center of these spatial arrangements. As Saidi insightfully suggests (2007) and following de Certeau (1988), we approach the city of Tunis and its monumental landscape as 'palimpsests'. We thus focus on the highly symbolic 'stubborn' places that 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). We must take care not to scrutinize only the most recent stratum; on the contrary, we should be able to conceive 'the interrelations between disparate forces and times' and 'to reveal, decode and decipher a system' veiled by 'superimposed orders' (de Certeau 1988: 202). According to Huyssen (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's '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' (Huyssen 2009: 7). Reading the palimpsestic nature of Tunis and its monumental landscape and considering how the configurations of its urban space unfolded over time in its mediation of memory, helps us 'understand the fundamental temporality of even those human endeavors that pretend to transcend time through their material reality and relative durability' (Huyssen 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 make up Tunis today (Huyssen 2009: 81). In what follows, we share our reading of Tunis as a vital anthropo-

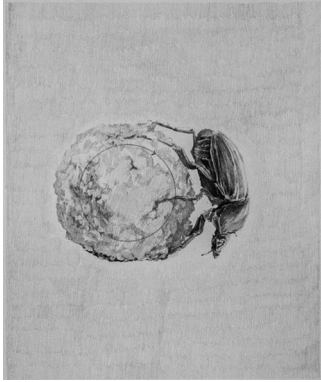


FIGURE 2
 Scarabaeus Sacer rolling a ball of dung
 © NIDHAL CHAMEKH

logical place and as an urban palimpsest, to reveal, decode and decipher the ambivalent processes of symbolization that this monumental landscape has undergone over time.

5.1 *City of Culture*

The opening of the the 'City of Culture' was initially planned for 7 November 2009 as part of the celebration of the 5th presidential re-election (Bint Nadia 2015). The plans called for a grand monument of 52,000 square meters that would house a theater, a cinema, a library, production studios, and auditoriums, 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 ostentatious central cultural center on the site of the former International Fair on Mohammed V Avenue, began in 2003, but was interrupted, then restarted in 2006, but stopped again in 2008. The main entrance of the 'City of Culture' consists of an architectural copy of the minimalist 'Great Arch of Defense' in Paris; this entrance serves as a door-frame for an ornate oriental Arabic door.⁴ The concrete skeleton of the 'Tower of Culture' was also already built. The glass geodesic sphere on top of the tower is an element in a number of monuments built by the state in the 2000s; it visualizes a globe and symbolizes the country's will to be included in the prevailing universal, contemporary and global values (Kazdaghli 2006). Ironically, over time, the construction site 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 that were deeply ingrained in the corrupt state structure (Karoui 2015). This popular cri-

4 Interview with Nidhal Chamekh, Paris 13 January 2017.

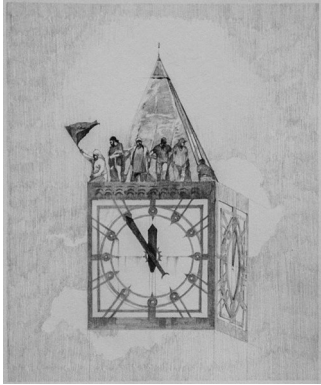


FIGURE 3

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

© NIDHAL CHAMEKH

tique resonates with the drawing of the scarabs in Chamekh's installation (see fig. 2). Where most beetles use their ball of dung as a food source or brooding chamber, Chamekh proposes to use the geodesic symbol of 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.⁵

5.2 *Big Ben Ali*

The second central monument on the cartographic installation is a 37-meter high master signifier of the monumental landscape, the last monument standing today on the 'January 14 Square'. Before the revolution it was known as the 'November 7 Square', before the Ben Ali regime it was the 'Africa Square', and finally, before independence it was 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 Big Ben in London and the Luxor Obelisk in Paris. The tower is coated in bronze in a traditional *mashrabiyya* (latticework) pattern; it is lit from within, and has a golden pyramidal rooftop (Coslett 2017). The four-sided clock tower is based in a circular reflecting pool with a musical cybernetic fountain. The sides of the monument are identical, it overlooks the capital and is visible from every perspec-

5 Since his appointment as minister of culture in August 2016, Mohamed Zine El Abidine has been harshly criticized for his involvement in the affair of the 'City of Culture' and for his strong ties to the Ben Ali regime. A petition 'Against the *Sinister* of culture: for a cultural policy that cuts with propaganda' was signed by hundreds of prominent figures from the cultural and artistic world, in an effort to prevent him taking office; the petition ultimately failed (Bel Hedi, Fatma and Karim 2016).

tive.⁶ From the outset, the Ben Ali regime constructed a political image that was designed to differentiate itself from the previous regime, so that through the idea of reform, renewal and change, it could heal the wounds caused by the authoritarian legacy of his charismatic predecessor Habib Bourguiba (Saidi 2008). The clock visualizes the need to constantly update oneself and keep up with 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 the twenty-three years of Ben Ali's rule; it propagates the idea that being up-to-date facilitates general progress, innovation, modernization and development, that catching up with the times would guarantee 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 exactly the same place as the master signifier of the colonial monumental landscape. The basic stratum or pedestal of the landscape saw the light of day as a constitutive element of the monumental translation of the French civilizing mission (Coslett 2017). The statue was erected in 1911 in honor of the late Jules Ferry, in the middle of the newly established '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; he looks over a Bedouin statuette offering him a bundle of freshly harvested alfalfa. A third statue of a settler sitting down looks up at Ferry in full admiration. As president of the French senate, Jules Ferry was at the forefront of the negotiations that led to the establishment of the protectorate in Tunisia. When, in April 1881, an army of 28,000 marines in a dozen French navy warships set foot on Tunisian land, they gained absolute domination 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' toward 'a more human future' (Gallois 2013: 253). Being in a class of their own, the French administration promised to lead Tunisia toward a better future. The road to progress and the new forms of being contained in the future promise of civilization were seen, however, as anachronistic. As many of the social and intellectual changes the French foresaw had already been carried out, the colo-

6 Interview with Nidhal Chamekh, Paris 13 January 2017.

nialists failed in their project of 'temporal dismantlement and reconstruction' because it promised a vision of the future that was already present (Gallois 2013: 273). During the struggle for national liberation, the various elements of the monumental landscape were vandalized, destroyed, and later replaced (Sebag 1998; Giudice 2009).

In 1956, the state held a ceremony around the unbolted monument of Jules Ferry on the renamed 'Africa Square'; several senior officials of the newly founded independent government attended, along with a celebrating crowd. But soon the empty square was 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 postcolonial 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, astride a galloping horse, triumphantly saluting the cheering masses, dressed in a modern tailored suite with a traditional chechia (a brimless Maghribi cap with a tassel). Reminiscent of the equestrian statue of Louis xv on the Place de la Concorde, the statue clearly mimics the French monarchical trend toward equestrian monumentalization (Coslett 2017).

Independence provoked an ambiguous process of entanglement between colonial and nationalist forms that represented the replacement of colonial logic by a nationalist one, but in the very facts, recovering colonial senses by mimicking the same symbolic practice 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 once fought (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). The rising tourist industry reflects the postcolonial regime's predilection for the western myth of progress. The excretion of the past was considered necessary to put the country on the track toward modernization, as Bourguiba himself emphasized, when he proposed to, '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 space in a park in the northern suburb of La Goulette, where the president first set foot when he came back from exile in 1955. The statue was replaced by the first version of the 'November 7 Clock'. Once the 'Mujahid El Akbar' (The 'supreme

combatant', as he was surnamed) was 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 a large number seven to mark six o'clock (Siino 2012). With the renovation of the main avenue at the end of the 1990s, the outdated clock monument was replaced by the 'Big Ben Ali', which stands today in honor of the third millennium.

In round-the-clock debates following the ouster of the dictator, the last monument standing was given an important function. For the first celebration of Labor Day since the revolution, the General Labor Union (UGTT) furnished the clock with iconic pictures of the revolution, as a form of tribute. The clock was only embellished for a few hours, as the police insisted that the photographs be pulled down because they were considered offensive toward their profession—they depicted scenes of police violence. Before the labor movement's action, the theater collective 'al-Halaka' had already, in vain, proposed to change the look of the clock tower for the celebration of the first anniversary of the revolution. Nevertheless, during the next two anniversaries of the revolution, the transitional government decided to dress 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 scaled the clock without ropes to wave the black standard during the day of protest for the 'Holy Quran', is imprinted on the Tunisian collective memory. After the image of militants waving their banner from the clock tower went viral, digital diversions popped-up in the online sphere, implicitly pointing at the supposedly backwardness of these activists, for instance in the video the 'Invasion of the clock' (Benyoussef 2016). They compared this 'conquest' of the clock in 2013 to the conquest of Mecca by the Prophet Muhammad in 630 CE. Another meme compared the action to the first moon landing in 1969. For some commentators, their supposed backwardness was confirmed by the irony of history, as their action happened the same day Europe adjusted its clock to summer time (Chine 2012), thus implying that Tunisians remain 'behind' Europeans. On Chamekh's apparently hopeful drawing, the clock shows five minutes before twelve instead of five minutes after twelve as the viral picture clearly showed (see fig. 3). However, he drew six instead of seven jihadis, unconsciously denying them some symbolic subversive agency.⁷

It was only in the context of the first presidential elections in November 2014, at the base of the latest constitution, that a political debate started about the 'Novemberist Clock Tower'. The interim president running for re-election,

7 Interview with Nidhal Chamekh, Paris, 13 January 2017.



FIGURE 4
Ibn Khaldun statue barbed on independence square.
Tunis, 2015
© NIDHAL CHAMEKH

Moncef Marzouki (2014) (unsuccessfully) proposed, in a public post on social media, a symbolic reparation, to replace the clock tower with a monument to the glory of the martyrs. 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 the Bourguiba statue to its 'natural place'. During the campaigns, both presidential candidates proposed to remove the 'Novemberist Clock', but as we see, 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 fourteenth-century father of modern sociology and historiography, stands. Together with the equestrian statue of Bourguiba, it was put up to symbolically counter the rampant feeling of 'national disenchantment' (Béji 1982) after the masses rose up against the liberal turn of the postcolonial regime, culminating in what is now known as 'Black Thursday'. The monument, made by sculptors Amor Ben Mahmoud and Zoubeir Turki, replaced the tomb of the unknown French soldier of World War II that was installed during the French protectorate. After independence, the tomb was moved to the war cemetery, and in 1978 it was replaced by the statue of Ibn Khaldun, which today faces 'Big Ben Ali' from afar (Coslett 2017). However, the statue of Ibn Khaldun (a philosopher holding a book in his hands and draped in a traditional burnous and jalaba), which was 1.5 meters shorter than that of the equestrian statue of Bourguiba, were connected by the main avenue (Saidi 2007; Fromherz 2011). The relationship established through the juxtaposition of the two iconic monuments seemed to imply a hierarchy between the monument of the 'father of the nation', who stood in a higher position, overseeing the new city, and oriented toward the West, and the monument of a medieval historian and sociologist, in a lower position, erected close to the

old medina and oriented toward the East.⁸ The statue of Ibn Khaldun is popularly known as the 'Bedouin lost in the city' or the 'Marabout abandoned by his followers' or as the 'former Cheikh of the Zitouna Mosque expelled by the Bourguibist regime' (Saidi 2007: 156). These processes of allocation, hierarchization and symbolism not only turned the main avenue connecting the two monuments into a spatio-temporal axis, but also implied a general process of subordinating the past and its traditions in favor of the present and modernity (Saidi 2007). As we can see on the drawing that contextualizes Chamekh's installation, during the latest revolutions the statue of Ibn Khaldun was surrounded by barbed wire (see fig. 4). Although at first it looked like it was (symbolically at least) intended to protect the personification of the historic philosophic consciousness of the revolution, it soon became clear that the army was only protecting the French embassy, the former 'colonial residence' located directly across from Ibn Khaldun's 'independence square', the former 'residence square'.

Exactly seven months after the Venice Biennale closed and the last person visited the 'Anti-Clock Project', the equestrian statue of Bourguiba was brought back to the center of Tunis. As promised by President Beji Caid Essebsi, the statue was effectively unbolted and removed from its previous location in La Goulette where it stood for twenty-nine years. In an attempt to re-establish the postcolonial 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 between the 'November 7 Clock' and Ibn Khaldun, on the main avenue carrying his name. Already in 2009, Essebsi stated in his visionary memoir *Habib Bourguiba. Le Bon Grain et l'Ivraie* [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 [will] 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

8 This juxtaposition has inspired many artists, certainly those engaged in literary circles during the rule of Bourguiba, for instance, in the subversive poem 'Nashid al-ayyam al-sitta' (Hymn of the six days) by Awlad Ahmed (1984), and during the rule of Ben Ali, in the plot of the novel of Fawzi Mellah *Le Conclave de la peureuse* (1993) or more recently in the premonitory novel of Kamal al-Riahi, *al-Ghurilla* (The gorilla) (2011).

the ministry of interior, in exactly the same place 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 proposition would have made legible immeasurable values—values that cannot be reduced to money or sheer force. As such, a monument for the martyrs could have been understood as the 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 three of the most important memorial sites in the urban space of Tunis 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 these were 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 has been re-integrated into 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 their erasures, it is clear that the colonial, and ‘Bourguibist’ and ‘Novemberist’, city texts never fully disappeared, rather they were 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 balance between tradition and modernity, the historical markers that constitute the

monumental landscape do not contradict 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 comforting 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 promise of civilization that constituted the colonial city text was never unleashed, rather it was just transformed into 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 duality during the ephemeral revolutionary moment, Tunisia resumed its race on the secular highway of progress and transition in the direction of the singular democratic future the world system prescribes. 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 the imagination of any potentially dignified futures. Thus, the clock tower, and more importantly the regime it represents, will probably stand tomorrow, symbolizing the apparently inexhaustible desire for, and transition to, democracy.

Though the slogan 'Our 14 will never be 7×2 ' has now been clarified, by now it should also be clear that this promise sounded more convincing directly after Ben Ali fled the country than it does today. As we now see, the central square of the postcolonial monumental landscape that was renamed 'November 7 Square' during the Ben Ali regime has now been renamed 'January 14 Square'. This does not mean that the date the autocrat fled is destined 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 Tarek el-Tayeb 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 sacrificed their lives for a liberated and dignified future, it also (provisionally at least) 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 once this sacrifice is made redundant.

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