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ME AND NOT ME: THE PERSONAL-COLLECTIVE VOICE OF FIRST-PERSON FILMS FROM THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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When thinking about films made during times of revolutionary insurrection, many different styles and approaches come to mind. In the Soviet Union Eisenstein innovated his theory of montage and Vertov worked with his Council of Three to perfect his 'camera eye' in the service of revolutionary truth (Eisenstein 2010; Vertov 1984). In the 1960s and '70s, the Palestine Film Unit made countless films mostly in the newsreel and training film vein, while in Argentina, a theory of Third Cinema was being developed by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas with a set of guidelines for militant cinema that ranges from the long form fiction film to the short, sharp intervention of a film 'pamphlet' (Solanas and Getino 1969/2014; 1971/2014). Around the same time, Jean-Luc Godard, in his most militant phase, renounced individual authorship altogether and worked in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin for a number of years under the collective named The Dziga Vertov Group. In none of these disparate cases does one ever see any emphasis on the individual, whether in the development of psychologically complex characters or the emphasis on the subjectivity of the filmmaker.

For reasons that may be too obvious to dwell on, it was nearly always the case that filmmaking strategies were developed to work against any type of individualism that might have been considered anathema to a collective mass struggle.[1] The revolutionary filmmaker was not meant to emerge as the subject of their film, and such an act of idiosyncratic singularity would surely have been decried by their comrades if they had. There have even been points along the span of twentieth-century revolutionary filmmaking where filmmakers were indeed singled out and isolated for their formal innovations, with accusations of pursuing a type of "petty bourgeois individualism."[2] For instance, Dziga Vertov, working feverishly in the first decades of the Soviet Revolution, was roundly criticized by his

filmmaking peers, including Eisenstein, and eventually his idiosyncratic style was denounced precisely for being too subjective. He was eventually sent to work in the backwaters of Ukraine, and his documentary approach was sidelined in favor of the more "objectivist" stance of Esfir Shub and her compilation films (Malitsky 2004; Yampolski and Spring 1991).

Knowing this history made it all the more surprising to find, while conducting research for my project *Filming Revolution* in winter 2013 and spring 2014, several film projects, either recently finished or still in production, foregrounding the subjective view of the filmmaker in unexpected ways. I had traveled to Egypt to investigate the approaches to filmmaking of independent, mostly documentary, filmmakers in the wake of the momentous historical events that began in 2011. My initial contention was that for the entirety of the twentieth century, revolutionary unrest constituted a remarkably fertile ground for new approaches and thinking in cinema, and that here was an opportunity to understand what might be unfolding right before our eyes in this new century. What I had absolutely not expected was to encounter so many personal films. Admittedly, few of the filmmakers I met were making claims about innovating a new form of revolutionary cinema, nor were they necessarily concerned with such questions. Some were new to filmmaking, others were experienced filmmakers, and most were simply trying to use film as a way to make sense of their relationship to the events around them. As Viola Shafik states in an interview conducted in May 2014, "[m]ajor historical events throw people back on themselves," and it then becomes their task to understand better what happened and what their role was in it. As she says, the revolution was a "moment of truth, and in that moment of truth, you want to know more about yourself . . . not just as an individual, but as a society."[3]

Before entering into a discussion of the films themselves, a note about first-person film may be in order.[4] In general, I will be speaking about the first-person modality in documentary, rather than in fiction film. The emergence of the overtly subjective perspective in documentary, something that was always there but was actively repressed in all but the most autobiographical of documentaries, initially ran counter to the carefully constructed illusion of objectivity pursued in the majority of cases. The first person may have been an available mode of address for experimental filmmakers and video artists, but documentarians took much longer to foreground their own perspective and point of view, preferring to hide it up their rhetorical sleeves. Whether this has more to do with left-wing affinities or journalistic aspirations (or both) is an open question. What is apparent, however, is that first-person documentary came to prominence, at least in North America and to a lesser extent in Europe, in parallel with the rise of identity politics and the demise of the organized left, leading me to consider, in an article

entitled "First Person Political" (Lebow 2013), whether there wasn't perhaps a direct correlation between these phenomena, and to wonder what the politics of first-person films might be said to be.

In a cynical vein, one might be tempted to ask whether this turn to the first person in Egyptian documentary is not a sign of the neoliberal demands and dreams of the revolution, neoliberalism revering the individual more as a consumer than a revolutionary, and going some way to prepare the ground for individualistic ideas and pursuits. Surely, if we follow a strain of thinking that suspects the West of a particular investment in developing a compliant consumer rather than a collective actor, we can imagine the drive toward more individualist concerns would fit this picture perfectly. After all, many of the funding and training initiatives that have supported these recent film projects come from abroad (including IDFA in Amsterdam, Bertha Foundation in the United Kingdom, the Canadian Foundation AlterCine, the Doha Film Institute, AFAC in Lebanon, and more), and there are certainly currents that might have influenced the modes of narration in these films, possibly impelling them toward the personal or testimonial vein. We know that there is a conflation between individualism and a certain vision of democracy, and we know too that the West's overt "democratization" campaigns tend to derive their definition of democracy straight from the IMF and the World Bank.[5]

Even if first-person documentary, as it began to be practiced in the West sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, may have been directly influenced by post-leftist identity politics whose main innovation was the departure from the objectivist pretenses of the documentary dogmas of an earlier age, its emergence in the Middle East can be traced to much more directly political phenomena. We see the earliest signs of it coming from Palestine (years after the demise of the Palestine Film Unit), Lebanon, and a bit later Iraq; countries and cultures in conflict that suffered from a type of journalistic over-mediation of their crises with a dearth of images made from the perspective of those living the consequences of these struggles. I have suggested elsewhere that first-person films emerge in the region at a point where their expression is a sign of resistance—resistance to the dominant media, to the othering gaze of international journalism, to overdetermined readings, to the absence of any alternative perspective (Lebow 2013, 261) In other words, I argue that there are certain conditions in which the first-person film can be understood as necessarily more than an individualistic or narcissistic gesture, drawing on and in collectivities and communal identities that have profound political potency and potentiality.

Further, even while recognizing that some aspect of the shift to first-person filmmaking broadly speaking may reflect a loosening of the political commitment to a type of collective action, it can also be seen to

be much more closely allied with a post-structuralist and postcolonialist turn away from the Enlightenment stance on rationality and objectivity, and the universalism that such positionalities hoped to represent. If there could be no universal speaking subject, or rather, if such a subject position constituted an exclusionary illusion in the service of a dominant imperialist and masculinist project, then surely it should not be considered a vehicle for liberatory, revolutionary politics.

In turning my sights to filmmaking in Egypt, and unexpectedly encountering a raft of first-person projects, I became interested in the ways in which the first-person film might indeed become a vehicle for politically engaged filmmaking and constitute a contemporary approach to speaking cinematic truth to power. In the research for the interactive documentary project *Filming Revolution*, I interviewed approximately thirty filmmakers, and a full 30 percent of the film projects discussed turned out to be first-person films. This by no means suggests that 30 percent of all independent film projects in Egypt since the revolution were personal films. Their preponderance in my research may have simply been a coincidence. However, it is undeniable that such a modality has become an acceptable and even fairly common form of filmmaking, especially documentary filmmaking, in Egypt today.

What were the projects I was introduced to in the editing suites and home offices of countless filmmakers who had all been actively involved in the revolution—or the uprising—and were all in the process of making sense of it? A young feminist activist and filmmaker, Nada Zatouna, was beginning to explore her roots as a half-Nubian Egyptian, prompted by the racism she had encountered during her active participation in the revolution.[6] Ahmed Nour, in his film *Waves* (*Mawj*, 2014) explores his, and his city's, experience of the revolution as a young Suezi who grew up in the era of Mubarak, having known no other leader for his entire life. Viola Shafik (a German-Egyptian) attempts to make sense, in her film *Arij: Scent of Revolution* (2014), of a revolution that appears to her to be as much a calamity as a liberation, in part by trying to take account of relevant histories. Nada Riyadh, hailing from Alexandria, talks about the revolution as a kind of idealistic passion and, in her film *Happily Ever After* (*Nihaya sa'ida*, 2016), suggests parallels between the idealism represented by the revolutionary yearnings on the streets and the idealism of romance in her personal life. Her friend Mohammed Rashad made his film *Little Eagles* (*Nusur saghira*, 2016) in part to investigate the lack of political education in Egypt's working classes, and in part an effort to make sense of his own unpreparedness to act politically when so many of his friends in Cairo—many of whom come from the Egyptian intelligentsia and the left—seemed to have a ready-made revolutionary vocabulary

right from the start of the uprising. While I won't discuss every film mentioned above, and will actually discuss some films I learned about well after the research for the *Filming Revolution* project had concluded, I bring these projects to mind because of the diversity of issues they, as an aggregate, manage to address: culture, race, ethnicity, regionalism, migration, history, generational memory, class, gender, education, politics, eros—all find their way into these personally inflected films.

In this chapter I will discuss five first-person films from Egypt, all completed between 2012 and 2016. The films are: Safaa Fathy's *Mohammed Saved from the Waters* (*Muhammad yanju min al-ma'*, 2012); *Arij: Scent of Revolution* by Viola Shafik; Ahmed Nour's *Waves*; *Happily Ever After* by Nada Riyadh; and Mohammed Rashad's *Little Eagles*. I will discuss these films in two main groupings: the first two made by veteran filmmakers, as films that had been started before the revolution and transformed to one degree or another once the revolution exploded in Tahrir; and the latter three, all made by younger filmmakers, very much in the aftermath of, and as reflections on the effects of, those events. Of course there are other first-person films that have been made by Egyptians since the revolution and some will be mentioned along the way,[7] but it is the analysis of these five to which I turn now. At times I will depend on the words of my interviewees for the *Filming Revolution* project, in an attempt to collectively decipher this trend.

Mohammed Saved from the Waters and *Arij: Scent of Revolution* were both projects that were in production prior to the revolution's start. Or to be more precise, the first was already in production and continued its trajectory, incorporating the events of the revolution along the way, and the second was meant to be a different film before the revolution and shifted significantly in its aftermath. In Fathy's film, the revolution is just a fact, something that was happening while the last part of filming a long-term project was being completed. In Shafik's film, the fact of the revolution seemed to challenge all previous facts, requiring a complete re-evaluation and rerouting of the project to reckon with the current transformative crisis. In short, one film retained its focus and incorporated the revolution in its stride, while the other appears to have been utterly derailed by it.

And yet, to say that *Mohammed Saved from the Waters* is unmoved by the revolution would be a step too far. It is a film that, while appearing to be a chronicle of the filmmaker's younger brother's kidney disease, actually all but calls for the revolution and appears to be fully prepared for it when it comes. *Mohammed* is one of the few first-person documentaries I've seen from Egypt that is able to draw together so many of the factors (economic, environmental, social) that led to the uprising against the Mubarak regime in the first place. At the start of the film Fathy's brother,

a man of just forty, is afflicted with a type of kidney disease common in Egypt, attributed to the extreme pollution of the Nile. In the film we learn that there are sixty-seven sewage canals discharging directly into the Nile. It goes on to suggest a negative reciprocity, in that the lack of respect shown to the Egyptian life-force that is the Nile is being returned by the indomitable river in the form of humiliation of those who depend on it, cutting them down in their prime. As Mohammed's disease progresses, we also learn of the collapse of the government-supported healthcare system, forcing Fathy's family to rely on private treatments which are much more expensive. In the process of documenting the beloved brother's irreversible descent into illness, and his extraordinary rationale that leads him to reject a transplant until it's too late (he doesn't want to exploit someone in need, nor is he easily convinced that it's not "haram" to buy or sell organs), the filmmaker seamlessly weaves in the family's fury about the systemic government neglect and a politics of resistance that seems to be shared by friends and relatives alike. Of all the films I discuss here, *Mohammed* is the one that penetrates closest to the bone, unflinchingly documenting a painful personal loss with a poetic stoicism that displays great skill and restraint. Yet despite the deep affective register that could have easily overwhelmed the project and made it a narrowly cast domestic drama, it manages to make profound connections with the social and political circumstances in which it is filmed.

Arij: Scent of Revolution is a very different type of first-person film. It does not involve family members or close friends as is typical of this mode, but engages a range of seemingly unconnected interlocutors in the filmmaker's quest to understand something about the upheaval the country has just gone through. It turns out the characters are connected in a typology of mourning, each representing an essential stage in the process of grieving after a traumatic loss: oblivion (the Islamist), anger (the activist), preservation (the collector), and depression (the author), though this schema is nowhere indicated in the film itself. Originally a film about history—in particular, the ambitious construction project around the main archaeological sites of Luxor in Upper Egypt, designed by the government to turn it into what some have disparagingly called "Vegas on the Nile" (Hauslohner 2010)—it still retains vestiges of this initial focus, while also exploring related and unrelated themes via the four characters. There is the young veiled woman, Awatef Mohammed, who, for reasons that I have not fully untangled, stands in for "oblivion," and has created a virtual Tahrir Square using the Second Life platform, for women to visit if (forbidden by relatives or husbands) they're unable to reach the actual square; a Coptic shopkeeper who doubles as a human-rights activist and advocate for his community (anger); a tour guide and collector of historical photographs

who is nearly drowning in his own unarchived collection (preservation); and finally and most poignantly, the well-known Egyptian author Alaa El Deeb, whom Shafik interviews about his 1978 novella *Lemon Blossoms*, which he has only the vaguest memory of having written, though it holds many important insights for the current age of newly minted (failed) revolutionaries. Shafik tells us in her interview for *Filming Revolution* that the film, not unlike El Deeb's book, had a difficult birth, as it was born of the trauma caused by the degree of destruction produced by the dictatorship and made evident in the moment of revolution. In the interview, Shafik appears to be well aware that her film doesn't fully cohere and in fact justifies this as a symptom of the moment, where it was "impossible to tell a coherent narrative of the revolution" (Lebow 2018).

It is clearly the interview with El Deeb and his writings that anchor the otherwise disjointed narrative. His warning, borrowed from the Cuban author Desnoes, about the need to remember and preserve one's history if one hopes to become civilized, resounds in the contemporary context, not only because of the crass money-making schemes visited upon heritage sites by the Mubarak regime, but because of the new revolutionary circumstances that almost seemed to want to wipe the historical slate clean. In fact, both *Mohammed* and *Arij* draw on the ancient history of Egypt as the bedrock foundation from which to make sense of the present, and El Deeb acts in *Arij* as the wise fool who, while he can't remember the contents of the story he wrote, nonetheless knows that one needs to remember the contents of one's history.

The three films that were begun after 2011 concern themselves exclusively with modern Egyptian history, going back only as far as Nasserism and the Suez Canal, in the case of Ahmed Nour's *Waves*, and back to the insurrectionary movements of the 1970s in Egypt, in the case of Mohammed Rashad's *Little Eagles* and Nada Riyadh's *Happily Ever After*. Perhaps the concern with the recent rather than the ancient past has something

13.1. *Arij: Scent of Revolution* (2014), directed by Viola Shafik.

to do with the immediacy of the struggles, turning only to what appears to be the most pertinent history to help think through the challenges of the present. It may also have to do with the relatively young age of the three filmmakers (all around thirty at the time of production). Either way, it's as if history has been reduced to the time just before they were born, before the ego was formed, a referentless point that is as unfathomable as it is near. As Barthes neatly mused about a photograph of his mother from a past he could just barely imagine, it represented "History" with a capital "H," characterized as "the time when my mother was alive before me." The historical point of reference most important for these filmmakers is that which is closest to them: that of their parents' generation, which leads directly to Barthes' parenthetical add-on, referring to that time as "the period which interests me most historically" (Barthes 1981, 65). In this way, most of these first-person films touch on history and attempt to understand its legacy, but only as far back as the filmmakers' parents generation, and the ways in which this relatively recent, lived history may or may not have affected their own identifications and associations.

The first-person films of this latter grouping that are most concerned with a generational inheritance, especially in political terms, are those, coincidentally, made by the two Alexandrian filmmakers: Nada Riyadh's *Happily Ever After* and Mohammed Rashad's *Little Eagles*.[8] Riyadh's film, ostensibly about how to maintain long-distance relationships (including the one in which she finds herself), eventually reveals itself to also be about how to live with political defeat. After several detours into other people's stories of long-distance love lost or maintained, we get to the heart of the

13.2. *Happily Ever After* (2016), directed by Nada Riyadh.

film, where we learn that Riyadh's parents, before moving to the Gulf to make money and raise a family, had been politically active in the 1970s and had, at least in their daughter's view, left Egypt with their tails figuratively between their legs before the job of system and regime change was finished. When the stakes are revealed, all of the film's handwringing about leaving or staying suddenly makes sense. This young revolutionist does not want to leave with the job half finished, and can't abide by her boyfriend's prioritizing his own career and education over the nation's future. And when it becomes clear that they may indeed not succeed in their revolutionary aims, she is forced to reconcile with her parents, judging them less harshly, and her partner too, for their personal priorities in the face of forces well beyond their control. The intimate style of the film often feels too insistent, even to the point of insensitivity, as Riyadh frequently films herself and boyfriend in what appear to be quite unguarded and sometimes quite trying conversations. Though the film can be cloying at times, in the end it allows us to witness a subtle shift in her perspective, a softening and an acceptance that in effect chronicle her transformation into a mature and nuanced adult.

With Mohammed Rashad who, incidentally appears in some of the group gatherings in Riyadh's film, the situation is slightly different. His film *Little Eagles* was made precisely because he did not have political parents, never even knew that such a thing existed, and come the revolution, felt woefully underprepared in comparison to many of his Cairene friends, who seemed to know exactly what to do and how to be in the unprecedented situation, as if they had been trained from a young age, which it turns out they had. He learns that many of his friends at the forefront of the movement to occupy Tahrir grew up in a social sphere comprised of predominantly middle-class left-wing parents, who set up a youth group called al-Nusur al-Sagira, translated variously as Young Eagles or Little Eagles, hence the title of the film. The Little Eagles, set up by 1970s activists, was essentially a left-wing equivalent to the Scouts, with meetings and summer camps that taught the young members survival skills, as well as educating them on political issues such as human rights and their rights as children. Not only did membership create a tight social network, it also proved to be excellent preparation for the revolution, preparation that Rashad noticed he was sorely lacking.

While the film may expose the painfully unresolved dynamics between a father and son, with Rashad in voice-over almost cruelly expressing his desire for a better caliber of father, it also shines a light on the class distinctions that run right through the core of Egyptian society. These are precisely the distinctions that enable a small, educated elite to imagine another kind of world, while the vast underclass of ordinary Egyptians toil away in dead-end

13.3. *Little Eagles* (2016), directed by Mohamed Rashad.

jobs (in the case of Rashad's father, working as a clothing presser), while never for a minute daring to dream of even the slightest change or improvement in their lot. Rashad may be the only working-class filmmaker in all of the first-person films I've seen from Egypt made in this period, and the only one who is thus able to express the dimensions and frustrations of this experience. Had the film taken a more collective view of that experience, insisting that Rashad's perspective, and not the Little Eagles', is the one shared by the vast majority of Egyptians, and thus the one most in need of attention if such collective revolutionary aspirations are ever to succeed, this film would have accomplished much more than it currently does. As it is, Rashad may have been too caught up in the personal need to avenge himself against his workaday, lackluster father, returning the disappointment he faced all his life as the too "artistic" (code for "effeminate"?) and idealistic embarrassment of a son. Nonetheless, the film reveals the wide chasm between the classes in Egypt that needs somehow to be bridged if any real change is going to happen, and in this the film is uniquely positioned.

Ahmed Nour's *Waves* is an important film in terms of diversity, given that it is made from the perspective of someone from Suez, far outside of the capital and center of all art and film production (Alexandria is really the only alternative film scene in Egypt, with Cairo as the unrivaled center), reminding the viewer that the revolution was literally and figuratively ignited in this neglected industrial backwater. In a country where "Cairo" is a metonym for "Egypt" and vice versa, it is important to remember the provinces and to differentiate the experiences of those living outside of the megalopolis, far from Tahrir, yet nonetheless absolutely essential to the nation's fortunes. Without the oil from the Suez region, and of course

the revenue from the Suez Canal, a major international shipping zone, the Egyptian economy would suffer major losses. Yet we are all too rarely exposed to the vantage point of a Suezi.

Nour's film is structured as a series of "waves" which function like chapters, except that they don't necessarily add up so much as randomly process information and emotion through which meanings ebb and flow rather than accrue. At the outset of his film, there is a series of portraits of people in Suez, followed by a brief introductory monologue that has Mubarak coming to power in the 1980s, just as Nour's generation is born in Suez, tying their fates together while immediately situating the film in a broad historical context. The very next image after the title is that of Nour's baby niece, born a month before the start of the revolution, tying her generation to the new, post-Mubarak era. The footage of the weaning infant is intercut with images of the burning streets of Suez, the city credited with igniting the January 2011 revolution. There is a clear association being made between the individual, the new generation, and the political conditions into which these individuals were born. No one simply stands for him- or herself. And the emphasis on the neglected residents of Suez, their rage at the injustices visited historically upon the city, finds its analogy in the stories Nour chooses to tell based on his childhood and adolescent recollections. His experience, then, stands in synecdochically for the experience of those of his generation born in Suez. He makes a point of saying that the film is "personal and not personal," adding that, "if the film were just about myself, I wouldn't have made it" (Lebow 2018).

This leads me back to the point with which I began, about a collectivist

13.4. *Waves* (2013), directed by Ahmed Nour.

notion of the first person in most Egyptian first-person films emerging since the revolution. Viola Shafik, in her *Filming Revolution* interview, coins the phrase "personal-collective" to describe the introduction of her own individual subjectivity as as being more widely representative of a larger collective. In Shafik's words, "the 'I' that is speaking there, that's not Viola. It's actually me and the others who have the same problem of trying to understand the Revolution and the history of the country." This "personal-collective" voice represents the "me and not me" of such an endeavor (Lebow 2018). The implication of positioning oneself at the apex of such an association does assume an affinity with a collective that may not be fully formulated, and is certainly not fully representative. Having already raised the issue of class omissions that a film like *Little Eagles* implicitly underscores, it is not unproblematic for the predominantly middle-class filmmakers in this brief study to assert their commonalities with the Egyptian people as a whole, nor is there some neat mathematical equivalence that would translate divergent experiences of gender, race, educational level, religious beliefs, or political affiliation, making them one unified whole. That said, we must not discount the relevance of the emergence of the personal voice, as it models a type of citizenship and activism that can potentially affirm and inspire others, given the identificatory power of film. It may even be said that the more collectivist approaches to revolutionary cinema of the past constitute a failure on the part of cinemas of revolution, some of which tended to alienate viewers and fail to connect. Could it be that the effort to personalize and account for the experiential dimension of revolution is precisely what these Egyptian documentaries contribute to the history of revolutionary cinema? In the case of the Egyptian first-person films discussed here, I want to propose that rather than standing *out* from the crowd to emphasize a personal, individualistic point of view, they are precisely standing *with* the crowd, being willing to stick their heads above the parapet and be counted as one of the many, the millions who took to the streets to fight for change. Thus it is the collective spirit of these first-person films, even when they veer toward the intimately personal, that not only saves them from a myopic inwardness, but may in fact signal a new turn in twenty-first-century cinema of revolution.

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