

Article

When Art Is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World

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Abstract: This article examines the explosion of artistic production in the Arab world during the so-called Arab Spring. Focusing on music, poetry, theatre, and graffiti and related visual arts, I explore how these “do-it-yourself” scenes represent, at least potentially, a “return of the aura” to the production of culture at the edge of social and political transformation. At the same time, the struggle to retain a revolutionary grounding in the wake of successful counter-revolutionary moves highlights the essentially “religious” grounding of “committed” art at the intersection of intense creativity and conflict across the Arab world.

Keywords: Arab Spring; revolutionary art; Tahrir Square

What to do when military thugs have thrown your mother out of the second story window of your home? If you’re Nigerian Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, Africa’s greatest political artist, you march her coffin to the Presidential compound and write a song, “Coffin for Head of State,” about the murder. Just to make sure everyone gets the point, you use the photo of the crowd at the gates of the compound with her coffin as the album cover [1].

Kuti understood, perhaps earlier and more viscerally than most artists in the global era, that art, and music in particular, is the “weapon of the future” (as he titled his final album) [2] in the struggle against violent, corrupt and repressive regimes. Art is especially important where civil society has little space for protest or to otherwise challenge the power of repressive regimes. His was a seminal late 20th century example of how art both serves as a vehicle and creates spaces for subcultures to become

countercultures—how groups of (usually) marginalized young people, drawn together by common cultural tastes (in music, modes of dress, styles of speech, *etc.*) and performances, gradually articulate a powerful oppositional political vision that challenges authoritarian state power. In 1970s and 1980s Nigeria, led by a brutal and even genocidal military dictatorship (the 1967–1970 War in Biafra killed upwards of 3 million Biafrans in the same amount of time the Syrian civil war claimed 200,000 lives) and flush with oil income, Kuti's evaluation of the power of music proved sadly cogent. It could bring together large number of poor Nigerians around an artistic and political vision to challenge an unjust system, but the time where music or art more broadly could encourage a revolutionary momentum that would fundamentally challenge and change the system was—and remains still—in the future for Nigerians, and most of the world as well. Art has always been a handmaiden to revolution and culture its fuel, for no other reason than social and political (inter)action are inherently symbolic and performative, and thus inherently aesthetic and affective. It is impossible to move large masses of people into the streets and convince them to risk everything for the slim chance of changing their future for the better without having a powerful cultural and artistic component to convey the messages in the most affective—that is, emotionally effective—manner possible. But the era of contemporary globalization has significantly augmented the role and power of artistic and cultural production within societies. Contemporary globalization is unique in several respects compared to earlier iterations of global integration. Broadly speaking culture has been the driving force behind contemporary globalization far more so than in previous eras. Political integration has been largely absent outside of the European Union; and even this process is increasingly under threat. Economic integration is often thought of as the hallmark of contemporary globalizaiton; but in truth, the economic aspects of globalization (greater integration into the world economy, foreign direct investment, effective liberalization and privatization policies) have on the global scale been highly skewed as greater wealth has been accompanied by greater inequality and poverty in many areas.

In the MENA region in particular, outside the Gulf countries the kind of broadly distributed economic development that should accompany globalization (as it's been advertised) hasn't occurred nearly to the degree that it's occurred in the advanced economies and top tier developing economies such as China, India, Turkey, or Brazil (the so-called BRICS). In the era of contemporary, neoliberal-driven globalization, “the economy is globalized to the extent it is culturalized,” that is, transacted through cultural symbols [3,4] Culture is inherently transnational and translational, colonizing and colonized, othering and othered, part survival strategy and part “expedient” invention that continuously redefines our identities.

Here I understand globalization as inherent to the emergence of the political, economic and cultural/ideological coefficients of what I term the “modernity matrix”—the complex and implicate set of processes composed of capitalism, colonialism/imperialism, nationalism and modernity as a self-referential concept and ideology that began to congeal at the time of the Columbian voyages and opening of the Americas to European conquest in the late 15th and early 16th century, and which have together driven world history since then. The balance, mix and relative strength of the various elements change over time and geography.

If culture has become a “crucial key” (as the United Nations described it) in solving our world's myriad crises, in the dominant neoliberal version of globalization among the most powerful experiences and performances of culture have become depoliticized and commodified at precisely the

moment that it has become the defining mechanism of political and economic interaction and the engine of global integration. At the same time, because of the penetrative power of contemporary technologies—particularly satellite television and then the internet—the power of globalization to “disembed” or “deterritorialize” people from their original cultures has become all the more evident, as people all over the world are exposed to an unprecedented array of cultural symbols, products and experiences that transform their identities in profound ways. Some, by virtue of circumstance of personality or both, can experience this process as liberating. For others, fear, anger and violence are the most likely response.

Neoliberalism, the guiding ideology and power apparatus undergirding contemporary globalization, also has had profound economic impact which in many but not all cases resembles the impact of colonialism in centuries past. Specifically, in the developing countries such as those of the Arab world (outside of the small number of wealthy gulf petro-kingdoms and emirates) it has encouraged greater corruption and authoritarian rule as processes of so-called “privatization” or “liberalization” concentrated wealth in the hands of existing (if somewhat broadened) class of elites, undid the advances in human development that were one of the few positive developments of the “authoritarian bargain” of the era of Arab socialism, and weakened the power of citizens to mitigate the worst effects of authoritarian rule even as in principle they should have led to greater space for civil society. The intersection of “really existing neoliberalism” and increasing cultural interpenetration constitute one of the core dynamics of the contemporary era, creating an almost schizophrenic situation in which tens of millions of inhabitants of the region have been caught between competing identities, narratives, languages, dreams, and powers with little room for maneuver.

As the Moroccan fusion band Hoba Hoba Spirit explained why they gave their 2005 album the title *Blad Schizo* (*Schizo Country*): “Because it is a schizophrenic country.” Centuries of power wielded by the Makhzen (the name long used to describe the Moroccan European imperialism and now globalization, have made it so. “You have to understand,” frontman Reda Allali continued, “even our language is schizo. [Derija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, is a mix of Arabic, Berber, French, and its own grammar.] No one else, from the Middle East, Africa, or Europe, understands us. And our politics are twisted as well [5].

The “schizo” nature of globalized culture played a crucial role in the genealogy of the Arab uprisings. In interviews with numerous activists from countries that experienced the most intense protests (for example, Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain) a narrative has emerged in which the youth generation that instigated the protests began literally to split from the dominant patriarchal, authoritarian culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, with a core group developing an identity through new networks of communication and cultural experience and interaction—as epitomized by the emergence of the internet, but also through the formation of various subcultures (from young Muslim brothers to metalheads) and particularly through their experience in the universities, the cauldron for previous generations’ politicization as well. This cultural split, this coming of age of an unprecedented number of young people from the Arab world (Arab countries boasted the largest share of under 30 populations in the world by the 1990s) who were highly educated, multicultural and multilingual, broadly alienated from their broader cultures, and feeling as if the existing systems both provided no hope for the future and that they therefore had little if anything to lose by challenging their governments in increasingly direct ways. As Mohamed-Salah Omri explains for Tunisia, “One key

feature of the system during Ben Ali's rule was a duality or parallel existence of two opposing systems of values and cultural production. At the cultural level, everything was double, and just as there was thriving parallel commerce, run largely by the ruling family, as we found out after Ben Ali ran away, there was 'the theater of parallel commerce'...The same goes for poetry, fiction, music, and cinema" [6,7].

1. Radical and Resistance Cultures

African American writer Toni Cade Bambara has declared that "the duty of the radical artist is to make the revolution irresistible." [8]. But art has to be more than just a tool of critique. As the Dalai Lama declared, art must "awaken people to compassion" at the same time it motivates them to revolution [8]. This raises the question, however, of what kind of artistic/aesthetic production makes it impossible not to risk everything for the chance fundamentally to change the system in which one lives. I argue that the key to art, and music specifically, is the return of what Walter Benjamin described as its "aura," which he argues was lost as artistic production and circulation became industrialized, commodified, and commercialized.

With the modern mass production and circulation of art—Benjamin calls it "mechanical" or "technological"—"the aura" that previously had given art such aesthetic, and thus social power by highlighting its singularity and irreplaceable value, disappeared. For Benjamin, the disappearance of the aura of art was a positive development because it allowed for artistic production that no longer ritualistically served existing power structures and thus could enable new and even revolutionary visions of the future.

Benjamin's friend and comrade, Theodor Adorno, was profoundly influenced by the notion of the aura developed in Benjamin's seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical (lit. "technological") Reproduction." But Adorno saw the process more negatively: for him, the mass produced, commodified cultural production led to the creation of a "culture industry." Far from challenging the power of capital and its ideologies, the culture industry imposed an artificial aura, the "aura of style," upon cultural production, which had unprecedented power to reinforce the hegemonic ideology of the system (in this case the emerging consumer capitalism). In Adorno's words, this process constituted a "stereotyped appropriation of everything for the purpose of mechanical reproduction that eliminated every unprepared and unresolved discord." [9].

Of course, revolutionary music and art more broadly must highlight, not resolve, discord; it must become "immanently critical," in the same manner that Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues imagined philosophy should behave, if it is to enable greater human freedom. But it can't stop with merely highlighting, never mind heightening discord; it has to take the next step and promote a vision, a path and a method to create a new kind of accord between the people who must act in concert if the system is to be seriously challenged.

And here, the rise of new digital technologies have profoundly reshaped the production, dissemination and consumption of art. Professional quality films—both fiction and particularly documentaries—can be shot for very little money by young people, edited on their computers with the latest software and uploaded to the internet where they can be watched by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Artists and poets can put their work on the internet with the same results. Music has been far more democratized than any other art form by the internet by the ability to produce and circulate

globally high quality recordings at low or no cost, evading the constraints of both capital and governments. I argue that at least with respect to music (which has particularly affective power for young people) this dynamic has returned the aura to music (or at least these styles of music), allowing it to connect to and move people in the ways necessary to encourage and sustain revolutionary action.

The digital revolution in production and distribution has enabled a return of the aura to music by enabling these two simultaneous processes. “Mechanical” reproduction and commodified distribution necessitated the development a “culture industry” to ensure its widest growth, and with the incorporation of cultural production and distribution into capitalist networks and control, the resultant art as well as its consumption could not help but reinforce the system’s ideology, and serve as one of the most powerful weapons in capital’s—especially late, post-industrial capital’s—ideological and hegemony-producing arsenal.

But with low cost digital production capabilities and products that can be endlessly circulated for free, the necessary link between large-scale circulation and distribution of cultural products and commodification was broken. Specifically, the rise of “DIY” (do-it-yourself) musical scenes like heavy metal, punk, hiphop and other “alt” popular music, involved the creation of subcultures that were inherently (if only latently at the start) subversive and countercultural.

Moreover, these scenes were composed in good measure of “outsiders” and others who were marginalized in their societies, and of members who had high levels of new media-related skills experience organizing at the underground—or at least un(der)-commodified level to spread their music. This dynamic does not only concern music; other arts also have their “DIY” scenes. Finally and most important, these scenes survived and indeed thrived on face-to-face gatherings where music was intensely, viscerally and ritualistically shared, creating shared experiences, and through them solidarities, which strengthened the power of the music.

The combination of dynamics described here is what led to the return of the “aura” of music, by which I mean that music once again served as a “ritualistic” (to use Benjamin’s term) condenser and amplifier of solidarities and identities—but it was now, at least potentially, free of servitude to the capitalist market and its attendant political and ideological systems. This aura, which we could see glimpses of during the height of the hippie era and then again with the birth of punk and hip-hop (all three of which were deeply grounded in broader political-economic conflicts), has the power to attract more people and help inspire and disseminate alternative identities and visions of the future of society.

In the advanced capitalist countries of North America, Europe and Asia, such auratic scenes still cannot compete with the hyper-commodified and politically dominant forms of cultural production and distribution generated and controlled by the commercial entertainment industries. But in Middle East, North Africa, and other parts of the developing world, they have greater possibility of encouraging and participating in movements for systemic change and even revolutionary movements.

2. Art without End

The Arab uprisings have motivated, enabled and been accompanied by a wide range of cultural performance, production and experience which can be divided into two broad categories. First are political actions and events which were inherently aesthetic or had very strong aesthetic components. The protests in Tunis, Tahrir Square and so many other locations epitomize this phenomenon. They are what I and my colleague Bryan Reynolds describe as “theater of immediacy,” cultural (often, but not

necessarily artistic) creation and performance for an intended audience that is not merely emergent—that is, in the process of formation—but “emurgent” (emergent + urgent); developing rapidly and in the context of intense sociopolitical struggle that destabilizes and even reconfigures previously dominant, congealed structures and networks of power and identity. These performances—and here I understand culture to be inherently and always performative—constitute, to borrow a concept from Benjamin, a space and experience in which performance becomes auratic, and so transformative [10].

If protests and other large scale highly charged public political events are inherently cultural and often feature a significant artistic component, artists themselves played an outsize role in the unfolding of the Arab uprisings. Perhaps the most well-known artistic symbols of the Arab uprisings are two musical artists, Tunisian rapper El Général and Egyptian singer Ramy Essam, both of whom I discuss below. But music was not the only artistic form central to the Arab uprisings. Poets and photographers, playwrights and graffiti artists, in their home countries and exile, all played a prominent role. Not only that, the form and content of the art produced by Arab activist artists has continuously changed during the last five years, as conditions on the ground, the political situations, and the goals, dreams and expectations of the artists.

Finally, the artistic production and the theater of protests are of course intimately related. What made Tahrir such a powerful space was all the forms of art—music, graffiti, posters, humor, song, photography, poetry—that occurred within in. The intensity could be overwhelming, chanting with drums next to poetry surrounding by life sizes photographs, many of them grizzly, of the revolution’s martyrs, astride hand-drawn cartoons and poetic banners, all within the space of a few meters. It was also “self-perpetuating,” as each crackdown by police produced more art—none the more so and longer into the revolutionary era than graffiti, which was the subject of constant warfare between the Egyptian government and protesters for almost three years in the area around Tahrir [11]. Moreover, artists also constantly changed their tone and emphasis as the protests, revolutions and civil wars have evolved, whether from within or outside the countries [12–14].

Many countries attempt to claim pride of place in producing the most innovative and greatest quantify of artistic output since the eruption of the Arab uprisings. Given the sheer size of its population, Egypt likely could lay the most legitimate claim to this position, but as Miriam Cooke argues, given all the violence and suffering Syrians have endured the last five years, they have been the “most artistically and culturally prolific” [15], while Palestine has had longer direct experience confronting the full force of an oppressive regime.

What is clear is that the region has seen a real explosion of creative talent and energy since the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi, in such varied areas as Tunisian rap, Libyan literature, Moroccan experimental theater, Yemeni protest music and Egyptian graffiti [16]. All of these forms have historically “thrived on conflict” while at the same time pushed the boundaries of moral, political and cultural freedom while given vent to the frustrations of the people, especially the youth. The problem that we must explore is to what extent this release mechanism went from having revolutionary power to erase fear, claim public space (especially streets and squares) and set off protests and even uprisings to merely offering a “festivalisation of dissent,” as Aomar Boum describes it, containing and dissipating (or at least redirecting) anger and calls for social justice to less threatening ends [17].

Theater, as much as music and poetry, can produce “tarab,” that aesthetic quality causing “enjoyment, reciprocation of emotion and communication between performers and audiences.” Such

intensity of affect is not merely at the core of great art, it's at the core of all revolutionary upsurges, which is yet another reason why all great art is revolutionary and all successful revolutions must have their own art. The question is, how much "tarab" can it have when it is tightly controlled, as for example was theater in Nasser's Egypt, where social realism and critique along Arab socialist principles were the rule [18]. At the same time, we cannot just look at state-sponsored theater even in the 1950s–1970s. There has always been a "decadent" (habit) theater alongside the officially sponsored theater. Its themes were far more varied and complex than the official theater, but it could only have so much impact from the fringes.

3. Delineating Revolution Art

At the height of the Tahrir protests, from 25 January 2011 through late 2012, there was really no place on earth quite like the "Republic of Tahrir" (Gumhuriya at-Tahrir). All the arts were present at one spot or another, a fully immersive sensory explosion that was, quite literally, life-changing. Surrounded by a seemingly numberless ring of 10-foot long banners featuring photos of disfigured martyrs, pavement and walls covered by graffiti (with a new mural or two likely being painted while you watch), musicians playing, drummers drumming, poets rhyming, activists chanting, rappers rapping, documentaries being filmed while others were screened on makeshift white (no doubt Egyptian cotton) sheets, street theater "replaying" the events of the day.

All this in the midst of tens and even hundreds of thousands of people talking, screaming, chanting, debating, blogging, vlogging, facebooking, reporting, calling home to tell loved ones it's okay (or not) to come to the Square, and on and on. And when fighting broke out with the military, security services, police or their various thugs (baltagiyya), we can add generous amounts of tear gas, bird shot, rocks, spears, knives, molotov cocktails, and high velocity bullets to the mix. And on your increasingly smart phone, dozens of new tweets and facebook postings every minute or two from friends, comrades and colleagues reporting the latest arrest, death, meeting or protest or the latest video or story on al-Jazeera or one of the new independent newspapers. And on and on, hour after hour, day after day.

And if it's November, and it's raining hard, and your camping in the Midan and a river seems to be running right under—and through—your tent, and have your computer and guitar or oud with you, and are hungry, and need a bathroom, and the Ultras who are protecting you think everyone they don't know is an informant (which more often than not might well be true) and the street kids you've adopted—more truthfully who've adopted you—are also hungry and cold, well, at least baltagiya are not trying to burn the tents down. Such was life in revolutionary Egypt, an experience that was echoed to various degrees and periods across the Arab world, from Rabat to Sanaa and dozens of cities in between during the uprisings era from early 2011 through 2013, at which point counter-revolutionary and extremist forces had effectively contained and even crushed most of the radical pro-democracy movements.

4. Music: Weapon of the Present

Music may have been the weapon of the future for Fela Kuti, but for Tunisians in late 2010, it was very much the weapon of the present—not merely the soundtrack of the revolution that caught fire in the ashes of Muhammad Bouazizi, but a motivating factor in bringing people into the streets and

reshaping their basic political subjectivity, which is a core process of any revolutionary change in a country's social and political structures [19]. Indeed, as captured in an instantly classic photograph of a Libyan “guitar hero” singing and strumming his guitar next to several comrades in the midst of a heated battle with government forces, when necessary today's artists are as courageous as their counterparts in centuries past, when drummers, trumpeters and other musicians marched in step with soldiers, playing their music over the din of the battle in order to encourage their comrades to defy their fear of death and march headlong into unimaginable violence [20].

The most famous exemplar of the role of music in the Tunisian and subsequent Arab uprisings is the song “Rais Lebled,” or Leader/President of the Country, by the then largely unknown rapper El Général (born Hamada ben Amour). Arriving in the mid-1990s to the Arab world, rap music quickly established itself as a major force for aesthetic expression and innovation among Arab youth from Morocco to Iran [21].

With a brooding tempo and hip-hop beat and minor piano melody, the grim mood of “Rais Lebled,” which follows a long line of “gangsta” style Arabic rap, sets up El Général's at turns plaintive and excoriating missive to then President Ben Ali. Beginning by informing the President that “your people are dying...eating from garbage...We are living like dogs,” he goes on to describe the myriad indignities and violence, corruption and oppression suffered by ordinary Tunisians, this despite the seemingly progressive but actually worthless constitution. He focuses then, explaining: “Mr. President, you told me to speak without fear/I spoke here but I knew that my end would be palms [*i.e.*, slaps and beatings]/I see so much injustice. That's why I chose to speak out/even though many people told me that my end will be execution./But how long [must] the Tunisian live in illusions?” [22].

It's hard to overstate the power of “Raid Lebled,” not least because such words could in fact get a person killed, or at least imprisoned and tortured for a very long time. But in speaking about overcoming fear, El Général captured the essence of the Arab uprisings—the loss of fear of a generation which, at least for a moment, would rather “die on our feet than live on our knees,” as one revolutionary chant borrowed from many another uprising before it intoned. Aesthetically, it was precisely because El Général was not that experienced or innovative a rapper, and thus rhymed slowly in an easy to understand manner, that the song could be learnt and chanted easily, becoming an anthem of the revolution.

Studying these cultural performances is crucial to understanding the transformation from traditional to a more progressive, innovative set of cultural norms [23]. There are dozens of revolutionary hip-hop songs in the “Arab Spring canon.” Most every country from Morocco to Bahrain produced at least one song that helped unite and motivate people, reflecting their pains and dreams, and bringing them out onto the streets. Whether Arabian Knightz's “Rebel” (Egypt), Ibn Thabit's “Ben Ghazi” (Libya), or L'7a9ed's “Klab ad-Dawla” (Dogs of the State), hip-hop was truly at the heart of the soundtrack to the protests. In Syria as in Tunisia, hip-hop helped announce the revolt. The anonymous song “Bayan raqam wahid” (Statement Number One) exclaims, “Statement number one/The Syrian people will not be humiliated/Statement number one/We sure won't stay like this/Statement number one/From the Houran comes good news/Statement number one/The Syrian people are revolting,” calling for the revolution that, tragically, led to one of the worst civil wars of the last fifty years [24,25].

This kind of courage and forthrightness owes to the very dawn of Arab hip-hop, with the Palestinian-Israeli (*i.e.*, Palestinian citizens of Israel) rap group DAM, whose song “Min irhabi?”

(Who's the Terrorist?) was one of the most powerful accusations ever put to music against the Israeli occupation [26]. As with so much in the Arab Spring, everything returns to Palestine (I discuss the role of Jerusalem's El Hakawati Theatre and the Jenin Freedom Theater as among the most important pre-uprisings resistance theaters in the Arab world).

We could easily spend the rest of this article discussing the many contours and contradictions of revolutionary (or not so revolutionary) Arab rap [27,28]. At the same time, a complete discussion would require exploring the many—indeed, majority—of young artists who either stay clear of politics (this is particularly true of the metal scenes around the region now that they are fare freer of direct repression merely because of the music and styles of dress or grooming), and of the instances where regimes have actively sponsored rappers and other artists in the wake of the uprisings as a counter to the revolutionary artists (Morocco and Bahrain are good examples of how government sponsor hip-hop artists who otherwise might be dangerous to their power).

In the space available I will focus on one artist: Morocco's El Haqed (a.k.a. L7a9ed; "the Enraged One") [29]. L7a9ed's trajectory began somewhat later than the first group of revolutionary rappers, who were already fairly active, if not well known, before the eruption of the region-wide protests in late 2010. Mouad Belghouat (his legal name) came onto the Moroccan scene in the late summer of 2011, as a February 20 activist after the protests had reached their apex and were already fading in the wake of passage of the referendum put forward by King Muhammad. His stage name can be translated as both the enraged "l'enragé" or the "spiteful," or the indignant. If revolutionary Egyptian singer Essam has brought a kind of Bob Dylan, Ritchie Havens-like hard folk sensibility to Egyptian protest music (not surprisingly, Essam is a metalhead, and counts groups like Rage against the Machine, Korn and Slipknot as major influences), L7a9ed represents the ubiquitous power of hip-hop as the world's most politicized musical form today.

Moroccan hip-hop has been especially fruitful, producing some of the best examples of the genre anywhere in the twenty years [30]. From the start Moroccan rap was implicitly political, addressing social issues such as poverty, crime and rampant corruption and inequality in the country. But most rappers steered clear of directly challenging the legitimacy of the system, never mind the King.

This began to change around the turn of the present decade, as it did across the region. By 2009 twenty rappers put out a compilation titled "Mamnou3 f'Radio," "Forbidden on the Radio," with the goal of bringing together "the best titles censored on FM radio" [31]. And yet, once the system and the King became targets, rappers like other oppositional voices began to be targeted. Even as many rappers were organizing to fight censorship, a clear split opened up between those who would take on core political issues and those, most famously represented by the rapper Bigg (perhaps the most well-known rapper in Morocco), who stood squarely behind the King, becoming in fact court rappers.

Equally an activist and a rapper, L7a9ed came to the authorities' attention by September 2011, when he was first arrested after an altercation with a member of the Royalist youth. It was most likely a set-up, as police and ambulances arrived on the scene almost immediately, and despite no evidence that he'd actually assaulted the person, he was sentenced to four months in prison.

As with most rappers, L7a9ed's prison stint only increased his street credibility, especially among Morocco's poor and disenfranchised young people, from whose midst he'd risen in the slum of Oukacha, in the outskirts of Casablanca. Indeed, as he rose to fame L7a9ed drew his depictions of the worst characteristics of young Moroccans' lives earned him the sobriquet the "Gavroche of the

Moroccan revolution” (“le Gavroche de la révolution marocaine”)—Gavroche was a minor but important character in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, a “street urchin” who joins the revolution and risks his life and in fact dies while collecting ammunition cartridges from dead government soldiers near the barricades during the 1832 popular rebellion in Paris [32].

It is instructive to compare L7a9ed to the “rapper of the Tunisian Revolution, El Général, whose music and career trajectory defined along with Ramy Essam’s the politicized youth culture of the Arab Spring. In “Rayes Lebled,” the rap song that helped launch the revolution, he pleads and implores the President Zine Abedin Ben Ali that “your people are dying...eating from garbage...We are living like dogs.”

L7a9ed’s attitude was much more confrontational from the start. Like Essam, L7a9ed’s lyrics take on the most taboo subjects in Moroccan politics—corruption, police brutality, poverty and the inherently oppressive nature of the monarchy [33]. Specifically, in “Kleb adDawla,” L7a9ed’s signature song, the police—as in every Arab country, the most direct and concrete manifestation of state powers—are labeled “dogs of the state” (the translation of the title). There is no pleading for recognition. There is only derision, anger and a direct challenge to the core instrument of state power.

The differing attitudes of the two rappers became apparent in their post-protest trajectories. El Général quickly left political rap after the revolution, becoming more aligned with the growing Islamist movement as the new system emerged. When he did return to politicized lyrics, it was to take on the country’s secular and constitutionally weak President, Moncef Marzouki, in the 2014 song, “Rayes Lebled 2.” [34] L7a9ed began as a politically engaged rapper, or performance activist, and never backed down. His activities earned him two more stints in jail, for a year in 2013 after a conviction for insulting the police in “Kleb adDawla” and, as of the time of writing, a four-month jail term after again being arrested in a likely frame-up for allegedly selling scalped tickets at a soccer match and resisting arrest (in fact, witnesses confirm that L7a9ed was badly beaten while being taken into custody). He also saw his press conference to mark the release of a new, anti-regime album, attacked in February 2014. Essentially L7a9ed, like Ramy Essam, has become the closest thing to famed Nigerian political artist Fela Kuti in Africa today.

Meeting together in Amman in the winter of 2014, L7a9ed expressed growing concern that he’d soon return to prison, especially after the release of his new mixtape, *Walou* (Nothing). He previewed the album for me and other artists and activists during the Fourth Arab Bloggers’ Meeting, a gathering which itself was dominated by the ongoing detention of bloggers, artists and social media figures from Egypt, Syria, and other Arab countries [35]. It was clear upon first listen that fans who worried that L7a9ed might tone it down after his stint in jail (at a press conference upon his release he intimated that he would focus more on his studies and less on politics) could rest easy—or better, again be as “enraged” as L7a9ed—as one song after another excoriated the ongoing corruption, police brutality, inequality, lack of freedom, and particularly hopelessness, that characterizes life in what for most Westerners remains one of the most “modern” and “moderate” Arab monarchy [36]. As L7a9ed raps in the title track, “Walou”, mixing defiance and despair:

“Nothing satisfies us...We are so sick. No culture, no art, no creation...No, no way. We won’t back down. It’s my slogan. Choose my side or theirs...Put this in your head: Never give up your rights...This country is ours, not his [the king’s].”

While hiphop gets most of the attention, the roots of the youth music scenes in the Arab and larger Muslim worlds lies as much if not more in heavy metal and rock, with elements of traditional national music (Palestine) and folk rock (Lebanon), among others also playing a role. Indeed, the original musical subcultures-turned-countercultures in the Arab world are the extreme metal scenes of the region, which were already threatening enough to launch many “Satanic metal scares” from Morocco to Iran in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as I documented in my *Heavy Metal Islam*.

These foreign-born music scenes served as incubators for marginalized youth to express themselves and create relationships and solidarities, and as important, develop the kinds of do-it-yourself skills in spreading their music (in other contexts, message), particularly via the burgeoning internet and social media, that would prove crucial for the revolutions when they erupted. Indeed, it’s no surprise that in Egypt and Tunisia, many of the grass roots leaders of the revolutions came directly out of the metal scenes in those two countries [5,37]. And it’s not just the male artists. One of the most important revolutionary singers of Tunisia, Emel Mathlouthi, started off her musical life playing covers for melodic death metal bands like In Flames, Dark Tranquility, and The Gathering before electrifying her fellow protesters in front of the Municipal Theatre during the Jasmine Revolution with an acapella folk song.

Ultimately, extreme metal and rap are not that distant in origin even if they tend to sound quite distinct (aside from the hybrid “rap metal” genre), as both have long featured dissonant, even jarring music based on minor scales and themes that are closely related to certain Arab maqamat, or modes (and thus are easily appropriated by local artists). Lyrically, the grittiness, anger and themes such as poverty, unemployment, police brutality, and lack of life opportunities—were at the heart of American hip hop culture before it was taken over by bling. Similarly, extreme metal’s focus on war, corruption, and chaos played a major role in the genre’s increasing popularity with young people across the Middle East and North Africa in the last twenty years.

One direct musical heir to the Arab metal scenes is none other than Ramy Essam, the “singer of the Egyptian revolution” whose song “Irhal” is considered along with “Rais Lebled” the most important tune in the revolutionary Arab canon and one of the most influential songs of the last century. Like Mathlouthi, Essam started off as a metalhead and fan of such groups as Slipknot, Korn and System of a Down, an edge he clearly brought to the sound of “Irhal.”

No artist better symbolizes the changing—and in many ways, waning—fortunes of political music in the Arab world than Ramy Essam. It’s difficult to overstate the impact of Essam’s presence on the protests in Tahrir Square during the 25 January uprising. Arriving with nothing but an old acoustic guitar and a sleeping bag on 31 January, within twenty-four hours he’d absorbed the words, and as important, the rhythms of the protesters’ chants in Tahrir, and composed “Irhal!” (Leave!), the song that quickly became the anthem not just of the Egyptian Revolution, but of the Arab uprisings from Morocco to Bahrain.

“Irhal” and “Rais Lebled” reflect two entirely different ways in which music impacts revolutionary events. El Général never performed his song live during the Revolution (similarly, today in Morocco L7a9ed finds it almost impossible to perform live in his native country). Rather, the song was known primarily through its video, whose dark and foreboding tones matched that of the music perfectly and which was circulated endlessly through social media as well as cell phones. His arrest was in fact that

factor that multiplied his renown and made him a revolutionary icon; until then the song was not nearly as popular as it became while he was in jail.

“Irhal” was quite different. While a very dark video of a nighttime crowd in Tahrir singing along with Essam went viral in the first days of February, the song’s popularity soared not because of social media, but because Essam played the song dozens of times each day in Tahrir, each time gathering more crowds until its popularity was such that people came to hear it and the majority of the crowd in fact knew the words (since the words comprised the most important slogans of the revolution, it wasn’t hard to memorize it).

Indeed, it was Essam’s physical presence in Tahrir during the key fighting, his literal embodiment of the struggle that helped make “Irhal” the anthem of the revolution. “If I were just a singer coming to the square and then leaving, it wouldn’t have had the same impact,” Essam believes. It was his physical presence, his performance of what I have elsewhere described (with Bryan Reynolds) as “theater of immediacy,” that overcame any possibility of government control or repression of the music, the message or the messengers [38]. Essam explained to me that “my job is to listen to all the things Egyptians are saying, distill them into their essence, and share it as widely as possible.” [39].

The post-revolutionary trajectories of artists like Essam and El Général are quite interesting. Essam’s stock rose considerably in the year after the ouster of Mubarak, as he won numerous international accolades and became a frequent presence on Egyptian television, his family’s history of political activism serving him well as he quickly became one of the most important fully revolutionary voices in Egypt, as opposed to the rising Muslim Brotherhood as to the military (he remained one of the few public figures who remained opposed to both sides in the fateful summer of 2013). On the other hand, El Général moved towards Ennahda, as did his close friend Psycho-M, another rising revolutionary rapper. Since the revolution he has not written any serious political music. And yet, today he remains free to perform across Tunisia as well as abroad. For his part, Essam was increasingly persecuted both under Morsi’s rule and particularly after the military coup of 2013.

His situation became so precarious that he could no longer perform, while his music was banned from the airwaves. In October 2014, he left Egypt for a 2-year musical residency in Sweden. He fears for his safety if he is forced to return home. Essam and his counterparts across the region such as L7a9ed, have functioned as organic intellectuals and sociopolitical conductors for a new generation of revolutionaries, generating enough valence to help shape not merely a counter-cultural but revolutionary cultural counter-hegemonic discourse grounded in the simple but profound task of overcoming generations of fear and reclaiming citizenship [40–42]. But without a constant physical presence in and control over space that valence will diminish over time. L7a9ed and Essam, one in professional exile inside his country and the other physically removed from his homeland, can continue to make videos that are accessible at home and travel abroad spreading the stories of their struggles. But while such activities keep the revolutionary embers glowing, they can’t change or even challenge the balance of power on the ground in Morocco or Egypt, and their inability to perform locally is symptomatic of the present weakness of the movements they represent.

It’s worth noting that while most of the international attention has gone to youth-oriented music such as hip-hop, rock and dance across the region, the protests across the region have from the start feature and especially music from the youth, older popular and traditional/folkloric music was also an important part of the sonic landscape of the protests across the region, particular in Egypt [43]. At

the same time, songs like “Irhal!” or Muhammad Mounir’s now classic “Ezzay,” which dominated Tahrir during the crucial 2011–2012 period of the Revolution, had all but disappeared by mid-2013, replaced by the counter-revolutionary pop hit “Teslam Ayadi” (Bless Your Hands), a hyper-melodramatic, chauvinistic tribute to the military and the Egyptian state sung by 1990s-era star who were close to the Mubarak regime [44]. Similarly, the Moroccan King deftly used patronage and sponsorship of some of his country’s most popular pop and rap artists, such as Don Bigg and Fnaire, to serve as key supporters of his supposed “reforms” in the wake of the February 20 protests [45–47].

5. Revolutionary Poetics “Behind the Sun”

It is no surprise that hiphop would prove to be a particularly apt cultural form for young Arabs to adapt to their revolutionary expression, as it is one of the most directly poetic forms of music available today. But poetry more broadly is also at the heart of the revolutions. As the poet Mazen Maarouf points out, “We should not be surprised that in these revolutions ordinary Arabs are capable of such poetry. In schools across the Arab world, poetry precedes other forms of art” [48]. Indeed, everything is poetry; from the rhymes dropped by rappers to the captions written by cartoonists, and thus poetry suffuses most other art forms.

Poetry has always been considered within Arab cultures as a vital “record” of their history and civilization; today it has its own television shows devoted to it—a poet’s idol to compete with the *Arab Idol* style shows that regularly captivate tens of millions of viewers. For over a century Arabic poetry has been focused in good measure on nationalism and politics, as much if not more than love and romanticism. At times it could seem “irrelevant, outdated and boring”—precisely why young people would look to other media, like hiphop, to express themselves. Slogans taken from protest would shape poetry, which would then be reinserted into the spaces and voices of protest, creating a virtuous feedback loop of creativity within a renewed and enlarged public sphere stretching across and through the boundaries between public and private, with both protests and poetry increasingly adopting the liberatory voicings and speech of colloquial language [49].

Every culture and generation produces poetry in response to crises. We need look no further than Wordsworth’s monumental “The Prelude” in response to the anti-democracy crackdown by the English government in the wake of the French Revolution, or Shelley’s “The Masque of Anarchy” written after the Peterloo massacre of 1819, to see how spread this tradition is [50]. Poetry has a unique historical role within Arabo-Islamic culture and Arabic language. Without exaggeration we could state that it remains far deeper embedded in Arabo-Islamic culture than in most other cultures and languages, “a central pillar of our cherished heritage that continues to shape our cultural identity” [51]. This is as true for the modern period as it is for classical Arabic poetry, which was directly tied to the poetic language of the Qur’an.

As with music, so too poetry is understood as “the essence of life,” as the poet Shukri Ayyad describes it. Not just the essence, in fact, but an “antibody” against reaction and regression of authoritarian societies, “that is able to take us from life as we know it and then bring us back to it.” What is key for poets like Ayyad and Egyptian poet and lyricist Ahmed Fouad Negm (who famously was jailed by Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak for his anti-regime poems, often sung by the great Sheikh Imam), whose song “Thawra” (Revolution) was not surprisingly one of the first songs chanted in the

streets during the January 25 protests. Poetry is, at its core, a revolutionary “philosophy...the philosophy of resistance to death and to face and acknowledge death as well.”

Moreover, as the Yemeni poet Ibtisam Mutawakkil argues in explaining the strong presence of both colloquial and formal poetry during the Yemeni revolution, “Yemeni society is still an aural society. For this reason, the spirited rhythm and phrases move the people...In the history of the Arab revolutions poets has always been at the forefront of awareness led the revolutionary action, and this action is still present in Yemen to the day since the revolutions of 1962 and 1963 [52].” Indeed, Yemen is a good example of how tribal poetry can inflect itself into more urban politics, causing deep aesthetic changes to both precisely because of its traditional role as an aesthetic of mediation between disputing factions in a conflict [53].

There is a strong relationship between what is known as “committed music” (*al-ughniya al-multazimah*) and protest poetry; and more, between them and fiction, cinema, theatre and art. All have evolved over the half century specifically to articulate a kind of “double discourse” that can speak both within and outside the imposed discursive and political boundaries imposed by the regime. Such a double voicing at all times certainly produced its share of schizophrenic identities and behaviors (never mind art), but it also gave enough flexibility to survive until more direct speech could be uttered [6].

Poetry was in fact central to the revolutions from the start. The most famous slogan of the revolutions, chanted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and beyond, is an adaptation of the poem “*Izza ash-sha’b yowman arada al-haya*” (“If the People One Day Will to Live”), written in 1933 by the Tunisian poet Abou el-Kasem Chebbi (1909–1934), which after the revolution became incorporated as the closing lines of Tunisia’s national anthem. During the Tunisian Revolution, and particularly at its climax on 14 January 2011, people chanted parts of the poem, such as “If one day, a people desire to live/then fate will answer their call/And their night will then begin to fade/and their chains break and fall,” but also chanted their adaptation of the poem: “The people want to bring down the regime”—in front of the Ministry of the Interior on Bourguiba Avenue [54]. The speed and flow of a march in Tahrir or down Bourguiba Boulevard, or around The Pearl roundabout in Manama would be determined by the poetry being chanted. Banners featured poetic slogans dozens of meters long at times. Songs, whether “*Rais Lebled*” or “*Irhal*” were nothing if not extremely poetic.

As the Moroccan poet Mohammed al-Ash’ari explained of the Arab Spring’s poetry, “Poets have the capabilities to enable them to escort civilian movements and educate consciences in the midst of significant changes in today’s world.” In particular, they help people want life—perhaps the most important function of any artform, “But even the poetry of the revolutions and beyond is weak and modest when compared what happened in the street or in the fields or the actions of the rebels,” Egyptian poet Girgis Shukri explains [52]. But something has certainly changed in the last half decade, and numerous articles in Arabic and English have attempted to decipher just what is unique about the present day [55,56].

As Mazen Maarouf explains, “The mission of the poet today, in the midst of mass uprisings and revolution, is different. It is more precise, direct and fateful. The poets must articulate their words clearly and sharply to agitate people while knowing it can be deadly. The agents of the regime may prosecute the poet at any moment, which means that the written poem might be a final word. The poet cannot deny it later [48].” He or she can, however, change recognized poems into something more apropos of the moment, as Tunisian revolutionary youth did with the words of the well known couplet

about their country—” The smell of my country Is roses and jasmine It pleases the eye—to the more immediately relevant and powerful “The smell of my country/Is gas and gun-powder./It burns the eye.” [57].

Similar to other art forms deployed during the last half decade, the themes of the poetry of the Arab uprisings is extremely varied, as are the styles, dialects and forms it has taken. Some, following Chebbi, take on dictatorial leaders directly. Others, Hisham aj-Jakh, writing in his poem “Ta’shira” (Visa), rebels equally against the aristocracy of formal Arabic and the attempts by regimes to prevent Arabs from unifying and the damage it does to the possibilities of being poetic as well: “I am Arab and not ashamed/I was born in ‘Tunis the Green’ of Omani origin/And I grew a thousand-fold/I am Arab in Baghdad [with] the palms/Sudan is my artery/I am Egyptian, Mauritanian, Djibouti and Oman/Christian and Sunni and Shiite and Kurdish and Alawi and Druze [58].”

In this international theme, Palestine stands above most other Arab countries, as the unending symbol of all that has been lost to Arab culture as the result of foreign and internal imbalances and distortions of power, ideology and identity. The one of the “songs of the revolution” (ughniyat al-thawrah), “Raji’ libladi” (Returning to my country), is directly influenced by the Palestinian narrative of return. Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry was particularly crucial to the broader Arab Spring project—one writer called him “the conscience of the Arab revolutions,” just as Palestine itself remained symbolically central [59,60].

A particularly insightful, if not well known poem, by Tari Youssef-Agha, a Syrian expatriate, re-terms “resistance” from the struggles against autocratic regimes to the “regimes of resistance” themselves, who have “turned the rulers into gods/transferred the whole country, horizontally and vertically/With its streets and squares, into shrines to worship the ruler/It made the people knee for him day and night [61].” Here it is the revolutionaries who represent a new state—of being as much as political institutions—and the existing systems which are holding back progress [62]. And this is what make it so different to the aesthetic and poetry of the religious extremists, who valorize only the killing and dying, almost as ends in themselves, rather than the struggle for greater freedom. As the Syrian exile Hala Mohammad writes in a poem dedicated to a martyred activist, Ghiyath Matar, “Heroes die in my life, my son, and rise/Death does not become you [52].”

6. Theaters of Immediacy

Not surprisingly, the historical and political power of Arab(ic) poetry increases as it is incorporated into other art forms, perhaps none more so than theater. Such is the affective power of theater as it’s been experienced across the region that one of Egypt’s foremost poets, Girgis Shukri, has declared that “the language of drama and of theater is much stronger than that of poetry or written texts” alone [58]. That language is in fact quite ancient—puppetry (*Khayal al-zill*), story-telling (*as-sard*), and for Shi’i Muslims, Ta’ziyah (passion plays involving the martyrdom of Ali’s son Hussein at Karbala) are the roots out of which modern theater emerged and matured, spreading across the region thanks both to increased European penetration (and ultimately rule) and, equally important, the movement of Arab writers, dramatists, and theater companies throughout North Africa and the Levant in the Late Ottoman and colonial/Mandate eras, particularly via the phenomenon of “popular dramas” (dramia ash-sha’biyya) [63–66].

In the post-1952 era rising nationalism and competing ideologies dampened the level of contact as countries developed their theatrical traditions based on the governing political ideologies [67]. On the other hand, because the highly ideological environment in which Arab theater evolved in this period (similar to its counterparts in the Soviet world) left little room for the theater to offer the kind of “safe” space for exploring difficult social and political issues that existed in the West. Arab theatre practitioners have rarely “enjoy[ed] the luxury of safety,” even as their work has had to preserve the humanity and independence of people in the most troubled of times [68,69].

But lack of safety should not be equated with lack of importance or consequence. In Egypt, for instance, there is a workers’ theater at the entrance to the factory complex at Mahallah, the main industrial center of the country that was quite important—as befits its position at the entrance—to the life of the workers during the Nasser and into the Sadat eras, if under a highly ideologized and controlled manner. It fell slowly into disrepair only in the Mubarak era when, as Saadallah Wannous, one of the leading lights of Arab theater, it came “under siege and [was] on the verge of vanishing from our lives” [70,71] because of increased censorship, an unwillingness of dramatists to engage their audiences off the stage in civil society, and the weakening support for the arts as part of the broad contraction of social spending in the wake of the rise of neoliberal governmentality.

Theater was by no means a completely moribund in the neoliberal era of the 1980s through 2000s. Cairo has been home to the International Festival of Experimental Theater since 1988 [72]. Palestine has been home to companies such as the Jenin Freedom Theater and El Hakawati that have been (and remain) at the forefront of cultural resistance against Occupation and oppressive regimes across the region. And countries where one might not expect a strong theatrical tradition, such as Yemen, in fact boast a powerful history going back a century in which foreign influences such as Shakespeare and Shaw have blended with extremely sophisticated and critical poetic traditions among the tribal heartlands to create one of the region’s best kept artistic secrets [73,74].

Indeed, the developments in Yemeni theater between 2009 and 2013 “represent the quintessential performances of Yemen’s Arab Spring...and an increasing awareness within Yemeni society of the dire necessity of revolution, not merely against a particular political regime but against an entire stagnant and corrosive economic, social, and political status quo [75].” But it was in the wake of the outbreak of the uprisings that theater returned to its own again, regaining the “immediacy, urgency and relevance” theater generally lacks in “safer, more comfortable societies [76].” A number of factors, including the freedom to produce new works dealing with difficult social issues (such as gender) as well as revolutionary themes, as well as to be in closer contact and dialog with the international theater scene, has enabled Arab theater to once again function as a “seismograph of societal conditions [68].”

In Morocco, experimental theater influenced by Theater of the Oppressed or less confrontational styles such as “L’khbar fi masrah” (“the news through theater”) has both encouraged and diffused potentially explosive social and political tensions [16]. Dramatists such as Egypt’s Sondos Shabayek and Laila Soliman or Tunisian Lofti Achour, have used both classical themes and techniques (such as storytelling) and references and direct engagements with the immediate, pre-revolutionary past, to great affect with local and (increasingly) international audiences [77]. At the same time, some of the most relevant pre-Arab Spring plays, such as Fadhel Jaibi’s *Amnesia-Yahia Yaish* (which dealt with the fall of a despotic Tunisian minister of state), have received even more enthusiastic reactions from crowds after the revolutions, when its implications could be appreciated more openly [77,78].

The broader question that remains for theater makers, like other artists across the region, is whether their art can help foster “a radically new mindset and a new thought until all this is reflected on the culture and art in general [79–81].”

Here special mention should be made of Palestinian Theater, especially troupes like El Hakawati Theater (also known as the Palestinian National Theater) in Jerusalem, established in 1984, and The Jenin Freedom Theater in Jenin, established in 2006. These groups operated before the uprisings, and because they were created specifically as means of resistance against a colonial occupation, they were much more directly confrontational against the oppressive government, in this case Israel, than were their counterparts in the Arab world.

Both theater companies have long focused on theater productions that reinforce Palestinian national culture and act as a means of retelling and amplifying stories of resistance. They also have acted as schools for teaching acting and the technical skills necessary to create theater and in so doing have influenced other companies, such as al-Kasaba Theater in Ramallah and Yes Theater in Hebron. These companies have been targets of Israeli harassment and closures, in particular the first two; El Hakawati because of its sensitive Jerusalem location and The Freedom Theater because of its highly charged political profile. The theater was founded by the well-known half-Jewish Israeli, half-Palestinian actor Juliano Mer-Khamis, whose mother Arna was a well-known Jewish communist who started the Stone Theater in Jenin during the first intifada to help heal and train young Palestinians [82–84]. Indeed, since its eruption, it's fair to say that the Freedom Theater remains at the forefront regionally of resistance theater embedded in local cultural contexts, despite the high price paid by the theater for its work—Mer-Khamis was gunned down by still unknown assailants in April, 2011 in front of the Theater; its artistic director Zakaria Zubaidi remains imprisoned, and the theater is routinely raided and its members arrested and attacked because of their work [85–88].

Outside Palestine, from stagings of various Shakespeare plays with postcolonial themes to Iraqi playwright Hassan Abdulrazzak's *The Prophet*, set in Cairo in the midst of the January 25 Revolution, or Sondos Shabayek's *Tahrir Monologues*, Arab theater, both performed in the Arab spring countries and increasingly on tour, has proved a “particularly efficient medium” for enabling the catharsis that must accompany revolutionary outbursts if they are to be sustained. Given the constant interaction of local and international dramaturgy, it's no surprise that theater has enjoyed a period of intense renewed productivity, in particular theater geared towards the stories and narratives of women, as exemplified by the powerful play, *Queens of Syria*, which tells the story of sixty women from Syria via the medium of their performance of Euripedes' tragedy, *The Trojan Woman* (the play is emblematic of the broader more public articulation of women's voices in the wake of the uprisings) [79,89–96].

Red lines continue to exist, even in the most democratic of Arab countries, Tunisia, where actors have been charged with “public indecency” and “indecent acts” and physically attacked by audience members, as happened to members of the Tunisian street theater company, Fanni Raghman Anni (in Tunisian dialect, “My Art In Spite of Myself” or “Artist Against My Will”) in response to the perception that actors were wearing too little clothing during a performance [97,98]. As in the pre-revolutionary era, theater retains the power to anger those in political and social—particularly religious—power; but it remains to be seen whether it can regain the broader social valence that made it an incubator of broader social trends and conflicts across the region in previous generations.

7. The Revolutions' "War Paint"

The Arab uprisings were certainly televised (as Gil Scott-Heron predicted they would be), and disseminated via many other communications media. But they were even more so drawn—by cartoonists, caricaturists, everyday people, and particularly graffiti artists. It was impossible to attend a protest anywhere, from Rabat to Manama, without being inundated with the artwork of everyone from small children to major artists of the day. Let us remember, the most far-reaching and bloody revolution of the region, Syria, was sparked by the arrest and torture of fifteen children for painting anti-government slogans on the wall of their school [99].

The Arab world's "history of social upheaval and textual illumination provides fertile soil for innovation" in the graphic arts, especially graffiti, one of the oldest and most politicized genres [100]. It can be divided into several sub-categories, depending on whether it is created by professional artists or ordinary people and/or activists, and whether it features only text (however stylized) or images as well.

In that regard, what separates Arab graffiti—both Arabic-language graffiti and graffiti in Arab countries (which could also be in French, Amazigh, English, Spanish, Italian and other local or international languages depending on the intended audience) are its intimate relationships with and debt to the well-developed and highly skilled Arabic and Qur'anic calligraphic traditions. Indeed, in a very profound sense, Qur'anic calligraphy and the newest street art are "daughters of the same parents [101]."

However deeply rooted, graffiti cannot be appreciated outside of the broader context of cartoons and other forms of graphic images, whether created by professionals and published in newspapers or other media, or drawn by ordinary people and brought to protests. Finally, graffiti is also deeply related to paintings, videos, sculptures and installations that have been exhibited in galleries, museums, and revolutionary spaces. During the uprisings, the verbal messages of the graffiti have been complex and multifarious; from simple repetition of revolutionary slogans—*Dégage!*, *Irhal!*, *Yasqut hukma-l 'askar!*—to the ubiquitous turns at humor ("Game Over!" "Doctor, it's your turn"—*i.e.*, one-time optometrist Bashar al-Assad will see himself out of power soon), and references to facebook, Google and Twitter. Images of all types have "play[ed] a central part in processes of political struggle" by conveying mediated and mediating political messages and ideologies [102]. More than just art, such visual messages were the "war paint" of the revolutions and a weapon in the hands of civil resistance against authoritarian regimes [11,103]. Aesthetic quality alone was not the most important reason for the impact of visual arts in the uprisings and revolutions. Even the simplest drawings—like those of Daraa's school kids—can spark a civil war.

Yet it is also clear that graffiti remains the signal visual icon of the Arab uprisings, distinguished both by its power as well as its vulnerability and ephemerality [104]. Its often overwhelming affective/aesthetic power simultaneously raises a number of crucial issues—the immense violence of state power, collaboration with oppressive regimes, the return of long-suppressed histories and secular-religious conflicts, to name just a few. Its ability to move so many people is precisely why governments across the region—and indeed, globally—consider it vandalism and sabotage [105].

As the Egyptian artist Ganzeer explains, graffiti has the power to "plant a flag" in the public sphere in a manner that directly undermines the state's sense of public security. It does so precisely because its presence (especially when prolonged) clearly marks a location's transformation into a revolutionary

space, or at least one outside of real government control [106–109]. Even more, as the artist Mohsen Al-Ateeqi points out, graffiti helps “encircle the hegemony” of regimes that have spent decades “containing” their societies by its offering of highly visible counter-hegemonic mechanisms for producing public opinion—better, of publicness and being public [106,110].

If rap legend Chuck D of Public Enemy once intoned that “Hiphop is the CNN of the streets” then it’s clear that graffiti—not surprisingly, a core original element of hiphop cultural practice—performs a similar function, with the added power that comes from being situated in one place and thereby marking it as, at least momentarily, a revolution place, enabling the public to encounter messages and motivations that have been censored in more “legitimate” media and in so doing becomes “in itself a form of public power to resist the ruling power [106].”

Although not directly related to the “Arab Spring” uprisings, it’s impossible to discuss the history of Arab graffiti apart from its role in Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. Indeed, most of the young activists behind the initial waves of protests came of age during the Second Intifada, and saw Palestinian resistance as an inspiration and model for their own organizing and protests. Not surprising, the walls of the West Bank and Gaza have been fertile ground since the First Intifada for expressing anti-occupation, anti-Israel and as important, Palestinian nationalist sentiments and narratives towards independence. The construction of the “separation” or “Apartheid” wall has, quite naturally, offered a huge canvas on which Palestinians and international artists have created elaborate works of art. At the same time, the rubble of Gaza has served as the tableau for some of the most intimately powerful graffiti ever created, both by local artists and artists of the stature of Banksy [111–114].

In Tahrir during the 18 days of the January 25 Revolution the most exciting and charged location was the “Revolutionary Artists Union,” a fifteen meters square plot located in front of—and more important, on the wall of—the KFC restaurant on the northwest section of the ring, where dozens of cartoonists, caricaturists, painters, poets, rappers, musicians and other artists—young and old, amateur as well as professional—gathered night and day to put up their artwork, and share poetry or songs. The spot, a classic “culture jam” if there ever was one (it took one of the Midan’s most well-known symbols of Western capitalism and conquered it, at least temporarily, with revolutionary and broadly anti-capitalist art), was in many ways the cultural engine of Tahrir, providing a constant sense of urgency and creativity which would radiate towards the rest of the Midan and encourage artists of all kinds and skill levels to bring their art to Tahrir.

Whatever the historical importance of written graffiti, images have always played crucial components of Arab graffiti. In the uprisings era, such imagery often has portrayed or represented people or events occurring on the ground, from murals featuring the faces of martyred protesters to, in one well known case, a stencil of nude self-portrait by the young Egyptian photographer Aliaa Magdy Elmahdy (which was overlaid with an elaborate defense of her (in)famous photo contextualizing it vis-a-vis rampant assaults on women by regime forces).

Equally frequent are far more elaborate and symbolized murals or representations of revolutionary heroes, hated regime figures, or various revolutionary scenes. These are composed in a variety of styles, including traditional graffiti or “street art” styles, “social realism,” and various engagements with Ancient Egyptian themes and aesthetics, from stenciled images of “anarchist pharaohs” (the image a pharaoh in the guise of Guy Fawkes with an iconic headdress) to mixed-media

transdisciplinary works by artists such as Hanaa El Dagham and highly stylized “neo-pharaonic” tableaux—epitomized by the work of the Luxor-based fine artist Alaa Awad, that bring the far past and the immediate present into intense dialog [115–117]. In Tunisia and Egypt cartoon figures also became—and remain—central symbols of political graffiti, as characters like Nadia Khiari’s Willis the Cat in Tunis, and Sad Panda in Cairo have rendered some of the most powerful—and in Sad Panda’s case, almost always mute—judgements on the oppressiveness and even absurdity of the ancien and post-revolutionary regimes [118–124].

As Don Karl and Pascal Zoghbi argue in their *Arabic Graffiti* (published just as the uprisings were spreading across the region in early 2011), graffiti doesn’t merely have aesthetic and political valence in its own right; it constitutes a powerful affirmation of the value of street art across the region [100,125]. When the words “Be with the revolution” began appearing during the initial uprisings, it helped make the spread the revolts all but inevitable [100].

Despite the natural affinity for graffiti within Arab culture, it did not flourish everywhere in the pre-2010 era. While prevalent in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran (where it was used both to mark territory and to publicize powerfully hegemonic—or hegemonizing—official ideologies) it was largely absent from Tunisia before the revolution, practiced mostly “in secret” and comprising largely visual references to football teams placed by their most rabid fans until the “glass dome of dictatorship exploded” with Bouazizi’s self-immolation. But within a matter of days of the outbreak of the protests in Tunis, the acronyms for famous soccer teams like EGS Gafsa or CA (for Club Africain, in Tunis) were replaced by the far more dangerous “ACAB”—all cops are bastards, the call letters of resistance against police power world-wide [103,126]. Suddenly, the walls were transformed from football tags to “insane wall books” that fed revolutionary action in the street. In this regard, what has yet to be explored in any detail is the aesthetic dynamics of the transformation of these football fanatics—today known around the world as the Ultras, whose years of experience battling police in the soccer-crazy country’s stadiums gave them the skills to fight them successfully on the streets—into the front line soldiers and fiercest defenders of the January 25 Revolution.

As I have already alluded, one reason for graffiti’s social power is that it’s the most important medium and long-term indicator of who controls physical space—the state or the opposition. Other forms of art and media—music, poetry, film—are not immediately tied to one location and could be circulated endlessly via cell phone, the internet and other means. But as long as it remains, graffiti marks the spot in which it is created as revolutionary. This is why it was so important for the headmaster of the Daraa elementary school where anti-regime graffiti was scrawled by young boys to ensure they were harshly punished, and why we can mark the switch in the balance of power in Egypt back towards the military as soon as it was able to paint over the “martyr’s wall” of Muhammad Mahmoud Street next to Tahrir, where much of the most beautiful, iconic and provocative graffiti was done and ultimately prevent it from being repainted.

Each country has had its own specific stylistic innovations and themes, owing to local artistic and poetic traditions, as well as the kinds of structures on which graffiti can be created and their availability to the general public (large and open walls on high traffic streets in a situation of relative political weakness (or at least tolerance) by the state as existed in Cairo will produce very different graffiti than half-rubbed buildings in Aleppo or Sanaa). Countries such as Tunisia, where there was little tolerance for political graffiti and even less support or credibility from the local artistic elite and

patrons, naturally saw less graffiti in the pre-uprisings era than Palestine or Egypt, which had stronger traditions. And even graffiti that has a profound political aura—such as Sad Panda, can be imagined by its creator as more only implicitly so (as with most scholarship, assumptions about the intentions, meanings and impact of any specific work of graffiti are very likely to lead to misinterpretations unless thoroughly researched) [122,127].

Aside from Egypt and Palestine, Bahrain has the most developed, organized and belligerent graffiti movement in the region (explicit calls for the overthrow of King Hamad were as ubiquitous as representations of the Pearl roundabout where the early protests were centered) [128,129]. Equally important, Yemen, understood mostly in the West as a bastion of feudalism and extremism, quickly saw the emergence of one of the most sophisticated public graffiti scenes in the region that epitomized the unprecedented and almost entirely non-violent grass-roots protests in the country [130]. The web portal Muftah organized a fascinating review of the most important graffiti across the region which shows just how quickly the walls of affected regions filled with graffiti, and how each has responded to the increasing repression that developed in response. What this review demonstrates is the combination of individual artistic inspiration, local themes, and broader regional and international styles that comprise the broad field of Arab graffiti in the Arab uprisings era [131].

Perhaps the most beautiful archive of the Egyptian Revolution, the book *Wall Talk: Graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution*, offers a detailed portrait of the full power and range of the graffiti of the revolution, hundreds of images strong. What is most striking about leafing through its almost 700 pages is the impossibility of summarizing the numerous styles, subjects, themes and aesthetics comprising Egyptian graffiti, from images that require no words—a mouth in the process of being unzipped, Mubarak with Devil horns, to powerful slogans—“A people’s assembly of the people’s blood” (Maglis sha’b min dama’ sha’b), to makeshift cinderblock “security walls” on the border of Tahrir being painted completely over with street scenes from the other side (in the manner of the detailed scenic art on the Separation/Apartheid Wall throughout the West Bank ([104], pp. 28, 89 140, 168, 406, 558–59; [132])).

If Graffiti is the most celebrated form of revolutionary visual art of the uprisings era, its “silent cry” (*cri muet*) more powerful than even the loudest gun or most repressive regime [133], it’s by no means the only one or isolated from other forms. Both visually and in terms of the often brutally honest satirical wit, cartoons have played a crucial role, not just in the Arab uprisings, but for a century of Arab journalist and media. It is not an understatement to argue that Arab(ic) graffiti would be as impossible to imagine without the history and presence of Arab cartoons as it would be without Arabic calligraphy. Indeed, the importance of cartoons or cartoon-inspired artwork, such as Willis the Cat and Sad Panda, in the graffiti of the uprisings points to the difficulty of fixing boundaries between these media.

The history of cartoons, and particularly political cartoons in the Arab world, is an immense subject that cannot be adequately addressed in this setting. Whether in Revolutionary France or contemporary Egypt or Morocco, cartoons are “vivid primary sources” for understanding larger events and the broader public mood [134]. As cartoons have migrated from newspapers and books to social media and the internet their subjects have increasingly focused on regional and international subjects, while leaving aside domestic issues that could lead to censorship or worse (exceptions to this rule include Palestine and Lebanon, both of which retained relatively more freedom of expression for artists compared with other Arab countries (although Palestinians have been jailed and even killed by Israel

for their art) [135]. But while the majority of cartoonists were staying clear of local politics in the years leading up to 2010, pre-Revolutionary era, some, like Egyptian cartoonist Andeel, have been consistently political since the early 2000s, attacking Mubarak then and Sisi now with the same lack of concern for the consequences [136].

A final and perhaps least discussed form of visual and plastic arts associated with the uprisings is installation art. In some ways revolutionary spaces like Tahrir, the Pearl, Change Square, and other long-term protest locations were themselves large-scale installations, theater of immediacy where emergent forms of highly aestheticized and affective cultural production motivated people to take unprecedented risks to change their lives and the political life of their countries. Such processes always leave behind their detritus—the hulks and scraps of fights between forces of order and repression and those of (at least temporary) anarchy and change.

In Tahrir, for example, the pitched battles of the first year and a half left many a burn out military or police vehicle abandoned around the environs of the Midan. Street artist Amor Eletebi took full advantage of these remnants of a seemingly weakened state power to create evocative and inviting works of art, engaging local residents and street kids to help him paint the carcass vibrant colors with images of hearts, zebras and other positive imagery. He also created ad hoc exhibition spaces in the burned out or abandoned buildings in the immediate vicinity of Tahrir [137]. This kind of street art was rare in its scope and duration (the vehicles Eleteby painted remained in their spots for many months before finally being cleared away). Equally important were the larger installations developed by Egyptian and Tunisian artists such as the collaborative Association L'Art Rue in Tunis, and Huda Lutfi and Hani Rashed in Cairo, through which a new kind of art, “concept pop,” has emerged that moves beyond the rather meaningless appropriation of everyday objects that had often characterized pre-revolutionary contemporary art in the Arab world, pointing viewers to the revolutionary implications of the events they represent [138,139].

The internet and social media have today become perhaps the most important vector for the dissemination of artistic content. Every country in which significant protests have occurred can boast highly developed internet cultures on the user and particularly developer ends. But while organizations like the Tunisian Nawaat or Morocco's *Mamfakinche* served as indispensable portals for the dissemination of subversive and even revolutionary knowledges, it is Egypt that has been home to the groups that have most boldly and effectively blended visual art and activism. Two media collectives in particular have played an important role in this process since 2011, the Mosireen collective and Kazeboon (liars). Together they epitomize how the internet as a medium for dissemination and circulation has influenced the production of art.

Mosireen (a combination of the words “Egypt” and “determined” in Arabic) is a Cairo-based media collective created during the 18 days of the January 25 revolution. Its goal has been to use citizen-produced art—in particular short films based on documentary footage of events that contradict government claims about who was responsible for acts of violence against citizens, which could be easily circulated on the internet and/or shown publicly in open-air gatherings. When effective these films constitute politically inspired art possessing the power to “wrong-foot censorship and empower the voice of a street-level perspective.” Mosireen's focus has been attuned particularly to archiving the visual record of the revolution and showing revolutionary inspired films to the public, often on the street in order to reach the most people [140,141].

The Kazeboon, or “liars” campaign, was founded by some of the same people as Mosireen in December 2011 when military police attacked protesters at a sit-in at the Cabinet headquarters. The name pertains to the penchant for the military (at that time, SCAF, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) to lie when accused of using violence against protesters. This time, protesters had recorded video of the attack, which activists used to produce a video, uploaded onto YouTube, that directly challenged the lie. So successful was this campaign, and so ubiquitous was the violence and the lies about it by the military and then the Morsi government, that the group’s *modus operandi* became using video to confront the lies of the regime (the Muslim Brotherhood would adopt a similar strategy during the Raba al-’Adawiyya sit-in, but with far less success). Like Mosireen, Kazeboon would sometimes hold events in public at revolutionary-friendly locations (such as the Sawi Culture Wheel in Zamalek, which had long sponsored edgy and even subversive cultural events and political meetings). But its primary means of communication has been the internet.

8. Conclusions: Art and/as Religion in the Arab Spring

Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, provided one of the most useful definitions of religion for the twenty-first: Religion, he argued, is whatever is of “ultimate concern” to an individual. Sacred or secular, moral or immoral, overtly spiritual or seemingly mundane, that which we hold in the highest and most intense position in our hearts “can destroy us as it can heal us [142].” The relationship between art and religion—specifically, the use of most every artistic medium to represent and express religious belief, faith, and doubt—is too well-documented to require discussion here. Of course, art and religion do not just act in synergy, with art a tool for the expression of religious sentiments. They can also be in competition, as the same intensity and quality of emotions, actions and experiences that define religious experience also define artistic experience at its most intense—that is, for those for whom art is of “ultimate concern.” In this context, it’s no surprise that Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed—and prohibited most forms of—music as no better than “opium” and other drugs; just like Marx termed religion over a century before [143].

At their best, both encourage liminal, transformative experiences, but their similarities put them in competition—usually from the point of view of many religious people, including Muslims, who see artistic expression as a distraction from the focus on God [144]. It’s thus not surprising, then, that many of the threats to artists in the wake of the uprisings have involved conservative religious forces, sometimes acting in concert with counter-revolutionary regimes (or elements within regimes in the midst of transformation). In the wake of the eruption of the protests and uprisings, and in the midst of seeming transformations towards democracy, Egyptian artists have been sued, Moroccan and even Tunisian musicians, graffiti artists and actors have faced harassment and arrest, for “moral” as well as political “crimes.” In Syria throats have been slit, tongues cut out and hands cut off (depending on the offending artist’s specific mode of work). Perhaps Tunisian artist Jalila Baccar best captured the dynamic at work when she explained a year after Ben Ali’s ouster: “During Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s regimes, political content was censored from any artworks. During the current regime, political content is still forbidden, only under the guise of ethics and religion [145].”

At the same time, however, religious forces in the Arab world are not uniformly or even mostly against artistic expression. Extremist groups like ISIL might destroy works of art and threaten or even harm artists, yet at the same time, such movements are suffused in their own aesthetic sensibilities and

even artistic production—in the case of ISIL, prominently featured in their glossy, high quality magazine, *Dabiq* [146,147]. But religiously grounded aesthetic/artistic production and expressions are not just or even mostly negative in intent or content, as the centuries-long histories of Sufi-inspired art and the beauty of “Islamic” art, architecture, poetry and music reminds us. Nor is it always accurate to create make a separation between “religious” or “secular” forms of art.

Of course, every religious movement has its own aesthetic component, even those against art produce reams of artistic content, as *Dabiq* so well demonstrates. Indeed, jihadis even have their own music and, even more powerful, poetry [148]. The Brotherhood has long dabbled in art; Hassan al-Banna’s Brother himself was a playwright, and the Brotherhood’s magazine has long featured very interesting artwork on its covers and in its pages, as a recent analysis in the journal *Kalamat* makes clear [149].

While the “religious” vs. “secular” division is often abused, in the context of the Arab uprisings such a distinction often remains relevant, as the religiously grounded movements and parties that emerged in their wake, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, but also Tunisian Ennahdah, have articulated very particular views towards art. Moreover, they have engaged in significant artistic creation based on these principles. They thus warrant separate consideration from other forms of engaged art.

Beginning with the Brotherhood, it’s clear that elements within the movement had begun to liberalize their attitudes towards culture by the early to mid-2000s. Forms of “secular” cultural production, such as rock and heavy metal, which were excoriated by the movement and other religious leaders until then (during the 1997s “Satanic metal affair” fans were threatened with execution for apostasy by religious leaders if they didn’t “repent” of their sinful musical habits) [150], suddenly adopted a far more laissez faire attitude towards seemingly amoral or even “un-Islamic” art. This was in line with their broader criticism of the harsh cultural positions of key figures like founder Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb [151,152]. As the Freedom and Justice Party developed its party platform, it turned its attention directly to art, declaring that “art is a significant form of expression which sends an influential message to its audience. Following the January revolution it is imperative we embrace the changes and blend with it,” the group stated [153].

The party attempted to quell fears by more secular-minded artists that it would “turn theaters into mosques” or encourage a broader “Brotherhoodization of art” by declaring that it would crack down on what it viewed to be un- or sacrilegious art by declaring its opposition to prior censorship as a core element of its political platform [151,154,155]. During the period of its political ascendancy it held several meetings and symposia with filmmakers, actors, and other artists (featuring Brotherhood-aligned cultural figures such as Sayed Darwish) as part of its efforts to articulate a seemingly moderate yet religiously-grounded position towards art [155].

Most important, however, the Brotherhood supported its own often intensive artistic activity, including theater, music and art. In the wake of its first electoral victory, the Freedom and Justice Party sponsored the production of at least a dozen songs and several theater shows ostensibly “in support of the revolution,” and declared that “anyone who has any kind of creative artistic act can participate with us and help shape the conscience of the nation.” These productions included Drama Teatro’s play “Wassa’a Tareeq” (Clear the Way), the group “Faces” production of “Atwa President of the Republic” and other plays, not only in Cairo and Alexandria, but in cities such as Fayoum, Damanhur Bilbeis,

Beheira, Badrasheen, Giza and Sharqiya. It even had its own theater troupe in Cairo, featuring trained actors and focusing on issues such as Sunni-Shi'i unity and the role of women in society [154].

The Brotherhood also sponsored theatrical and musical competitions. The goal, as epitomized by the musical production of Brotherhood-affiliated artists, was to straddle the line between the “clean” art (in music, known as *anashid*) and more secular (and potentially more problematic) “secular” genres (in music, known as *aghani*, or songs).

The Muslim Brotherhood's changing view of the relationship between religion and art was mirrored in many ways by that of Ennahda in Tunisia. While the movement did not devote the resources to produce its own art, theater, film, poetry or music to any significant degree, its leaders, and particularly Rachid Ghannouchi, went out of their way to declare their support for the arts and opposition to the harsh orthodox view of non-religiously focused art. Its political literature focused a lot of attention to issues of “culture” and particular as it referred to the “culture of human rights” (*thaqafa huquq al-insan*) [156]. When scores of actors and artists were arrested for allegedly indecent or anti-government art, Ghannouchi himself came out against prosecution, and condemned attacks by Salafis on artists or patrons of theaters and other artistic events [157,158]. Even El Général and Psycho MC, two of the Tunisian revolution's musical icons, took what many other rappers and commentators believe was noticeably “Islamist” turns with their music and their public persona after the revolution, as Ennahda quickly rose to prominence [159].

However, what the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired art or its and Ennahda's policies have not been, in any meaningful sense, is revolutionary, particularly when compared to the vast majority of artistic production described in this article. Culturally, The Brotherhood was motivated by different concerns than the revolutionary artistic production described in this article. As Sayed Darwish argued, “We are seeking to adapt all the tools of art, and to use all available talents to produce serious works that respect the intelligence of the audience and improve the fabric of the community—art that builds and promotes society, not works that destroy its morals and values [155,160].”

For the Brotherhood, this lack of revolutionary themes or motivations is in keeping with the overall outlook and strategies of the movement in the last twenty years, at least until the overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi. The movement was already being slowly incorporated into the existing power structure in the 2000s and rose quickly to the top of the post-Mubarak political order despite—in fact, because of—its distance from the revolutionary currents that animated it. Politically, economically and especially culturally, the Brotherhood had little interest in inspiring, never mind instigating, any large-scale changes in society, and in fact time and time again sided with the military and deep state (to which it was being integrated until its utter mismanagement of the government led the military to turn on it) against revolutionary forces.

Similarly, Ennahda quickly became one of the most powerful parties in Tunisia, and in fact governed the country for several years. Thus it too had little reason to sponsor art that continued to advocate a revolutionary view when the main goals of the revolution from its perspective had already been accomplished. And like the Brotherhood, Ghannouchi articulated a view of art and artistic freedom that declared it to be “not absolute, but should be restricted by customs and values prevailing in each society [157,158].”

Unlike the Brotherhood and its political party, the FJP, Ennahda had a powerful motivation to remain moderate in its cultural views. Not only was pre-revolutionary Tunisia the most secular country

in the Arab world, but Ennahda had to contend with a growing extremist Salafi movement in Tunisia on the one hand, and the consequences of the Brotherhood's lack of compromise while in office in Egypt. Moderation and a lack of compulsion have been central components of Ennahda's political strategies, whatever the personal views of members towards art (in interviews with members, they have rarely expressed interest in engaging in debates of what kind if any art is religiously permissible or prohibited), and has been key to its successful navigation of the treacherous post-revolutionary political landscape in Tunisia.

Ultimately, while it is not difficult to spot "religious" versus "secular" art in the post-uprisings Arab world, the main distinction between various forms of artistic production is not centered on religion, ethics or morality. It is centered around the contentious question of whether the region and individual countries are still living in revolutionary or normal time, whether artists should and can continue to motivate citizens into the streets to fight for a wholesale change in their societies, or should either support the status quo or ignore politics all together. It is undeniable that the Arab uprisings and revolutions of the last five years has produced some of the most politically as well as aesthetically powerful and innovative art the world has seen in generations. The question that remains is whether today the aura of revolution can continue to inspire artists and ordinary people to continue the struggle for "bread, freedom, and social justice" that half a decade ago helped launch the Arab Spring.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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- <http://www.inplaceofwar.net/sad-panda-on-graffiti-in-post-revolution-egypt> (accessed on 2 August 2015).
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 126. For examples of Ultras graffiti, see ([115], pp. 478–524).
 127. Interestingly, these words were uttered in July 2011, when there still seemed to be much hope for the future. But only four months later, at the start of the Muhammad Mahmoud riots, he became much more explicit, painting an image of a soldier tossing the baby into a fire to symbolize the demise of the next generation of Egyptians at the hands of the violence of the interim government [123].
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 136. Barney Thompson. “Why cartoons and comics are flourishing in the Middle East.” *Financial Times*, 25 July 2015. Available online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/26a80334-31fa-11e5-91ac-a5e17d9b4cff.html> (accessed on 2 August 2015).
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