

THE TAIN OF TAHRIR



Video stills from the experimental documentary *Excursions in the Dark* by Kaya Behkalam

THE CURFEW, THE STATE-OF-EXCEPTION-BECOME-IMAGE, WAS AN ATTEMPT TO REPLACE ANOTHER IMAGE, THE DOMINANT IMAGE OF THE DAY

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On January 28, 2011, three days after the protests had started to unravel the streets of Cairo, and until June 15, the Egyptian authorities imposed a nightly curfew over the inner city. Under the pretense of securing the city and its inhabitants, the sites of political confrontations were expected to empty out after midnight, sometimes already in the early evening hours. After a while the area between Tahrir Square and Ramses Station, from Maspero to the High Court, usually sites of pulsating vibrancy throughout the night, changed drastically, entering instead a state of emptiness, stillness and silence, foreign to the capital.

In the same way that every story told silences others beneath it, every new image dispels or supercedes other images. The insurmountable paradox innate to every iconoclastic act reveals itself. Essentially a gesture of violence and annihilation, the iconoclastic act never succeeds in entirely eradicating the image it wants to replace. The substituted image lives on as a trace, in the form of a present absence of the new image that has taken its place. Both images, the displaced and the displacing, remain conflated; one is bound to the other, similar to the way the tarnished rear side of a mirror, the tain, constitutes the base of the visible reflection of the front. The events on the streets since January 25, 2011, followed the dialectic of the front- and backside of a mirror. The curfew, the state-of-exception-become-image, was an attempt to replace the dominant image of the day. Instead, what happened was that the night-image functioned as the tain of the day, offering the onlooker a possible understanding of the nature of the daytime events: The curfew at night rendered the uprising at day reflective. The notion of

tain "refers to the tinfoil, the silver lining, the lusterless back of the mirror... without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play."^[1]

The curfew was the desperate attempt to regain control over the visual regime of the city; annihilating both presence and vision it was a countermeasure to the intensely mediated visual feedback circuits employed by protesters in the square. Whoever dared to defy the curfew witnessed a city that appeared as a stage in standby mode, a theater in between performances, waiting to be filled with action. The sudden absence of people brought other protagonists into the spotlight: The architecture, the lighting, and the remains of the day. What was this stage waiting to be filled with? During daytime the now absent actors had been negotiating their proposition for a post-revolutionary society on these very streets and places. At night, lying in bed, they were countering the military's restriction of public space with the unbounded realm of their imaginations, guided by the structures of their collective unconscious.

Fascinated by the sudden emptiness, I walked through downtown Cairo during the curfew for several nights in February and March 2011, documenting the image that had been produced to not be seen. During the days following my nightly excursions I browsed through Walter Benjamin's massive *Passagenwerk* (*Arcades Project*) that had rather accidentally found its way to the suitcase I had brought with me to post-revolutionary Cairo. The intricate relationship between collective dreamscapes, architecture and political agency runs through the *Passagenwerk* as a connecting thread. For Benjamin the connection between past and present reflects the relation between the dream and the waking world. In this reading the study of history takes the form of dream interpretation that initiates a process of political awakening.

Benjamin's reflections on the subliminal desires and aspirations enciphered into architecture and other "wish images"^[2] in which "each epoch entertains images of its successor" were based on the city life in Paris in the 19th century. To my surprise the area around me, the stretch of streets between Tahrir and Attaba Square, with its decayed Rococo-like buildings, wide squares and alleys, proved to be quite an appropriate setting for this reading. Downtown Cairo, in colloquial Arabic *wust al-balad*, literally: the



heart of the country, was modernized under the influence and consultation of the same city planner who had restructured the French capital in the second half of the 19th century: Baron Haussmann. [3] Haussmann's concept utilized architecture as a means of gaining sovereign control [4] over citizens and had a massive impact on many modern cities, a politic that is subjected to harsh criticism in Benjamin's writings. As the French revolution had taken place in the narrow, medieval streets of old Paris, where it was easy to set up and hold makeshift barricades and thus control large areas of the city without extensive military equipment, Napoleon III had commissioned Haussmann to design a city more easily controllable by authorities. The new Paris with its linear perspectives became the paradigm for downtown Cairo, on the orders of the occidentalist Ismail Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt.

As the main political confrontations took place within this highly ideologized part of the city, the events of the Egyptian revolution can also be read as a visual inversion of the surveillance architecture of Michel Foucault's idea of the "panoptical regime" to which the modern metropolis had been subjected. In the mediated feedback space, that surface resulting from the synchronicity of producing, perceiving and distributing images, the protesting subject re-appropriates the power of control and interpretation of his own image in urban space. In the terminology of the Stage, the once subjugated 'extra' becomes a character actor, an active agent and observer; the striated urban space evolves into an open stage, ready for his employment. What surfaces here might not be a new kind of subjectivity, but rather an inter-subjective space of projection, a field of experience

positioned outside of the subject. Vilém Flusser recognizes: "When we start to project, then we are no longer subjects of objects, but projects for objects (*Entwürfe für Gegenstände*), which are not subjugated by objects anymore." [5]

Once encountering this space of simultaneous experience and projection, the Deleuzian "crystal image," in which actual and potential presences and possibilities conflate and multiply, there is no turning back.

From this moment on any image produced, including the iconoclasm of the curfew, the blackout or the blinding of eyesight, cannot be perceived only as intimidating signs of authoritarian politics, but as constituents of the very projection surface that offers the basis, the tain, of an emancipatory visual reflection.

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[1] Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror - Derrida and the philosophy of reflection*, Harvard University Press 1986, p.6

[2] In his *Passagenwerk* exposé Benjamin speaks of "images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wish images, and in them the collective attempts to transcend as well as to illumine the incompleteness of the social order of production...In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch that follows, the latter appears wedded to elements of ur-history, that is, of a classless society. Its experiences, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective, produce, in their interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions.", W.B. Paris, *the Capital of the 19th Century*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften V*, p. 497

[3] Nezar AlSayyad, *Cairo - Histories of a City*, Harvard University Press 2011, p.206

[4] cf. Howard Saalman, *Haussmann: Paris Transformed*, George Braziller Inc, 1971, p. 26

[5] Vilém Flusser: *Kommunikologie weiterdenken*, Frankfurt Main 2009, p.180f, translation by the author