Alisa Lebow

Filming Revolution: a non-linear database project about filmmaking in Egypt since the Revolution

Filming Revolution is an interactive meta-documentary that I have produced about documentary and independent filmmaking in Egypt since the Revolution, bringing together the collective wisdom and creative strategies of media-makers in Egypt, before during and after the revolution.[1] The visitor to the website is invited to engage with Egyptian filmmakers, artists, activists and archivists, discussing their work and their ideas about how (and whether) to make films in the time of revolution.

This interactive archive does not attempt to provide a history of the revolution, nor does it attempt to be an exhaustive chronicle of filmmaking in Egypt since 2011. The focus is on documentary and independent filmmaking and creative approaches to representing Egyptian culture and society leading up to and after the events of the revolution. Just as there are many people making interesting work, there are many different approaches to filmmaking that have developed before, during, and since the heady events of 2011. This website about filmmaking practices looks at a range of projects and ideas about them to begin to make sense of what it means to film in times of revolution.

Over thirty filmmakers, archivists, activists and artists were interviewed for this project in two research trips to Cairo, the first in December 2013, the second in May-June 2014. The first set of interviews occurred just after a long and arduous military curfew was lifted, as part of the state of emergency declared after President Mohammad Morsi was deposed and approximately one thousand of his Muslim Brotherhood followers were massacred by the army in Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square, August 2013. The second set of interviews was conducted during the election and inauguration of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. In both cases, the spirits of most of the people interviewed were low in relation to the political scene but less so in relation to the creative arena. As we've seen in Egypt and elsewhere, revolution is not a singular event, nor does it happen in a matter of days. It is an on-going process that tends to be monitored in political terms but has so many other facets. Even as the political classes work to reconsolidate their power, on the cultural level the power of creativity should not be underestimated.

There were many I spoke with who were willing to question whether what happened in the years since the 2011 toppling of Mubarak could even be called a revolution. Some called it an uprising. Some called it a rebellion. Others still, called it a fiction. Yet there were still some among those I

interviewed who claimed the right to retain the word, knowing well that a revolution is no simple matter and that counter-revolutionary forces are always also in play. In this project, we retain the notion of revolution even as it is frequently questioned and problematized by participants. At times it is referred to in terms of the initial 18 days of the occupation of Tahrir Square, at others, as an on-going condition, or unfinished project. These inconsistencies have not been sanitized, as these are the confusions wrought by the situation as it is encountered. Is the revolution over? Was it ever a revolution? If so, has it failed or been utterly coopted? These are not questions for this website to answer. Instead the website takes its cues from the insights of the interviewees, who represent a spectrum of opinions on the matter.

The choice to create an interactive documentary website, rather than either writing a book or making a linear documentary about filming in Egypt since the revolution, was a very conscious one. For a film scholar such as myself, the temptation is to write a book, not only because that is my training, but because that is what is expected of me. Yet to position myself as the author of a book about filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution, is to put myself in the position of mastery over my subject, a positioning I was unwilling take at the outset of this project. I did not experience the events of the revolution, nor am I an expert in Egyptian film. I do not speak Arabic, relying on translation and subtitles for my access to many of the films discussed. I preferred the position of interlocutor, an interactivity that is amplified rather than reduced by the web-based platform. My questions led to a range of responses most of which are aired here, and can be heard in dialogue with one another, not just with me. My role as producer or director becomes one of facilitator, organizing the material in ways that can be accessible, searchable, allowing it to resonate on multiple levels.

Of course, the very fact that I am asking questions, conducting interviews, and subsequently organizing the material implies a directorial hand. My questions, concerns, recurrent themes of inquiry find their way into the project, as exemplified in the unexpected category of first person/personal film, a subject upon which I have written extensively, yet had not planned to pursue here. However, it was the material itself, the fact that so many of those interviewed seemed to be working on personal projects, which was not something I had anticipated, that dictated this line of questioning. And many of the lines of questions that I had planned to pursue prior to initiating the project, questions about revolutionary aesthetics, for instance, or about militant filmmaking, or about social networking, did not end up being prominent themes of the project at all.

I can say in good faith that it was in the encounter with these lively, committed, engaging filmmakers (I'm using the term to encompass a range of media making and a range of identifications) that this project and its emergent themes was forged. If I had preconceived ideas, I was generally disabused of them. If I had an agenda, it was usually rerouted onto more interesting or relevant tracks. If I needed to be briefed about the way things were (or were

not) for the people I spoke with, they educated me in the most gentle and thoughtful way. What I encountered in Egypt, in the midst of very uncertain times, despite people's exhaustion and profound disappointment, was what seemed to be an infinite well of generosity-of time, of ideas, of spirit. I had prepared myself for polite rejection, because after all I came to them three plus years after the big headline events, after so much blood had since been spilled, so many allegiances broken, so many from the West abandoning them for the newest cause or craze. I expected people to be done talking, explaining, presenting, as if they were on show. And why should they have thought I'd be after anything different. Yet, nonetheless, people made time to meet with me, show me their work, even if it was in the most preliminary stages, and most importantly to think aloud with me, as if they had never been asked these questions before, as if it was the first time they were thinking about these things that had clearly dominated much of their waking lives for the past 3-4 years, if not more. It was their spirit of dialogue, their magnanimity of time and energy that made me want to make this more than an inquiry for my own edification. And my hope is that it will be of use to them as well as to all others who are interested in the topic.

Given that I worked on this website for approximately two years, editing the interviews, organizing the data (there are over 400 artifacts on the site at present), spending time with people's words and projects, I can say that by now the material has begun to yield a few initial insights that I can share. Following the threads of the interviews and the themes that emerged from them, I have identified three main issues related to independent filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution:

- **No Grand Theory**: Like the revolution itself, and unlike most revolutionary filmmaking before it, there is no particular theory or methodology being proposed that might distinguish filmmaking of this period.
- **Resistance to Narrating the Revolution**: several of the filmmakers expressed a distinct disinclination toward creating specific narratives of the revolution or indeed, representing its events in any direct way.
- **First Person Filmmaking**: When choosing to represent questions of the revolution, personal, subjective, filmmaking seems to be a preferred approach.

All three of these insights were something of a surprise to me, since I had initially hoped to find the people who were beginning to articulate their aesthetic strategies precisely with the aim of developing their preferred narratives of the revolution. Also, given that most previous revolutionary film movements have eschewed the personal in favor of the collective, I was unprepared to encounter as many personal projects as I did.

Many of the people included in the Filming Revolution website do not know one another or of one another's work. A few may have known one another in film school, or have shared resources, some have worked together collectively

or in partnerships for a long time, but many have not. There are overlapping circles, yet there are also people and projects unknown to others and it is my hope that this website brings people and ideas together in ways that have not happened before. Yet, interestingly trends have begun to emerge.

There are many ways to have approached this subject, but by making an interactive website, which takes its conceptual inspiration from the notion of the constellation, I attempted to create a multi-valent project that, rather than containing its subject, allows it to overflow. And rather than constructing a linear story neatly framing that which cannot be contained, I embraced the logic of refusing to frame or box-in any simple notions of the revolution in Egyptian documentary today, resisting the tendency to speak in the language of power by monumentalizing and rigidifying events that defy such easy (or reductive) interpretations.

In a move towards adequation of form and content, the *Filming Revolution* website attempts to match the open ended, counter-monumental, rhizomatic emergent structure of this revolution by translating it into an homologous platform (non-linear, non-hierarchical, spatially and temporally open-ended) that loosely parallels the sentiments and strategies expressed within it without attempting to master or constrain them. *Filming Revolution* functions as creative project and creative resource simultaneously, open to interpretation and inviting to researchers who seek to engage with the ideas of filmmakers who participated in one of the momentous events of our day.

Filming Revolution is meant to be a resource for anyone interested in the perspective of Egyptian documentary and independent filmmakers about what is, undoubtedly and regardless of its ultimate outcome, one of the major historical events of our time. At present it is only available in English, which limits its reach quite dramatically, but given that nothing like it exists on the internet in any language, at least we can say it's a start. If we can obtain the resources for Arabic translation, we will endeavor to translate everything that is not already in Arabic. We invite you to spend some time exploring this project: www.filmingrevolution.org.